

The Beginning of the Classroom Compromise: The Elementary School Years

Reality TV would have a field day in elementary school. No need to create embarrassing situations or survival challenges, just set up a time-lapse video camera to record every few minutes or so and watch the strange world of classroom life unfold. What you would see is a world of persistent gender lessons and compromises, perhaps something like this:

Snapshot #1 Emma and Alicia sit with hands raised while Kenton answers a question. Alicia moves her arm over her head to help hold up her raised hand, which appears to be getting heavier.

Snapshot #2 Madison answers a question as the teacher frowns at two boys who are talking.

Snapshot #3 Olivia looks disappointed as the teacher chooses Roberto to demonstrate how to use a microscope.

Snapshot #4 The teacher praises Marcus for his skill in constructing a classroom display.

Snapshot #5 The teacher explains that the homework assignment will be kept brief if everyone pays careful attention for the next fifteen minutes.

Snapshot #6 The teacher helps Ethan with a spelling mistake.

Snapshot #7 The teacher compliments Alicia on her neat paper.

Snapshot #8 Students are in lines for a spelling bee. Boys are on one side of the room and girls are on the other.

As Ted Sizer wrote in *Horace's Compromise*, classroom life often means compromise, an academic *Let's Make a Deal*. Here's the deal: if the students do not challenge the teacher or cause disruption, if the

teacher can get through the day's lesson plan, then the students will be rewarded with less work, less pressure, and a more relaxed classroom climate. If teachers and students can meet each other's needs, a comfortable life for all is the reward. Sizer believed that when one or the other breaks this unspoken contract, trouble is likely to follow.

So if some students want to talk, letting them talk can head off potential discipline problems. And if some students do not want to talk, putting them in the spotlight can lead to a whole new set of woes. You probably remember this unspoken compromise from your own school days. If you wanted to speak, you knew just what to do to get called on. Raising a hand might be your first move, but waving your hand would signal that you *really* wanted to talk. Eye contact with the teacher was always a good idea, but a few strategically placed grunts could work miracles in getting attention. Once called on—assuming you had the right answer (not always a sure thing)—you got to speak, your needs were met, and the teacher's needs were met as well. By calling on the eager and willing students, the teacher moves the lesson along at a good pace, the main points are all “covered,” and there are smiles all around.

Remember when you did not want to talk? Perhaps you did not have a clue to the right answer. Or perhaps you were incredibly shy, frightened at speaking in front of peers who could make or break your social world. Maybe you were new to the country and to the language, embarrassed to show that you did not always understand what was being said, or how best to formulate your sentences. Then you wanted to be silent, hidden, and if at all possible, invisible. So you honed your invisible techniques: you would disappear in your book and avoid eye contact with the teacher. Most often your prayers would be answered and you would be left alone. But some teachers would push the comfort zone, break the classroom compromise, and ask you a question. Perhaps you endured just a few seconds of silent discomfort, social embarrassment, hopefully mumbling enough words so the teacher would move on. Although the memories of these embarrassing moments linger, they are probably rare. Truth is, most teachers call on students who want to talk, and leave the others alone, and everybody is comfortable. So what's the problem?

Although it *sounds* awfully good, the purpose of school is not to make everyone comfortable. Schools are for education, for stretching, for learning new and sometimes uncomfortable skills. Talented teachers know that if they select only students who quickly volunteer, reticent students will be relegated to the sidelines, unable or unwilling to participate

while talkative students will be reinforced for talking even more. The students who may be most in need of the teacher's attention will be least likely to get it. The students who most need to learn the lesson of how to talk in public are least likely to have that opportunity. Students who need a little more time to think—because they are by nature thoughtful, or because English is a new language, or because their cultural background encourages a slower response, or because they are shy—become spectators to rapid classroom exchanges. Females lose out, children of color lose out, English language learners are left behind, and shy boys are silenced. The classroom compromise creates an attractive comfort zone that moves the lesson forward at a good clip, but too often leaves many students behind.

The gendered nature of the classroom compromise can be subtle and is often ignored. Male students frequently control classroom conversation. They ask and answer more questions. They receive more praise for the intellectual quality of their ideas. They get criticized more publicly and harshly when they break a rule. They get help when they are confused. They are the heart and center of interaction. Watch how boys dominate the discussion about presidents in this upper elementary class.

The fifth-grade class is almost out of control. "Just a minute," the teacher admonishes. "There are too many of us here to all shout out at once. I want you to raise your hands, and then I'll call on you. If you shout out, I'll pick somebody else."

Order is restored. Then Stephen, enthusiastic to make his point, calls out.

STEPHEN: I think Lincoln was the best president. He held the country together during the war.

TEACHER: A lot of historians would agree with you.

KELVIN (seeing that nothing happened to Stephen, calls out): I don't. Lincoln was okay, but my Dad liked Reagan. He always said Reagan was a great president.

DAVID (calling out): Reagan? Are you kidding?

TEACHER: Who do you think our best president was, Dave?

DAVID: FDR. He saved us from the Depression.

MAX (calling out): I don't think it's right to pick one best president. There were a lot of good ones.

TEACHER: That's interesting.

REBECCA (calling out): I don't think the presidents today are as good as the ones we used to have.

TEACHER: Okay, Rebecca. But you forgot the rule. You're supposed to raise your hand.

The classroom is the only place in society where so many different, young, and restless individuals are crowded into close quarters for an extended period of time day after day. Teachers sense the undertow of raw energy and restlessness that threatens to engulf the classroom. Few successfully redirect all this energy for learning. Most try to contain it with conventions such as "Raise your hand if you want to talk." Yet even a fraction of a second is too long for some students to wait to be heard. Very active and animated students challenge the rule and simply shout out the answer.

Intellectually, teachers know they should apply rules consistently, but when the discussion becomes fast-paced and furious, rules are often swept aside. When this happens, it is an open invitation for male dominance. The Sadkers and others have found that boys call out significantly more often than girls. Sometimes what they say has little or nothing to do with the teacher's questions. Whether male comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them. However, when girls call out, there is a fascinating phenomenon. Perhaps the teacher sees this as a warning sign and suddenly remembers the rule about raising your hand before you talk. And those not as assertive as the animated male students are deftly and swiftly put back in their place.¹

Not being allowed to call out like her male classmates during the brief conversation about presidents will not psychologically scar Rebecca; however, the system of silencing operates covertly and repeatedly. It occurs several times a day during each school week for twelve years, and even longer if Rebecca goes to college, and, most insidious of all, it happens subliminally. This micro inequity eventually has a powerful cumulative impact.

In many ways, girls appear to be doing well in school. They get better grades and receive fewer punishments than boys. Quieter and more likely to conform, they are a school's ideal students. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" is often the school's operating principle as girls' good behavior frees the teacher to work with the more difficult-to-manage boys. In fact, some see quiet, conforming girls as a sign that they are doing well, as proof that schools work well for girls but not for boys. Hardly. Take a more thoughtful look. Girls receive less instructional time, less help, and fewer challenges. Reinforced for passivity, their independence and self-esteem suffer. Girls are penalized for "following the rules." Per-

haps because they mature sooner than boys, or because of socialization, most girls tolerate a sedentary learning style better than boys do. In contrast, boys get reinforced for breaking the rules; they are rewarded for grabbing more than their fair share of the teacher's time and attention. Even when teachers remember to apply the rules consistently, boys are more likely to get noticed.

The Sadkers observed hundreds of classes and watched as girls typically raised their hands, arms bent at the elbow in a cautious, tentative, almost passive gesture. At other times they pause or stop to think before raising their arms straight and high. Educator Diana Meehan calls this phenomenon the "girl pause": If a teacher asks a question, a girl pauses to think, *Do I know this?* Meanwhile, a boy blurts out an answer, and the class moves on.² In contrast, when boys raise their hands, they fling them wildly in the air, up and down, up and down, again and again. Sometimes these hand signals are accompanied by strange noises, "Ooh! Ooh! Me! Me! Ooooh!" Occasionally they even stand beside or on top of their seats and wave one or both arms to get attention. "Ooh! Me! Mrs. Smith, call on me." In the social studies class about presidents, we saw boys as a group grabbing attention while girls as a group were left out of the action.

Another way to observe the gender dimension of the classroom compromise is to focus on individual children and record and describe their behavior for an extended period of time. Here is what we found when we watched two children for a forty-five-minute class. Perhaps you will see yourself in their behavior. Maybe you will see your son or daughter.

The fifth-grade boy sits in the fourth seat, second row. Since there are more than thirty other children in the class, getting the teacher's attention is a very competitive game.

First the boy waves his hand straight in the air so that the teacher will select him from the surrounding forest of mainly male arms. He waves and pumps for almost three minutes without success. Evidently tiring, he puts his right arm down only to replace it with the left. Wave and pump. Wave and pump. Another two minutes go by. Still no recognition. Down with the left hand, up with the right. He moves to strategy two—sounds: "Ooh, me. C'mon. C'mon. Pleeze. Oooooh!" Another minute without being noticed. Strategy three: He gets out of his seat, stands in front of his desk, and waves with sound effects for another thirty seconds. He slumps back into his seat, momentarily discouraged. Five seconds later there's the strategy four effort: He holds

his right arm up in the air by resting it on his left as he leans on his elbow. Three more minutes go by.

“Tom.” His name. Recognition. For a brief moment he has the floor. The eyes of the teacher and his classmates are on him, the center of attention. He has spent more than nine minutes in his effort to get a half-minute in the sun. Post-response: He sits for four quiet minutes. Then up shoots the arm again.

There is another student in the same class on the other side of the room, a little more toward the front. She begins the class with her arm held high, her face animated, her body leaning forward. Clearly she has something she wants to say. She keeps her right hand raised for more than a minute, switches to the left for forty-five seconds. She is not called on. She doesn't make noises or jump out of her seat, but it looks as though her arm is getting tired. She reverts to propping the right arm up with the left, a signal she maintains for two more minutes. Still no recognition. The hand comes down.

She sits quietly, stares out the window, plays with the hair of the girl in front of her. Her face is no longer animated. She crosses her arms on the desk and rests her head on them, which is how she spends the final twelve minutes of class time. Her eyes are open, but it is impossible to tell if she is listening. The period ends. The girl has not said a word.

When we videotape classrooms and play back the recordings, most teachers are stunned to see themselves teaching subtle gender lessons along with math and spelling. The teacher in the social studies class about presidents was completely unaware that she gave male students more attention. Only after several viewings of the videotape did she notice how she let boys call out answers but reprimanded girls for similar behavior. The teacher who taught Tom and the silent girl did not realize what effort it took to get attention. Surprised and saddened, he watched how his initially eager female student wilted and then faded from the activities of the classroom.

In our workshops for educators we call boys like Tom “star students” or “green-arms.” Teachers smile with weary recognition as we describe students whose hands are up in the air so high and so long that the blood could have drained out. They want to be called on and are comfortable in the spotlight. The Sadkers' research shows that in a typical class of twenty-five students, two or three green-arm students may capture 25 percent of the teacher's attention.³ The lesson moves forward, but with the momentum of only one-fourth of the class.

Most students are not so salient. Rather, nominally involved, they are asked one or two questions by the teacher each class period. Even though nominal students don't wave arms and make birdlike noises, they do exhibit their own distinct patterns. If you were a nominal student, you can probably remember the following from your own school days: As the teacher approaches, you tense. The question is asked. Your shoulders rise, your adrenaline pumps, and your heart pounds so loudly that the teacher's voice is barely audible. You answer. Correct! You exhale with relief. The teacher's shadow moves on. You've paid your dues. If the teacher asks you another question, you're likely to think, *He's picking on me.*

When teachers ask students to read aloud one after the other down the row, one paragraph after another, nominal students count ahead and practice their upcoming paragraph silently. Can you remember industriously working on an impending passage only to have the student in front of you flub his, leaving you to stumble over unknown literary ground? If you can picture yourself in this scene for at least part of your school career, you were probably a nominal student.

In the typical classroom the Sadkers found that approximately 10 percent of students are green-arms and 70 percent are nominal. Who's left? The remaining 20 percent, about four or five students in most classrooms, do not say anything at all. Of course some boys are shy and some girls are assertive, but in their observations of more than one hundred classrooms, the Sadkers found that male students are more often heard and female students are more often stifled.⁴ Others have also found that no matter the subject or grade level, boys command classroom attention.⁵

Boys cast in starring classroom roles are often high achievers. Bright boys answer the questions, and their opinions are respected by the teacher. Low-achieving boys also get plenty of attention, but more often it's negative. In general, girls receive less attention, but there's another revelation: unlike the smart boy who flourishes in the classroom, the smart girl is the student who is least likely to be recognized.⁶ (Yet being "too smart" can create difficulties for males and females, especially in middle and high schools. Gifted students often face ridicule from peers, and consequently work hard to hide their intelligence by underachieving and withdrawing from classroom interactions.)

Analyzing their interaction data, the Sadkers discovered another intriguing trend: The students most likely to receive teacher attention

were white males; the second most likely were males of color; the third, white females; and the least likely, females of color. In school, receiving attention from the teacher is enormously important for a student's achievement and self-esteem. Later in life, in the working world, the salary received is important, and salary levels parallel the classroom: white males at the top and minority females at the bottom. In her classroom interaction studies, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine found that black girls were active, assertive, and prominent in the primary grades, but as they moved up through elementary school, they became the most invisible members of classrooms.⁷ Researcher Linda Grant witnessed that even the energy of black girls in the early grades is channeled into stereotypical roles that stress service and nurture. In the first- and second-grade classrooms she observed, black girls were cast in the roles of teacher helpers and monitors of disruptive peers.⁸

THE "OKAY" CLASSROOM IS NOT

As part of our work at American University, David, Myra, and Karen supervised student teachers. During one of these visits by the Sadkers, a young woman, one of the most talented in our teacher preparation program, confronted a sexist incident:

The teacher flicks on the overhead projector, and a poem in the shape of a seesaw draws the third graders' attention. Another transparency and a new image, this time in the shape of a candy bar. The children giggle and whisper. More images—a kite poem, and even one looking like a giraffe. The youngsters are captivated.

"What do these poems have in common?" the teacher says to open the discussion. Through skillful questions and explanations she teaches concrete poetry and motivates the children to write their own poems. "What are some topics you might want to write about?" The third graders are eager to share their ideas: Trucks. A cat. Dogs. TV. My doll.

"That's so dumb." A boy's comment breaks the collegial brainstorming. "I bet all the girls will draw girly Barbie dolls."

"Not me," a girl shoots back. "I'm doing a horse poem."

Not about to let sexism mar her lesson, this teacher confronts the comment. "There's nothing wrong with dolls. A lot of girls and boys like to play with them, which is nice because they learn how to take

care of people that way. Not all girls like dolls, just like not all boys like football. Now me—I like teddy bears. [The children laugh.] I'm going to write my concrete poem about a teddy bear.”

As the class settles down to write, the teacher walks from desk to desk giving reactions and offering suggestions.

First stop, a boy's desk (twenty seconds): “That's good. I like the way you use describing words.”

Second stop, a boy's desk (two minutes; the teacher kneels so she can be eye to eye with the student): “You can't think of anything to write about? What are some of your hobbies?” (There are several more questions about hobbies, and then the boy's interest is sparked and he begins to write.)

Third stop, a boy's desk (fifteen seconds): “That's great! A deck of cards. I never would have thought of that.”

Fourth stop, a boy's desk (two minutes): “Tony, this isn't right. It's not supposed to be in straight lines. A concrete poem is in the shape of something. (More discussion that is inaudible. Tony seems to have gotten the idea and starts to write.)

Fifth stop, a girl's desk (four seconds): “Okay.”

“I was so nervous. I can't believe that boy's comment about the doll,” the student teacher said, shaking her head as she talked with us after the lesson. “How do these kids come up with this stuff? Did I handle it well? What do you think?”

David and Myra assured the student teacher that she had handled the doll incident skillfully. Many instructors would not even have picked up on the comment, and even fewer would have challenged it. Ironically, even as this talented beginning teacher confronted the sexist comment of one of her young male students, she inadvertently doled out insidious gender lessons herself.

In studies of sexism in classroom interaction, we have been particularly fascinated by the ways teachers react to student work and comments because this feedback is crucially important to achievement and self-esteem. The Sadkers found that teachers typically give students four types of responses.

Teacher *praises*: “Good job.” “That was an excellent paper.” “I like how you developed the characters in your short story.”

Teacher *remediates*, encouraging a student to correct a wrong answer or expand and enhance thinking: “Check your addition and

remember the carry method.” “Review the causes of the Civil War and try again.”

Teacher *criticizes*, giving an explicit statement that something is not correct: “No, you’ve missed number four.” This category also includes statements that are much harsher: “This is a terrible report.”

Teacher *accepts*, offering a brief acknowledgment that an answer is accurate: “Uh-huh.” “Okay.”

Teachers praise students only 10 percent of the time. Criticism is even rarer—only 5 percent of comments. In many classrooms teachers do not use any praise or criticism at all. About one-third of teacher interactions are comprised of remediation, a dynamic and beneficial form of feedback.

More than half the time, however, teachers slip into the routine of giving the quickest, easiest, and least helpful feedback—a brief nonverbal nod, a quick “okay.” They rely more on acceptance than on praise, remediation, and criticism combined. The bland and neutral “okay” is pervasive, another sign of the classroom compromise where students are not challenged with more difficult questions, or “pushed” to think more carefully. The prevalence of the “Okay Classroom” is another sign that comfort rather than academic rigor is a classroom norm.

In the scene above, it is clear that the compromise is not shared equally by both genders. Boys received not only more instruction but also better instruction. Two boys were praised, a response that promotes their confidence and self-esteem, and alerts them to what they do well. Through constructive criticism, another boy learned that he was not completing the assignment accurately, and he corrected his mistake. The teacher gave another boy remediation, helping him develop ideas for his poem. The only feedback given to a girl was bland and imprecise, without direction or information. “Okay” can leave her to wonder, “How am I doing? Is my poem good? Can I make it better? Were you really listening? Do you care? Tell me more, please.”

The Sadkers’ research in more than one hundred classrooms found that while boys received more of all four reactions, the gender gap was greatest in the most precise and valuable feedback. Boys, especially the high achievers, were more likely to be praised, corrected, helped, and criticized—all reactions that foster student achievement. Additional studies show that lower-achieving boys and those with discipline problems are not praised as much as their “starring” peers; yet they still receive more teacher interactions, remediation, and criticism.⁹ No mat-

ter whether they were high or low achievers, girls received the more superficial “okay” reaction, one that packs far less educational punch. In her research, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine also found that black females were least likely to receive clear academic feedback.¹⁰

At first teachers are surprised to learn that girls are “okayed” and boys gain clear feedback. Then it begins to make sense. “I don’t like to tell a girl anything is wrong because I don’t want to upset her,” many say. “What if she cries? I wouldn’t know how to handle it.”

The “okay” response is well-meaning, but it kills with kindness. If girls, and boys, don’t know when they are wrong, if they don’t learn strategies to get it right, then they will never correct their mistakes. And if they rarely receive negative feedback in school, they will be shocked when they are confronted by it in the workplace and in life.

THE BOMBING RATE

“How long do you wait for students to answer a question?” When we ask teachers to describe what they do hundreds of times daily in the classroom, their answers are all over the map: One minute. Ten seconds. Five seconds. Twenty-five seconds. Three seconds. How long do you think teachers wait for a student to answer?

Three decades ago, Mary Budd Rowe was the first researcher to frame this question and then try to answer it. Today, many continue her work and uncover an astonishingly hurried classroom. On average, teachers wait only nine-tenths of a second for a student to answer a question. If a student can’t answer within that time, teachers call on another student or answer the question themselves.¹¹

When questions are hurled at this bombing rate, some students get lost, confused, or rattled, or just drop out of the discussion. “Would you repeat that?” “Say it again.” “Give me a minute. I can get it.” Requests such as these are really pleas for more time to think. Nobody has enough time in the bombing rate classroom, but boys have more time than girls. It is not unusual for boys to get double the wait time.¹²

Waiting longer for a student to answer is one of the most powerful and positive things a teacher can do. It is a vote of confidence, a way of saying, “I have high expectations for you, so I will wait a little longer. I know you can get it if I give you a chance.” Since boys receive more wait time, they try harder to achieve. As girls struggle to answer under the pressure of time, they may flounder and fail. Less assertive in class and

more likely to think about their answers and how to respond, girls may need *more* time to think. In the real world of the classroom, they receive less. For female achievement and self-esteem, it is a case of very bad timing.

PRETTY IS—HANDSOME DOES

Ashley Reiter, a national winner of the Westinghouse Talent Search for her sophisticated project on math modeling, remembers winning her first math contest. It happened at the same time that she first wore her contact lenses. Triumphant, Ashley showed up at school the next day without glasses and with a new medal. “Everyone talked about how pretty I looked,” Ashley remembers. “Nobody said a word about the math competition.”

One area where girls are recognized more than boys is appearance. Teachers compliment their outfits and hairstyles. We hear it over and over again—not during large academic discussions but in more private moments, in small groups, when a student comes up to the teacher’s desk, at recess, in hallways, at lunchtime, when children enter and exit the classroom: “Is that a new dress?” “You look so pretty today.” “I love your new haircut. It’s so cute.” While these comments are most prevalent in the early grades, they continue throughout school, into the workplace, and throughout life: “That’s a great outfit.” “You look terrific today.”

Many teachers do not want to emphasize appearance. “They pull you in,” a preschool teacher says. “The little girls come up to you with their frilly dresses and hair ribbons and jewelry. ‘Look what I have,’ they say and wait for you to respond. What are you supposed to do? Ignore them? Insult them? They look so happy when you tell them they’re pretty. It’s a way of connecting. I think it’s what they’re used to hearing, the way they are rewarded at home.”

Like girls, boys in the early grades also ask teachers how they look, but teachers respond to boys and girls differently. And in these differences there is a world of meaning:

A first-grade classroom: A girl approaches the teacher and holds up the locket that is hanging around her neck. “See my new necklace?” The teacher smiles. “That’s beautiful. Did your mother give it to you?” The little girl nods. “You look so pretty today.”

The same first-grade classroom: A boy comes up to the teacher and

points to his sneakers. "These are new," he says. "That's neat," the teacher responds. "I'll bet you can jump really high in those."

A kindergarten classroom: The teacher walks over to a boy who is playing with small, round plastic hoops. He has slipped his hand through them and holds out his arm, circled in red, blue, green, and yellow "bracelets," for the teacher to admire. The teacher finds a plastic peg that stands on the floor. "Look. Here's what you should do with these." The teacher and the boy spend the next several minutes removing the hoops from the boy's arm and putting them around the peg. "First we'll put blue," says the teacher. "What color shall we put on next? What color is that? Right, yellow. Are all the rings the same size? Let's see if any are bigger than the others."

When teachers talk with boys about appearance, the exchanges are brief—quick recognition and then on to something else. Or teachers use appearance incidents to move on to a physical skill or academic topic. In the scene just described, the teacher used the bracelet incident to teach about size, shape, and color. In another exchange, a little boy showed the teacher his shiny new belt buckle. Her response: "Cowboys wore buckles like that. They were rough and tough and they rode horses. Did you know that?"

When teachers talk to girls about their appearance, the conversations are usually longer, and the focus stays on how pretty the girl looks. Sometimes the emphasis moves from personal appearance to papers and work. When boys are praised, it is most often for the intellectual quality of their ideas. Girls are twice as likely to be praised for following the rules of form. "I love your margins" or "What perfect handwriting" are the messages.¹³

Girls learn these appearance lessons early and well, and with lasting impact. When we asked more than four hundred middle school students from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds to describe the best thing about being female, appearance topped the list. One seventh grader declared, "Being pretty is important because it helps me get people's approval." Another seventh grader described how "THE perfect outfit can make you feel pretty and worth something." Yet another girl noted that her favorite after-school activity is "receiving beauty treatments to feel better about myself." Sadly, such comments underscored how girls learn to seek approval and validation of their worth based on appearance.¹⁴

DIFFERENT WORLDS

This chapter began with a series of brief video clips that revealed the classroom compromises and gender lessons imbedded in everyday teaching. If the camera were to go beyond the classroom and take pictures throughout the school, we might see something like this:

Snapshot #1 Leaving the library, a single caterpillar line crawls along—its first half all female, its second half all male.

Snapshot #2 At a long rectangular lunchroom table a group of fifth and sixth graders eat lunch together, black and white, Hispanic and Asian. Every child is male.

Snapshot #3 On the playground, a large all-male soccer game is in play. It stretches out to take over most of the schoolyard.

Snapshot #4 A few girls jump rope at the edge of the schoolyard.

If you look again at these scenes but substitute white and black for male and female, the segregation screams out. A racial inequity would be unacceptable, but a gender inequity is not even noticed. We must freeze the action to even see the divisions. A separate boy world and a separate girl world is just education as usual. Many of us were schooled in these gender-divided worlds, and it didn't seem to hurt us. Or did it?

BOY BASTIONS—GIRL GHETTOS

Raphaela Best spent four years as an observer in an elementary school in one of Maryland's most affluent counties. She helped the children with schoolwork, ate lunch with them, and played games in class and at recess. As an anthropologist, she also took copious notes. After more than one thousand hours of living with the children, she concluded that elementary school consists of separate and unequal worlds.¹⁵ She watched gender segregation in action firsthand, and with each year saw the walls grow higher and more entrenched.

In the first grade, when so much about school seems gigantic and fearful, children look to adults for safety. Best found that both boys and girls ran to their first-grade teacher for hugs, praise, and general warmth and affection. But by the second grade, boys had begun to place more importance on their peer group. To ensure privacy from the female world, the

meeting place became the boys' bathroom, where the boys talked about kids at school and decided what to play at recess.

By grades three and four the playground also became increasingly sex-segregated, as blacktop and grassy areas were reserved for active boys' ball games. The girls were often found on the sidelines, where they stood talking, played hopscotch, and jumped rope. Occasionally an athletic girl breached the cultural divide and played with the boys, yet her status as tomboy was always a limiting and noninclusive role. A powerful male culture had evolved, one of privileged entitlement. Excluded from this all-male society were not only girls but also some boys who were considered "sissies."

Girls spent the first few years of school helping the teacher, not switching their allegiance to the peer group until the fourth grade. Then, instead of joining a club, they formed best-friend relationships. Sometimes fights broke out, when two girls argued over having a third as best friend. Being a good student and having a pleasing personality were seen as important, but, by the upper elementary grades, appearance had become the key to social status.

Best found the lunchroom to be a key area of increasingly formal segregation. In the first grade boys and girls sat together, talking and playing. By second grade they sat at the same table, but it was as if an invisible line had cut it in half, with girls on one end and boys on the other. By the third grade the boys burst into the cafeteria at a dead run to claim their male-only table.

These cafeteria gender hierarchies can haunt students for years. A student at American University remembers his school lunchroom in Brooklyn:

At lunch our class all sat together at one long table. All the girls sat on one side, and the boys sat on the other. This was our system. Unfortunately, there were two more boys in my class than seats on the boys' side. There was no greater social embarrassment for a boy in the very hierarchical system we had set up in our class than to have to sit on the girls' side at lunch. It happened to me once, before I moved up the class social ladder. Boys climbed the rungs of that ladder by beating on each other during recess. To this day, twenty years later, I remember that lunch. It was horrible.

Other men speak, also with horror, of school situations when they became "one of the girls." The father of a nine-year-old daughter

remembered girls in elementary school as “worse than just different. We considered them a subspecies.” Many teachers who were victims of sexist schooling themselves understand this system and collaborate with it; they warn noisy boys of a humiliating punishment: “If you don’t behave, I’m going to make you sit with the girls.”

Girls are hurt by these gender divides, too. A third grader described it this way: “Usually we separate ourselves, but my teacher begins recess by handing a jump rope to the girls and a ball to the boys.” Like the wave of a magic wand, this gesture creates strict gender lines. “The boys always pick the biggest areas for their games,” she says. “We have what’s left over, what they don’t want.”

“When it’s recess time,” an elementary school girl observed, “the boys run to the closet and get out the balls and bats and mitts and other stuff.”

“Does the teacher ever say anything about the boys taking all the balls?” we asked her.

“Never.”

“Would you like to play ball in the big area of the playground?”

“Sometimes I would like to. And sometimes girls do play kickball, but mostly not. This is just the way it is in our school.”

Every morning at recess in schoolyards across the country, boys fan out over the prime territory to play kickball, football, or basketball. Sometimes girls join them, but more often it’s an all-male ball game. In the typical schoolyard, the boys’ area is bigger than the girls’. Boys never ask if it is their right to take over the territory, and it is rarely questioned. Girls huddle along the sidelines, on the fringe, as if in a separate female annex. Recess becomes a spectator sport.

Teachers seldom intervene to divide space and equipment more evenly, and seldom attempt to connect the segregated worlds—not even when they are asked directly by the girls.

“The boys won’t let us play,” a third grader said, tugging at the arm of the teacher on recess duty. “They have an all-boys club and they won’t let any girls play.”

“Don’t you worry, honey,” the teacher said, patting the little girl’s hair. “When you get bigger, those boys will pay you all the attention you want. Don’t you bother about them now.”

As we observed that exchange, we couldn’t help but wonder how the teacher would have reacted if the recess group had announced “No

Catholics” or if white children had blatantly refused to play with Asians. The world of children and the world of adults is comprised of *different* races, but each gender is socially constructed as so different, so alien that we use the phrase “the *opposite* sex.”

Most girls—five, six, seven, or eight years old—are much too young to truly understand and challenge their assignment as the lower-caste gender. But without challenge over the course of years, this hidden curriculum in second-class citizenship sinks in. By upper elementary and middle school, nearly one in five students see second-class status as the biggest disadvantage of being a girl. Boys and girls describe a society that expects females to serve males by cleaning and cooking, and see girls as the weaker sex. Students further report that teachers and coaches listen less and expect less from girls than boys. One girl remarked, “People think you aren’t as good at ‘a whole lot of things’ if you are a girl.” Another told us:

Our basketball coach told our parents that the girls’ practice was shorter than the boys’ team practice because girls did not have the “attention span” or the “interest” to focus on basketball for two hours at a time and were more interested in socializing than in the game. Our coach is wrong.¹⁶

Schools and children need help—intervention by adults who can equalize the playing field. The first step is for parents and teachers to question education-as-usual. A Milwaukee teacher recalls when she finally understood she was questioning too little and accepting too much:

As I walked my assigned area of the playground on a recent Monday, I looked at the boys playing basketball on the far end and the girls huddled or walking in small groups along the side. No one was fighting or swearing, so I figured it was a good day. And then I caught myself. No, all was not well because I knew that some of the girls huddled in the groups liked to play basketball. So why weren’t they playing? And what was I doing about it? Why did I allow a “might-makes-right” playground where the boys decided where they would play and with whom, which in practice meant no girls on the basketball or soccer teams. What was the hidden message I was giving to the girls on the playground? That the boys decide, and that’s that?¹⁷

MALE MAGNETS

We are often asked to talk to classes about sexism in school. In one visit to a sixth grade, a thoughtful African-American girl talked about how baffled she was by boys. "What thoughts go on inside their heads?" she asked. Her classmates began to giggle until they realized her question was completely honest. "No, I mean it. I know they don't think like I do. Something different goes on inside their heads, but I can't figure out what it is." Her sincerity drew in others:

"Yeah, guys are totally different. They're like aliens."

"When I go to the movies and something sad happens, I cry. But a guy doesn't cry. It's not that they have *different* feelings. They don't have *any* feelings."

"I don't think that's true. They have feelings, they just don't let anyone know it."

"Girls are strange, too. We don't get them at all," one boy said, getting the boys into the discussion.

A popular African-American male student addressed his reaction directly to the girls in the classroom: "You don't talk about normal things like we do. All you talk about is hair and makeup, and what to do if you get your period."

Several students glanced up quickly to catch our reaction to this taboo topic. But the boy was not after shock effect; he was being honest, too. We were struck by the confusion of these eleven-year-olds. They did not understand one another because they had so little opportunity to really interact. We asked the sixth graders to look around their classroom and see if they noticed anything that might lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding. The classroom was arranged in eight groups of six. In each group, African-American, Asian, Hispanic, and white children sat together. The students were amazed to see that not a single group was integrated by gender.

We have found that sex segregation in the lunchroom and schoolyard spills over into the classroom. In the Sadkers' three-year, multistate study of one hundred classrooms, researchers drew "gender geography" maps of each class they visited. They found that more than half of the classes were segregated by gender. There is more communication across race than across gender in elementary schools.¹⁸

We have seen how sex segregation occurs when children form self-

selected groups. Sometimes the division is even clearer, and so is the impact on instruction.

The students are seated formally in rows. There are even spaces between the rows, except down the middle of the room where the students have created an aisle large enough for two people standing side by side to walk down. On one side of the aisle, the students are all female; on the other side, all male. Black, white, Hispanic, and Asian students sit all around the room, but no student has broken the gender barrier.

The teacher in this room is conducting a math game, with the right team (boys) against the left team (girls). The problems have been put on the board, and members of each team race to the front of the room to see who can write the answer first. Competition is intense, but eventually the girls fall behind. The teacher keeps score on the board, with two columns headed “Good Girls” and “Brilliant Boys.”

The gender segregation was so formal in this class that we asked if the teacher had set it up. “Of course not.” She looked offended. “I wouldn’t think of doing such a thing. The students do it themselves.” It never occurred to the well-meaning teacher to raise the issue or change the seats.

Here is another segregation episode, this one involving affluent independent school students during a swimming lesson.

The pool is divided by a rope into two lap lanes. No one has tested the children or divided them by ability to make faster and slower lap lanes, but all the girls are in one lane and all the boys in another. Although many of the girls swim as fast or faster than the boys, gender alone created the division.

A male teacher and a female teacher supervise the swimming. The male teacher stands at the end of the pool directly in front of the boy lane. He gives boys suggestions and advice as they come across the pool: “Good stroke, Tom.” “Sean, watch your breathing.” “Michael, don’t forget to kick.” “Tim, bend your arm forty-five degrees, like this.” The boys find these comments helpful, so they call out questions and clamor for more attention. “Is this it?” “Look at my stroke and tell me if it’s good.” The female teacher comes over to the male side of the pool to help answer the avalanche of male requests.

Meanwhile, the girls talk to each other, splash, jump up and down

to keep from getting cold. Finally, too bored to wait for more directions, several start swimming to the other end of the pool. Others follow. Not a single girl has received instruction on how to improve her performance.

In our research we have found that gender segregation is a major contributor to female invisibility. In sex-segregated classes, teachers are pulled to the more talkative, more disruptive male sections of the classroom or pool. There they stay, teaching boys more actively and directly while the girls fade into the background.

THE SPOTLIGHT ON BOYS

When teachers are asked to remember their most outstanding students, boys' names dominate the list. Teachers say males are brighter, better at science and math, and more likely to become the nation's future leaders. When students are asked to choose outstanding classmates, they also name boys. But boys are also on another roster. When teachers remember their worst students—the discipline problems, the ones most likely to create a classroom disturbance or to flunk out of school—they still list boys.¹⁹ As one teacher at a workshop put it, “Boys at school are either in the process of becoming the Establishment or fighting it. Either way, they are the center of attention.”

In the classroom, attention is the prize. But not every boy can be at the head of the class. Only a few rise to the very top. We watched two boys fight for star status in a suburban elementary school:

Twenty-eight students file into the room, hang up their coats, and take their seats. The teacher, a nine-year veteran of the classroom, reviews the day's agenda. Math is first on the schedule.

It is then we meet Jim and Matt, without being formally introduced. With the teacher's first question their hands shoot up. First Matt answers, then Jim, as each competes to be the center of attention. Hands waving, they edge out of their seats. Jim sits on his knees, gaining a full six inches and a visible advantage over Matt. The next question goes to the now-elevated Jim, stirring Matt to even greater heights—literally. He stands beside his chair and waves his arm. “Settle down, guys, and give someone else a chance,” the teacher says. Several other students are called on, but within a few minutes the “Matt

and Jim Show” returns. When the teacher writes difficult problems on the board, the questions no one else can answer, she turns to her two male stars for answers. “Matt and Jim will be great mathematicians when they grow up,” the teacher comments as math class ends and she erases the problems from the board.

Evidently, Matt will grow up to be a great historian as well, for he dominates social studies, too. With Jim less involved, Matt has the floor all to himself. During language arts, the class works in small groups on stories for a school newspaper, and the achievements of Jim and Matt are featured in several articles. The last class before lunch is science, and Matt is called up for a demonstration. As he stands in front of the room and reads the results of the science experiment, the other students dutifully copy his calculations into their notebooks.

During lunch we review our observation forms. Although almost evenly divided between boys and girls, males in this class have benefited from a more active learning environment; but Matt and Jim were in a class of their own. Matt received more of the teacher’s time and talent than anyone else, with Jim coming in second. Calling these two boys future mathematicians, the teacher further distanced them from the rest of the class. At the end of three hours, Matt and Jim have answered almost half of the teachers’ questions, leaving the other twenty-six students to divide up the remainder of the teachers’ attention. Nine students, six girls and three boys, have not said a single word.

Warmed by the academic spotlight, students like Matt and Jim reap school rewards. In the elementary grades their future careers are the talk of the teachers’ room. By high school, prestigious colleges and scholarships loom on the horizon. But school life can be marred by clouds even for stars. Since their performance is head and shoulders above the other students, boys like Matt and Jim no longer compete with their classmates; they are vying with each other. These superstar students, who are more likely to be male, face ever-increasing pressure and cutthroat competition in their fight to get to the top—to win state honors, the most lucrative scholarship, a place at an Ivy League college. From Jim’s vantage point, although ahead of his classmates, he just can’t seem to catch up with Matt. Frustration and despair often haunt and depress smart boys who find themselves “runners-up” in the competition for top prizes.

Star students are not the only ones who capture the teacher’s attention. When schools are not able to meet their needs, some boys cross the

line and go from calling out to acting out. On the classroom stage these males take the bad-boy role, sometimes using it as a passport to popularity. Interviewing elementary school students, researchers have found that many of the most admired males are those ready to take on the teacher. Here's how two fourth graders described these popular boys:

MARK: They're always getting into trouble by talking back to the teacher.

TOM: Yeah, they always have to show off to each other that they aren't afraid to say anything they want to the teacher, that they aren't teacher's pets. Whatever they're doing, they make it look like it's better than what the teacher is doing, 'cause they think what she's doing is stupid.

MARK: And one day Josh and Allen got in trouble in music 'cause they told the teacher the Disney movie she wanted to show sucked. They got pink [disciplinary] slips.

TOM: Yeah, and that's the third pink slip Josh's got already this year, and it's only Thanksgiving.²⁰

If teachers were asked to “round up the usual suspects”—the class clowns, troublemakers, and delinquents—they would fill the room with boys. Teachers remember these boys for all the wrong reasons. In fact, so pervasive is the concern over male misbehavior that even when a boy and a girl are involved in an identical infraction of the rules, the male is more likely to get the penalty. Scenes like this one are played out daily in schools across America:

Two seniors, Kyle and Michelle, arrive at their high school English class fifteen minutes late. The teacher stares at them as they enter the room. “Kyle, do you need a special invitation? Is it too much to ask that you get here on time? Never mind. Sit down and see me after class. [Pause; voice softens.] And Michelle, I'm disappointed in you.”

Boys' disorderly conduct sets into motion a chain reaction with steep costs and lasting impressions. When men at our workshops looked back on their school days, some of their most unpleasant memories were of the tough disciplinary incidents they experienced. A man who is now a high school teacher in New England said: “I was in fifth grade, and it was the first time I had a male teacher. This teacher would treat the girls almost like princesses, but when the boys were disciplined, it was very

physical and very rough. He would grab us by the hair and slam our heads down on the desk.”

Marissa, a student teacher in a Maryland middle school, is already learning the disaster potential of problem students, mainly male. Observing her class, we keep track of which students she calls on, what she says, and where she moves in the room. When we show her our notes, she sees that most of her questions went to six boys sitting at two tables near her desk.

“I know I usually call on those boys up front. I put them there so I can keep an eye on them.”

“Did you realize that more than half of the questions you asked went to those six boys?”

“I didn’t think I was talking with them that much, but I do use questions to keep them on task.”

“Were they on task?”

“At the beginning, but toward the end they weren’t paying attention.”

“What about the other twenty-four students, the rest of the class? How were they doing?”

Marissa looks confused. “I don’t even know,” she says. “I was so concerned about that group of boys, so worried they would act out, I didn’t pay much attention to the rest of the class.”

Marissa was devoting her energy to boys at the bottom, the ones with potential to undermine her authority and throw the class into turmoil. So powerful was their influence, they determined where she walked, whom she questioned, and even how the room was arranged and where students sat.

While boys grab teacher attention by acting out, the consequences of such misbehavior can reveal a racial mismatch. African-American males are punished more often and more harshly than their white peers, setting a pattern of black male footsteps out of the classroom and into disciplinary spaces.²¹ In her book, *Bad Boys*, sociologist Ann Ferguson provides a window into this troubling inequity. She spent three years observing African-American fifth and sixth graders in a racially and economically diverse California public elementary school. She concluded that in the eyes of many teachers, black males set the standard for inappropriate behavior, too often seen as “one step away from becoming a troublemaker.”²²

Ferguson argues that male misbehavior is often characterized as “boys will be boys: they are mischievous and naughty by nature. As a result, rule breaking on the part of boys is looked at as something-they-can’t-help.”²³ We have seen how male misbehavior gets attention, yet Ferguson witnessed that teachers give their attention for very different reasons. When African-American boys acted out in class, the “boys will be boys” idea was quickly cast aside as black boys earned the distinction of “troublemakers,” children with character flaws needing to be controlled. Within the school, academic expectations of the “troublemakers” quickly plummeted. Yet teachers admitted that their attitudes shifted when a white boy misbehaved. They believed in his academic promise and their discipline was designed to keep him on task.

Racial inequities were further revealed when teachers were asked to describe their typical students. On one end of the spectrum was the ideal student, a studious yet mischievous white male. A sixth-grade teacher offered this description:

The ideal student is one that can sit and listen and learn from me—work with their peers, and take responsibility on themselves and understand what is next, what is expected of them. He’s not really Goody Two-shoes, you know. He’s not quiet and perfect. He’ll take risks. He’ll say the wrong answer. He’ll fool around and have to be reprimanded in class. There’s a nice balance to him.²⁴

In contrast to the ideal students are those devoid of this nice balance, the at-risk, unsalvageable ones. Who are these unsalvageable students? Most often African-American boys. Here is one teacher’s explanation:

He’s a boy with a lot of energy and usually uncontrolled energy. He’s very loud in the classroom, very inappropriate in the class. He has a great sense of humor, but again it’s inappropriate. I would say most of the time that his mouth is open, it’s inappropriate, it’s too loud, it’s disrupting. But other than that [dry laugh] he’s a great kid. You know if I didn’t have to teach him, if it was a recreational setting, it would be fine.²⁵

In both teacher accounts, boys are acting out in class. But a troubling contrast emerges when we examine the meaning attached to the misbehavior. The teachers Ferguson interviewed believed that by acting out the

ideal student—the white male—achieves a healthy balance between academic prowess and being a “real boy.” Not so for African-American boys. Their classroom disruption was seen as deviant. Boys at the bottom and boys at the top are magnets that attract a teacher’s attention either as a reward or as a mechanism for control. Teachers hope their male stars will become tomorrow’s corporate presidents, senators, and civic leaders, but they do not hold high hopes for the boys at the bottom. Instead they fear those males could become involved in very serious trouble. Both groups are taught very different lessons and socialized into distinct aspects of the male role in America. Often these roles are created by the complex intersection of gender, race, and socioeconomic class. Whether they are first or last, boys pay a price.

STOP HERE

CHARACTERS OF THE CURRICULUM

Few things stir up more controversy than the content of school curriculum. Teachers, parents, students—all seem to be intuitively aware that schoolbooks shape what the next generation knows and how it behaves. In this case research supports intuition. When children read about people in nontraditional gender roles, they are less likely to limit themselves to stereotypes. When children read about women and minorities in history, they are more likely to feel these groups have made important contributions to the country. As one sixth grader told us, “I love to read biographies about women. When I learn about what they’ve done, I feel like a door is opening. If they can do great things, maybe I can, too.”

But what if your identity is misrepresented, misremembered, or just plain missing from the school curriculum? For more than four decades, parents and educators have conducted studies to document objectively how men and women are portrayed in the curriculum.

In their landmark 1975 study *Dick and Jane as Victims*, Lenore Weitzman and her colleagues studied 2,760 stories in 134 elementary texts and readers, looking at the pictures, stories, and language used to describe male and female characters and found the following ratios:²⁶

Boy-centered stories to girl-centered stories	5:2
Adult male characters to adult female characters	3:1
Male biographies to female biographies	6:1
Male fairy-tale stories to female fairy-tale stories	4:1