Public schools in early America were designed to ensure the reproduction of Eurocentric social values. It could be argued that little has changed. Gender Lessons takes an in-depth look at how schools institutionalize gender—how kids are taught the rules and expectations of performing masculinity and femininity. This work provides extensive examples of how elementary, middle, and high schools: sextype; defend and preserve patriarchy; weave gendered expectations in all things school related; promote inequity; and limit their students’ potential by explicitly and implicitly teaching that they must fit into only one of two boxes—“girl” or “boy.” Richardson argues that schools—a powerful and wide reaching publicly funded mechanism—should be engaged in social (re)imagination that disbands the antiquated girl/boy and feminine/masculine binary so that kids might have a chance at being themselves. This book is sure to provoke conversation in courses and professional communities interested in education, gender studies, social work, sociology, counseling and guidance.

“In the 1970s, feminists fought to reform sexist school curricula and challenged taken-for-granted tracking of boys and girls. Forty years later, drawing from personal experiences and insightful research in schools, Scott Richardson shows us that the job is far from finished. Informal interactions and stubborn sexist beliefs about gender difference still press girls and boys in primary, middle and high schools into different—and highly constraining—gender boxes. Anyone who cares about taking the next steps toward gender equality in schools will find in Gender Lessons a useful and hopeful map to a better future for our kids.” –Michael A. Messner, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at the University of California, Berkeley and author of Some Men: Feminist Allies and the Movement to End Violence Against Women

“This book is unique in that it includes data from elementary, middle, and high schools from both students’ and teachers’ perspectives. These examples are familiar to anyone working in K-12 schools, but his analysis offers a new lens for many that can expose the frustrating and often heartbreaking nature of these taken-for-granted cultural norms.” –Elizabeth J. Meyer, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education at California Polytechnic State University and author of Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools

Scott Richardson, Ph.D. is a curriculum theorist and researcher in the areas of gender, sexuality and democratic, alternative, and international education. He is the author of eleMENtary School: (Hyper)Masculinity in a Feminized Context.
Gender Lessons
Teaching Gender

Volume 4

Series Editor
Patricia Leavy
USA

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Gender Lessons

Patriarchy, Sextyping & Schools

Scott Richardson

Millersville University, Millersville, USA
PRAISE FOR GENDER LESSONS: PATRIARCHY,
SEXTYPING & SCHOOLS

“Read how kids and their teachers conspire to create the illusion that gender is uniform. In ‘pledging the patriarchy’ even the victors are victimized by the ‘sextyping’ schools accommodate and sometimes espouse. Read about teachers who sometimes teach gender lessons to their students a little too ‘up close and personal.’ No muckraker, Richardson reports what he learned from his resounding research, not always telling us what we’re supposed to learn but allowing the facts themselves to teach. But if you haven’t learned your lesson by chapter 6, you’ll grasp it then. (Ah, the French, once again). Even if Richardson didn’t have kids—he has two, Mali and Maria—you know he’d make a great Dad, because he is a great teacher: ‘My hope is that we might fully recognize children as complex individuals—that we go beyond any biological assignment, and resist the pressure to stereotype (sextype) how boys and girls are “supposed to act”.’ Scott Richardson understands. Read for yourself.”

William F. Pinar, Ph.D., Professor and Canada Research Chair, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

“In the 1970s, feminists fought to reform sexist school curricula and challenged taken-for-granted tracking of boys and girls. Forty years later, drawing from personal experiences and insightful research in schools, Scott Richardson shows us that the job is far from finished. Informal interactions and stubborn sexist beliefs about gender difference still press girls and boys in primary, middle and high schools into different—and highly constraining—gender boxes. Teachers, parents, and anyone who cares about taking the next steps toward gender equality in schools will find in Gender Lessons a useful and hopeful map to a better future for our kids.”

Michael A. Messner, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at the University of California, Berkeley and author of Some Men: Feminist Allies and the Movement to End Violence Against Women
“Dr. Richardson has done an excellent job providing an accessible and scholarly analysis of the ways in which gender is taught and reproduced in school settings. His style of combining personal narratives with data from his team’s detailed observations in schools give readers an engaging entry point to think carefully about what he calls sextyping. He provides many examples that describe and problematize everyday practices in average K-12 schools and classrooms. These examples are familiar to anyone working in K-12 schools, but his analysis offers a new lens for many that can expose the frustrating and often heartbreaking nature of these taken-for-granted cultural norms. This book is unique in that it includes data from elementary, middle, and high schools from both students’ and teachers’ perspectives. His writing is provocative, engaging, and contributes to an important body of research that can help parents, educators, and policy makers think differently about what effective and inclusive schools look like.”

Elizabeth J. Meyer, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education at California Polytechnic State University and author of *Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools*
For Yara
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FOREWORD

In August before I started junior high school, I bought supplies I had not needed in elementary school. For my notebook I knew I had to get a pencil case. I liked the large one with bright colors rather than the smaller white one. “Those are the ones the girls buy,” the store manager told my mother. So I put it back on the shelf. I also learned in the first week of junior high that the popular boys carried their books under one arm. I thought it made more sense to use both arms to carry the stack in front of my body. My arm hurt when I lugged four large textbooks on one side. But only girls carried their books in front, my best friend told me. That settled it—I lived with sore arms rather than risk social suicide.

Most of us learn early on what is and is not expected of boys and girls. The lessons come from many teachers—parents, friends, television stars, favorite musicians, the church…and from our school teachers. What we learn in classrooms usually reinforces what we already picked up outside the school when we were very young.

So the teachers you will meet in this book did not cause what Scott Richardson calls “sextyping.” When a first grade teacher told the boys to wear cowboy hats and the girls to put on tiaras for a concert, she did what her community expected. Men and women differ, and the sooner our kids know it, the better. This isn’t discrimination; it’s reality. “Sounds like you live in a different world,” one teacher told Scott when he questioned that view of life.

But if the teachers in this book did not cause sextyping, they certainly did not challenge it…or even talk about it. They accepted and often reinforced what we academics say is “constructed”—a view that gender is a performance. It is not innate, genetic, or inborn. Very few teachers wanted to be what the great sociologist David Riesman once called a “countervailing force”—the daring idea that educators should occasionally question what others take for granted. In fact, they celebrated the labeling and stereotyping that would, in their opinion, prepare the young to be happy heterosexual adults.
Several teachers agreed with Scott’s view that separate is never equal, but they were a small group who met together, voluntarily, each morning. Even when Scott joined them, they only talked about sextyping after he raised the issue, and the very best conversation took place outside school, fueled by mimosas. There are few spaces in most schools for discussion of issues that aren’t linked to the agenda of higher test scores. The vignettes in this book that make us cringe can happen so often because the classroom doors are closed.

But Scott got in. It wasn’t easy—he had to pretend he was studying academic success when in fact he knew from the start that he wanted to extend the extraordinary work of his first book, EleMENtary School. It wasn’t funded —Scott is a countervailing force because he is an ethnographer—a close observer who spends months in schools—in an age when scholarship without statistics is out of fashion. He stands apart by virtue of how he acts as well as what he believes.

An astute observer of early 19th century America, Alexis deTocqueville, said that “the majority lives in the perpetual practice of self-applause, and there are certain truths which the Americans can only learn from strangers or from experience.” In this book we have the experience of a savvy stranger in a school district that is all too American.

Robert L. Hampel
School of Education, University of Delaware
Ethnographic work of this kind requires years in the field, constant processing of ideas with anyone who would listen, and endless lonely hours, blurry eyed, behind the glow of a computer. For me, it also required squatting in bars, coffee shops and anywhere I could find an electrical outlet. This work survived multiple computer crashes and my losing the only copy of the manuscript on a bus in Reykjavík. Luckily, I had a supportive team of people who kept me going.

My dedicated and wicked smart research assistants are amazing. Thank you to Khoan Ly, Sabrina Hensel, Samantha Lang, Brandon Leinbach, Kortney Gipe, and Jenna Bisbing.

I was gifted with a talented core of readers who provided invaluable advice. I greatly owe Yara Graupera, Elizabeth Soslau, Angela Wilson Kost, and Robert L. Hampel for giving me critical feedback from start to finish. Thanks also to Edwin Minguela, Mel Cleveland, Cajetan Berger, Edward Woestman, Savannah Rosensteel, Brent Schrader, Jessica Heindel, Dagmar Snowadzky, Dana Morrison Simone, Lindsay Eisenhut, Maria Cristina Bucur, Robert Jones, and Khristina Schultz.

I work with great colleagues in the Educational Foundations Department at Millersville University, to whom I owe significant thanks. In particular, Thomas Neuville for engaging in any half-baked idea at any time, Ojoma Edeh Herr for providing me with new writing spaces, Tiffany Wright for allowing me to force impromptu readings on her, and John Ward for always playing devil’s advocate.

Thank you Patricia Leavy, a gifted editor with vision, generosity, and insight who has given my work a great home in the Teaching Gender Series.

Most of all, I am thankful to my family—all of you—for listening, reading, editing, challenging and questioning. It is you who provide me with deep inspiration.

…Mali and Maria, thanks for letting me be your dad.
When I was in the second grade,
the collars on my dresses were fastened like nooses around necks
to fit the mold of a woman
and to protect the boys from distractions.

Boys will be boys, so the girls need to cover up and shut up.

I wondered what rules I could depend on when I couldn’t breathe
in this packaging you trapped me in,
yet your tune remains unchanged:

My gender is a lifeline carved into my hand
that will determine what I can and can’t do
and if I am not a white boy basking in the hyper-masculine,
I cannot be equal.

My option has been preselected
predetermined by what’s “down there”
(because god forbid we learn about our own organs and hormones
and how to safely engage them without a trial by pregnancy).

In history, you reduce us to footnotes
and contextualize our existence to that of a man.
I want to be complete on my own
but you say that makes me the sick one
for wanting to leave this box.

In math and science, you blame my vagina if I don’t know the answer
when you should probably check your lesson plan
because while you keep insisting that there are only two options,
I know boys who are sensitive and demure
and girls who are calculating and adventurous
and kids who don’t fit into your pronouns.

Your prescription is conformity,
but if students are committing suicide
because they couldn’t fit,
Then these boxes are nothing more than coffins.

We are not the sick ones.
An education system with a fatality rate
is the one that needs a cure.

It starts in the classroom.
It starts with opening your eyes and realizing
you have more than just “boys” and “girls.”
you have essays and poems
movement, energy, opinions
dirt and charcoal
paintings breaking out of their frames
touchdowns and scores of
symphonic melodies crafted by laughter.

You have students.
You have us.

—Nicole Weerbrouck
FIELD NOTE

In the library, writing. Miller's 7th grade class coding in for book exchange.
3 girls (LB, C, LM) sit at a table behind me. Miller + Reifschneider sit at a table close to me. Students:

"You look at "Carmen" girl."
(magazine)

- oh, that dress is sooo cute
- I can't even to the beach
- what a bikini like this
- They were like "whoa?"

She's pretty
- Ask Lyn (another girl in this grade)
- would you like to go with me?
- I have to get my make-up

- She's pretty - she should read this, she needs help - it says about what to think about boys who... can her
- Where did you meet your boyfriend?
INTRODUCTION

This book is about how schools sextype and institutionalize gender. I explore how schools, particularly Monroe Valley, a suburban school district, explicitly and implicitly *teach* girls to perform femininity and boys to perform masculinity.

I am not the first person to write about how schools establish specific cultural roles and expectations for kids. There are many important books in this field. I am simply providing another example so that we may be opened to more conversations. This research employs ethnographic/narrative methodologies; makes sense of data by pulling from theories grounded in curriculum inquiry, sociology, philosophy, and gender studies; and creates narratives by weaving together conversations, observations, and interviews. In some cases, particularly when I use student voices, I employ composite non-fiction so that I can offer more anonymity. Blended research methodology such as this may make it difficult for some readers to “trust” the researcher because the tone is less “research technical.” Traditional academics argue that work like this may not be taken seriously. To a large extent, I am not concerned about traditionalists, or about how traditional academic paradigms attempt to define and confine (essentially creating a monopoly) how inquiry needs to happen. As a writer, I chose this blended path, and work hard to create a narrative tone because I view it as important to connect with a broader audience (teachers, parents, students, academics, and so on) and engage them in their own sense-making processes.

This book is chock-full of examples detailing how gender is taught in schools. I am afraid that so many examples might make reading this work become tedious. I hear voices in my head, “Alright, alright, Scott, we get it.” But the dozens of examples I provide here represent only a fraction of what I observed. I considered scaling back how many examples I should provide, but resisted because 1) the institutionalization of gender is a conversation rarely held, 2) readers have a better chance at connecting with certain stories and make sense of their own (or their students’/kids’ school experiences), 3) few works
have catalogued daily school happenings based in sextyping, and 4) gender is so incredibly pervasive…it is everywhere, in everything.

My hope is that we might fully recognize children as complex individuals—that we go beyond any biological assignment, and resist the pressure to stereotype (sextype) how boys and girls are “supposed to act.” It is also my hope to really recognize that “racism, sexism, and elitism all have concrete institutional locations,” and that it is our duty to radically reimagine these spaces.

NOTES


3 Also, the methods section of this book (Chapter 2, “Getting Into It”) details how I gleaned information—how I came to know what I knew. This allows me to speak on behalf of participants in the study (e.g., how a student felt in a specific circumstance, or how a teacher interprets school policy, and so on) throughout the rest of the work without having to qualify every instance along the way. I find this technique useful and important for many reasons, but most importantly so that I do not continue to disrupt the powerful narrative of participants’ experiences. For a good example of a work that is similar in nature, see: Tracey Kidder, Among School (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989).

DEAR MRS. BALDWIN, I’M CONCERNED

The word on the street, or at least in academic circles, is that by now it is well understood that gender is a social construct. Babies are born sexed with genitalia and often, before they open their eyes, they are swaddled in blue or pink. Bam! Gendered. “Baby banners announcing, ‘It’s a boy!’ or ‘It’s a girl!’ should read, ‘I’m ascribing this baby boyhood’ or ‘I’m socially constructing this baby as a girl.’” Family members, teachers, communities, media, and more all work to continue to impose gender on individuals from birth through adulthood, and even beyond death.

“Grandpa was such a gentleman. He never raised a hand to those kids unless one of his boys was disrespecting a woman.”

“She was so sweet. Jane was a great neighbor. Even into her eighties you could tell she used to turn a lot of heads. And she was always so put together…never left the house without her high heels.”

A coffee shop near my house is a hot spot for stay at home moms. Toting their small children to brunch in bucket seats, strollers, and swaddles, they connect with one another chatting about money, school, husbands, parenting, sex, vacations, among other things. They fawn over each other’s kids. One day I was watching a group of four moms, likely in their lower thirties, sipping lattes and going through the usual topics.

“Bill’s applying for that new job at the courthouse…”

“Lexi hasn’t pooped in a day, I’m going to call the pediatrician or I’m going to stuff her full of applesauce and prunes…”

“I just don’t like the beach as much anymore, I think we’ll try a ski resort this year…”

Interrupting, a friend of theirs, smiling from ear to ear, walked through the door. She was carrying her newborn, and it was evident that the rest of the moms have not yet met this kid.

“Oh my goodness! He’s so handsome!” one mom exclaimed.
Another threw her arms around her friend, “You are so lucky to have such a cute little guy! He’s going to be a lady-killer!”

“Oh, look at those eyes…you’re flirting with me, aren’t you?”

I thought about joining the conversation just to see what would happen, “You are one sexy baby…give me a call later.” Surely, I would have been told off. But is it not absurd to sexualize an infant? To immediately bathe a two week-old in heteronormativity? And what if a group of dads did this around a newborn daughter?

“I bet she is going to date lots of men when she’s a teenager.”

“She is so hot!”

“Young daughter is giving me eyes…”

Girls too are gendered at birth, but differently. Boys are expected to hit the ground running, looking for the next girl to conquer. Girls are expected to be adorable little princesses, with their sexuality guarded by their fathers. From, “Oh, you’re daddy’s little girl…” to purity rings, daddy-daughter dances, the omnipresent threat of a boyfriend having to deal with dad if he took things too far (in my teenage years, a father once told me, “Don’t make me have a talk with you behind the shed.”) to fathers giving their daughters away at weddings.

Gender is continually constructed and imposed on each of us. Westernized heteronormative scripts are practically handed to us on day one. And the people in our lives (acting as producers, directors, and audience members) will continue to make sure we stick to the script: no improvising allowed; be your character, play your gendered performance. These scripts and performances do serve a perceived important purpose. They allow us to make quick sense of who one is/should be and what we can expect of them depending if they are a man or woman. It is an unfair act of generalization that cues us to interact with each other in particular ways. But it does something else too. It helps to maintain what bell hooks calls:

“white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”—“the interlocking systems of domination that define our reality” (as quoted in Jhally, 1997). “White,” “supremacist,” and “capitalist” are adjectives modifying “patriarchy,” the noun, which she defines as, “a political-social system that insists that males are inherently
DEAR MRS. BALDWIN, I’M CONCERNED

dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (hooks, 2004, p. 18). This is strong wording. It may be difficult to “see” psychological terrorism and violence in most of our everyday lives because patriarchy does not always (need to) explicitly employ it. What this means to me is that psychological terrorism and violence is often implicitly present, and ready to be unleashed if white men begin to lose their dominant status in our society.²

White supremacist capitalist patriarchy is both a long held American tradition (like baseball and apple pie) and enemy number one (that is, if we desire progress). Our gendering process does nothing but uphold and seriously defend this system of deep inequality. Related and just as important to recognize, I believe, is my claim that by teaching discreet performances of femininity and masculinity, and by not reimagining new genders and rendering them available to youth, we are limiting our children’s capabilities to be fully human. It is simple: if we were to teach all of our children how to perform, enact, and own the great range of human traits—regardless of whether they are/used to be considered “masculine” and “feminine”—their potential to become more whole, well-rounded, and relatable would be exponentially greater. They would grow to better understand each other as individuals and produce a society that might be ready to take on, or starve, the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in older generations. Our kids deserve the chance to be fully human, to become self-determined and self-actualized without the imposing boundaries of gendered performances. They deserve to challenge white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. But we have to teach them differently, now.

Though this book describes the institutionalization of gender, it is also a call for deinstitutionalization. There is no need for children to learn gender in a binary (male/female) and static manner. Society should be more nuanced by now, and demand that our schools recognize and actively teach about a flexible and ever evolving spectrum of gender. Enough, “boys and girls, line up,” already. I know this is a tall order.
It would mean that teachers, administrators and others who work in schools must be open to, and receive, an education of their own. Many adults undoubtedly want what is best for children, but fail to see that by categorizing and enforcing “girl” and “boy” expectations, they work to limit kids to certain gendered performances. These performances, then, become difficult to break and are expected of us over a lifetime. So, deinstitutionalizing gender for kids at an early age is important. This does seem like a utopic dream, but I do not see any reasonable excuse for leaving deinstitutionalization unexplored, especially since we already have a wide reaching publicly funded mechanism in place that could do this work: schools.

My philosophical positioning has been influenced by many factors: my experiences growing up as a boy and man, my work as a male elementary school teacher in a perceived “feminized” context, and by making general observations about gender relations in this country. The status of women, particularly women of color, in this country is quite unimaginable. I am equally concerned about this “remasculinization” movement that is being wielded, as if men are really suffering from the same economic and social disparities as women. Women are steadily, for the first time in American history, graduating at higher rates than men from all levels of education, from high school, bachelors, masters, and doctoral programs. However, women are still paid $0.77 to every $1.00 a man makes for the same job. Obviously, we do not live in a meritocracy in the U.S. Actual achievement is of little concern if it is by women. Also, there is the on-going epidemic of sexual harassment and assault that victimizes women mostly, but hurts men too. I could go on, and on, but the three extremely important phenomena that I theorize about and inspire me the most for this work are:

1. the relatively ignored socialization process that happens in and outside of our schools;
2. my undergraduate students, many of them fresh out of high school, who have learned—and perform well—stereotypical gendered behaviors that interfere with their education;
3. the deep worry I have for my own children in this gendered world.
DEAR MRS. BALDWIN, I’M CONCERNED

GENDER SOCIALIZATION

In graduate school, when I first became interested in gender, I sought the help of a sociologist. She was well known for her work, and I needed to conceptualize “masculinity” and “femininity.” We met at her office, and I sat nervously twitching in the uncomfortable wooden chair that was for visiting students. I only knew her by reputation, but I definitely did not want to seem dumb. I was still in the “imposter phase,” wondering if I was good enough to be a graduate student and academic.

“So, what is it that you want my help with?”

“Masculinity” and “femininity” had not been defined, but I needed to understand their meaning. I asked, “Has ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ been defined? And if so, how?”

She smiled and pointed to a collection of rap CDs on her table. “Are those masculine or feminine?”

“I feel like this is a trick.”

“It’s not a trick, just tell me. When you look at those, do you think they are masculine or feminine?”

“Masculine.”

“They are?”

“I don’t know. I think about rap music, and most of the artists are men. I guess I know more men who listen to rap.”

“OK, that’s good. It’s related to your reason. But just visually, tell me, what do you see?”

“Ummm… the labels are high contrast, lots of sharp lines, bold black and white shapes.”

“Ok, good. How about that plant over there?” She pointed toward her window.

“Feminine.”

“She’s green.”

“It has tiny flowers, it’s green… I think of nurturing.”

She smiled at me and said, “Do you need a definition of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ after all?”
We parted ways with her saying, “Don’t worry about it, everyone knows what ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ is, and sometimes they give words to it, but most times, we just know.

I was startled that this person, a social scientist, who lives in the world of academia, when given the opportunity to exhaustively define and ascribe meaning to constructs was just so nonchalant about it.

In the following months, I thought about it more, and did my own scouring of academic literature but remained without any solid definition. It was only after reading R. W. Connell’s work on masculinity that I finally “gave in.” Gender was not to be defined outside of the likes of silly internet blogs, YouTube videos (“Shit White Girls Say”) and “young women’s magazine” polls (“Quiz! Are You a Real Lady?”).

Connell’s model asserts that there are a variety of masculinities, which makes sense only in hierarchical and contested relations with one another. R. W. Connell argues that men enact and embody different configurations of masculinity depending on their positions within a social hierarchy of power. *Hegemonic masculinity*, the type of gender practice that, in a given space and time, supports gender inequality, is at the top of this hierarchy. *Complicit masculinity*, describes men who benefit from hegemonic masculinity but do not enact it; *subordinated masculinity* describes men who are oppressed by definitions of hegemonic masculinity, primarily gay men; *marginalized masculinity* describes men who may be positioned powerfully in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race.8

Connell is careful to point out that masculinity is also flexible and “inherently relational” with “femininity.” “‘Masculinity’ does not exist except in contrast and relation with ‘femininity’. "b “Masculinity,” or femininity, “to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.”10

So, yes, there is no one definition of “masculinity” or “femininity.” This leaves us with just “knowing,” or “sensing,” by tapping into our cultural understandings of these terms, from moment to moment,
situation to situation. While these constructs of “masculinity” and “femininity” are difficult to put into exact words, “as a society we have little trouble in recognizing it.” And we certainly have little trouble creating it. Practically everything around us has some sort of gendered meaning—from concrete materials like CDs and plants to abstract concepts like care and problem solving. Genres, subject matter, and interests also get gendered. Since forever women have been considered deficient in science, technology, engineering, and math (the “STEM” fields). Of course, there are no good reasons for the absence of women in these fields, and only now are we really taking this problem seriously.

We map on gendered meanings to everything, and we have expectations of how one should interact or engage with our world, accordingly. Even if we try to cancel out, or ignore, gendered meanings others ascribe, or we are conscious to not create performances that reify stereotypical “girl” and “boy” culture, we still end up feeling the pressure to conform/perform for two primary reasons. The first is social/economic, and the other is environmental.

Let’s pretend that a stereotypical hypermasculine man uncharacteristically begins to perform femininity—wears a little bit of make-up or is openly emotional—or a stereotypical hyperfeminine woman uncharacteristically begins to perform masculinity—develops an interest in basketball or buys a Harley—their friends and family might express confusion. Perhaps it would be so confusing that their friends and family might not know how to interact or continue in their relationships in a comfortable manner. Employers might also find these transitions confusing and downright unwelcomed. This might have direct impact on their ability to support their employee’s work. There are many examples that could be made, but here is an easy one: In the restaurant business (unless they are progressive or openly affirming) it would be hard to imagine that an androgynous person (despite how competent they might be) would be rewarded a job waiting on tables over a sweet, smiling, passive and pretty woman or funny nice guy.

In sum, those who break gender rules, or are “border crossers,” will suffer social and economic consequences for simply being who they are. On a personal note, I often wonder what might happen if I wore
a skirt to class. How would my college students react? How about my colleagues? What about the dean?! I have not been brave enough, yet, because things could drastically change for me. I am a newer faculty member, and would like a long successful career—and this simple act might have deep professional (economic) and social repercussions. Perhaps I would be denied tenure and promotion. I should point out that I have no real inclination to wear a skirt, but that the option is not even really available keeps me from sincerely considering it. Who knows, maybe it is something I might like and identify with. How awful is it that the perceptions of others, and the threat of unnecessary consequences, keep us in check, restrict our sense of autonomy, and disallows our potential selves?

We have very little control over most of our environment. Sure, we can turn off the television, avoid the internet, draw the curtains, and turn out the lights, but that will likely lead to a lonely and uninformed life. Living out there and connected, however, means we are bombarded by lessons that try to convince us that the heteronormative gendered binary is completely normal and essential. These lessons are tethered to capitalism. For example:

- Preteen girls can be pretty if they convince their parents to purchase certain clothes, make-up, and so on.
- Little boys can be brave and just all-around awesome if their parents buy them play swords and shields.
- Men can be sexy and irresistible with the right kind of shaving cream.
- Women can be beautiful and apparently super flexible in yoga pants, if they just buy the right tampon.

Whether it is the purchase of products, entertainment, education, or something else, there is practically always a gendered/sexualized message that accompanies the specifications of what is being sold. After being so indoctrinated, it is almost absurd to imagine a commercial that would be straightforward and told the truth:

“The use of this make-up will result in a fight between you and your parents, and possibly your school. But these clothes are good, because you need to not be naked in public.”
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“These play swords and shields will affirm that secret you’ve kept to yourself—yes, in-deed your son is an asshole. You’ll wish just once he would listen to your plea, ‘No play fighting in the house.’”

“Shaving cream can be used in conjunction with a razor to shave any hair you desire. Go for it.”

“This tampon will absorb your menstrual bleeding while you are doing any human activity, including yoga if that’s your thing.”

Capitalism, marketing specifically, sends strong cultural messages about how masculinity and femininity should look and how we, the consumers of products and gender, should embody it. Marketing ploys and other phenomena are providing environmental stimuli and reinforcing a binary gendered system teaching that we should fit in it on one side or the other. Consider this (short!) list:

• pink and purple versus all other colors
• pink and blue aisles in toy stores
• “boy” and “girl” names
• the phrase “you guys” to categorize all groups of people—old lady knitting clubs, Girl Scouts, mixed gender middle-agers, etc.—devalues others who might identify as women/feminine (working to make them “invisible,”) or gendered in other ways. “This seemingly innocent phrase may be operating like a computer virus, worming its way into our memory files and erasing our sense of why we worry about sexism in language to begin with.”

• differently cut clothing (e.g., low rise jeans, long cut swim trunks, swimsuits for girls/women—99% of which would be “inappropriate” cuts for any other place, like schools that worry—perhaps unnecessarily?—about butt cheeks, etc.)
• “Mother’s Day” and “Father’s Day”
• “boy” and “girl” bathrooms (I use bathrooms for very specific biologically driven reasons…I wonder, what else happens in women’s bathrooms that they must be separated?)
• TV channels (e.g., Lifetime for Women, Spike TV)
• “chick flicks”
• boy bands
• hair accessories
• select spas or massage parlors (including seedy ones)
religious practices (think: different seating areas in the synagogue, women cannot become Catholic priests, roles and responsibilities differ according to denomination)

• greeting cards

• strip clubs (most cater to men, some do not allow female patrons, and male strip clubs are few and far between)

• man caves

• locker rooms (that are social/non-private, but are driven by gender)

• names of businesses (“Five Guys,” “Pep Boys,” “Kirchner & Sons Refrigeration,” “Hooters,” and “Dirty Dicks”)

• representation in certain careers

• representations of “masculine” and “feminine” media—of every kind imaginable

• mud flaps with Playboy symbols or those tacky side profiles of curvaceous women sitting ummm…sexy I suppose?

• athletics (male and female teams, some exclusively gendered like football…some sports, like cheerleading, serve to sexualize women)

• recreational events (e.g., “girls night out” and “ladies night” at the bar)

• overheard or random jokes about sex

• general beliefs held by people that men and women have different capabilities (that men are more technologically capable, while women are more capable at caring).

• supposed humor like, the old man to the fourteen year old, “So, do you have a girlfriend yet?”

• men’s body wash

• the criminalization of women’s nipples

• street and work harassment

• “mancations”

• Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts

• terms like, “human kind”

• phrases like, “man up”

• “selfie” culture and sexting

• men approaching women in social situations asking, “Do you have a boyfriend?”

• manscaping and Brazilian bikini waxes
No wonder we do not fully recognize the pressure we have been under to perform gender, or how we personally uphold patriarchy by being heedlessly complicit. To a certain degree we are all Truman Burbank in the movie, *The Truman Show*. We recognize that something might not be exactly right. We experience some discontent. But, until suspicion and discontent turns personal, there is seemingly nothing much to complain about—it is just life. It is just how life is supposed to be.

My grandmother is sweet, thoughtful, and is always learning. Books and documentaries are a natural part of her daily diet. On occasion, because she is curious, she asks, “What are you up to?” With this question anxiety rushes over me and I remind myself that despite her inquisitive disposition, she also comes from a different era. I respond as if I’m a fifteen year old who just stole a six-pack of beer, a car, and got a tattoo of my girlfriend’s name on my bicep. I tiptoe around an answer, “You know, nothing much.” If she presses, I submit some real answers, but with the understanding that they will be met with criticism. I tell her I am writing about gender, which is almost always true. I will go into a few specific details, but then try to change the subject. More times than not, however, she does not let it go. “I don’t understand what there’s to write about,” she would say. Or, “That’s just the way the world is. Men and women are different. They are meant to do different things.” I have tried in the past to talk about how we are socialized to be masculine and feminine and when we assume these roles, inequality ensues. On occasion, she agrees, “That’s true, men never want to help out around the house.” But more times than not, she thinks I am making a big deal out of nothing. She does not understand gender as multiple, flexible, constructed, or imposed. It is simple reality. My grandma is not alone.

**MY STUDENTS**

An important debate has endured the test of time in America: Should schools model themselves after society or should society model itself after schools? Meaning, should schools “get students ready” to “fit” the current conditions (economic, social, religious, etc.) of society?
Or should society look to schools to reimagine the future—for new and better ways that society should function. Undoubtedly, regardless of which side you are on, we can agree that practically, both happen. Sometimes schools push change and bring innovation to society, and other times schools spit out “products” who are expected to play certain roles. In my observation, however, when it comes to gender, high schoolers are graduating with few to no skills that allow them to critically think about gender, their individual performances, or society’s impact (like the above list) on gender construction. Take, for example, the undergraduates that I teach.

I teach students who want to be elementary school teachers. Recently, I had my most challenging group of students of all-time.

As a teacher, I try to practice democratic pedagogical approaches. I want to build a learning community where students take care of one another. For several years now, I have been practicing a model of “open syllabus education” (OSE)—developed with a few innovative colleagues—that invites students to develop their courses with my guidance. The first day of class is usually very exciting. The great majority of students have never participated in K-12 or post-secondary courses that actively enlist their help, or empower them to “own” their education. Therefore, during our first class session, students usually experience a range of confusion, worry, and enlightenment. I love to watch them grapple with my sixteen page document of provocations (my invitation to a democratic class). I ask questions like:

• You may ask, “How can we (students) participate in designing a curriculum well if we are not familiar with the academic matter of the class? Is it not primarily, if not solely, the role of the teacher, who is considered to be very knowledgeable in this academic field and knows better what should be learned?”

• What would be the ideal practice for your learning and professional development: having grades or not having grades and if having grades, what kind of grades and how should grading be organized for you to make it highly beneficial and minimally (or not) harmful?

• How are we going to make organizational, curricular, instructional, and conflict-resolution decisions and reflect on their consequences
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in our class? Should we try to do “democratic decision making” in our class? What does that mean?
• Should our community transcend the classroom? Meaning, do we become involved in each other beyond class? What does this look like?

Students are quick to see that none of these questions have any one answer. They discuss, argue, push back, wonder, and try to make sense of this new structure. Students do not have to accept my invitation to an OSE class; they can simply ask for a regular (closed) syllabus that has their entire semester planned for them. However, my classes always accept this democratic approach and report, “it’s a unique opportunity to try to learn differently.”

This one class, however, used it as a unique opportunity to bully one another.

“I like this idea,” said Samantha, a student who I met just minutes before. She sat in the back, proper, and forthright. “But, it’s not going to work.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because this class is all girls.”

Confused, I pressed on, “So, what difference does that make?”

“Girls are bitches,” she said.

I needed a moment to recover, but Michelle, sitting across the room agreed, “Girls can’t be trusted with getting along and making decisions with each other. She’s right. We’re all bitches.”

The class, shook their heads and sharpened their eyes, and produced a chorus of, “yup, that’s true,” and “I agree.”

“Whoa! Hold on a second!” I responded. I hoped they were kidding, but observing their serious demeanor, I was moved to spring to their defense.

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Are you telling me that it is impossible for girls to get along? For them to be in a productive learning community together? To take care of one another?”

“It’s not impossible, but it’s not likely…it’s just the way we are,” said Samantha, now leaning back and talking with a sly smile.

I spent the next hour trying to understand why they believed that girls were inherently “bitches.” Needless to say, they did not have any
good reasons or evidence. They continued, like my grandma, “Girls are just that way.”

It was the oddest first class I ever had, and the semester went downhill from there. This group of thirty women, nineteen to twenty-three years in age, made life miserable for one another. They used the democratic classroom to make bad decisions for one another. They would listen intently to what their peers expressed they needed, and then vote for the opposite. The class formed factions—the cool and pretty; the nerdy and serious; the emotional; the conservative religious; and so on. Students scrambled to sit with their factions prior to every class session. If one came late to class, and could not find a seat next to their “friends,” horror would overwhelm them. How dare they sit with another group of people who are moderately different than themselves?!

Worst of all, they engaged in deeply aggressive behaviors. Some were quite explicit—for example, they took to real-time cyber-bullying during class. They foolishly followed me on Twitter and then used this platform to trash one another.

“Ppl are so retarded. Like anyone gives a fuck about your opinion. #shutupbitch”

“Every time she opens her mouth I wanna slap her.”

“Your presentation @studentname was the shit, ignore those haters. They wish they could be us.”

“I can’t even. This class has so many sluts.”

Implicitly aggressive behaviors, microaggressions, were just as bad, but more difficult for me to detect. When certain students in opposing factions spoke in class, eye rolling, deep sighs, turning away, and rebuttals that dug at their belief systems, ensued. A look, ever-so-slight could, enrage another student for the rest of class.

Other professors who had these students in their classes were experiencing the same problem. So, we staged an intervention. We showed the film *Bully*™ and afterward, talked about their behaviors. We told them, “enough is enough!” Students sobbed and some even confessed that they were acting terribly.

We believed this would reign them in. And for a week or so, it did. But by the end of the semester, they were all back in it—fighting it out,
being terrible people. As one final attempt to help them make sense of their actions, I invited a good colleague and friend of mine, Elizabeth, and the associate provost at my university, Jeff, to my last class session of the semester. I asked them to sit up in the front of the classroom and directed my students to be quiet. I told my students that they were not allowed to ask questions or interrupt at all, and said:

Teaching is tough. And sometimes you have really difficult situations. In the future, if you ever get a job teaching—which at this point, I kinda hope you don’t—you should seek out good colleagues that can help give you feedback. That you can lean-on. That you trust will be honest. So, before you, I have invited two really great people to come in to talk to me. I’m going to tell them about my trouble teaching you, and they’ll give me feedback. The point of this exercise is for you to 1) listen to how professionals can help each other improve their practice/what good mentorship looks like and 2) to inform you, again, about your unprofessional behavior. This semester has been hell for me. I cannot believe that people who want to be teachers, who want to enter relationships of care in a classroom, would take to bullying. Let’s begin…

Then, I turned to Elizabeth and Jeff and we held an hour long conversation about my students’ behaviors, my possible failures as their instructor, and what we desired in teachers.

As you can imagine, my students were stunned. They sat in disbelief that I would be so honest. That my colleagues were involved, that others were talking about them, made it even more “real.” When the class was over, Elizabeth and Jeff reported that it was one of the most unique experiences they had in a college classroom. That held true for me too. I thought that for sure, my students would reflect a little bit and try to make sense of everything. I should not have been so optimistic.

The next day, several came to my office fretting over whether I actually meant that they “shouldn’t be teachers.” We talked a bit, and right before they left, they frankly told me, “But Dr. Richardson, you knew this was going to happen. It’s your fault too. We told you that it wasn’t going to work because girls are bitches.”

These girls were addicted to being mean. They were addicted to the idea of what it meant to be a girl. They saw no way out of it. It was clear
that their high schools, and perhaps none of their schooling before that, challenged what it meant to be a girl—or better yet, a person. What a gift it would have been if they were taught and learned that they did not have to be this way. I wondered, what was the institutionalization process like for these students?

MY KIDS

I have two children, Mali and Maria. At the time of this writing they are nine and eight. They, like most siblings, are very different from one another, but share some core qualities. They are kind, wild, smart, silly, generous, eccentric, self-determined, hilarious, and witty. They are crazy about animals (particularly dogs) and have deeply adventurous spirits. As they have gotten older, they have begun to share interests in horseback riding, rock wall climbing, zip lining, exploring nature, and traveling to new places. They are naturally curious and desire to learn about the world around them.

They are different in some obvious ways: Mali is an old soul and deeply sensitive (like me), whereas Maria is a space cadet and “sour patch kid” (like my partner, Yara)—sweet one moment, sour the next. Mali’s mind is that of a sociologist, while Maria’s is of a philosopher. They look vastly different, too. Mali has always been tall and strong. She has deep dark brown eyes and hair. She rarely cares about what she looks like, and dresses for complete comfort. Maria has blue eyes, blonde hair and is on the shorter side. Occasionally she cares what she looks like, but is content to wear the same outfit for a week (or as long as we let her get away with it). Yara and I often reflect how challenging it has been at times to parent kids who are so similar and dissimilar to us, but ultimately feel blessed and amazed at how they are also their own unique selves—truly perfect in every single way.

Mali has been known to spend hours at night, lying in bed, thinking about the social interactions she encountered, examining adult conversations overheard, and wondering...just wondering...about everything she observed throughout the day. Mali’s mind is almost always switched “on,” and is constantly at work trying to make sense of all she has experienced. Most of all, she attempts to understand why
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people feel the way they do. Then, in her own nine year old way, she advocates for their needs. Mali cannot help but to care.

Once, we took the kids to a pig catching contest at a local fair—not something we typically do—and instead of running after the terrified greased up hog like the dozens of other children, she ran behind the pack and helped those who had fallen in the mud during the chase. These kids were strangers. Kids she knows are lucky to have a such a solid friend in her. She will forever stand by their side, and stick up for them.

Mali is also concerned about “right” and “wrong.” She is interested in social justice, and believes that her contributions can help create change. She has been known to organize yard sales that benefit people experiencing poverty and animal shelters. This usually consisted of her setting up a table in our front yard with old toys, things she found around the house, and little pieces of artwork that she produced. Around election time, she pays attention to political advertisements, and asks whom we are going to vote for, and why. Most recently, she has become interested in political protests.

Mali is a kid who never wants to disappoint. In fact, Yara and I often wish she were just a little naughty, selfish, or would tune out the adult world; that is, we desire her to be a carefree kid. Last year she—the kid who never does anything wrong—worried for two full months that she might have been “accidently bad,” possibly resulting in Santa Claus to skip over our house…or even worse, just visiting her sister.

Mali is wildly creative and has big ideas. By the looks of it, she has been managing an artist cooperative out of her bedroom. It is an explosion of yarn, paints, scrap material she’s pulled from our trash, odd knick knacks, books, glue, modeling clay, and so on. She has twine strung between her windows and the ceiling fan so she could hang bed sheets and make hideaway spaces to work in. She has random sketches and paintings taped to her wall, pieces she has knitted strewn across the floor, and dozens of journals and sketch pads filled with her ideas all over her desk, bed, and elsewhere. Dare we attempt to help her “clean up,” she accuses us of trying to get rid of her stuff. Her world is a creative one, and she feels secure being immersed in art.

Besides art, she has a wide spectrum of interests which include reading, writing, theatre, anything science related, Teenage Mutant
Ninja Turtles, outer space, the sea, theatre, climbing trees, wrestling, super corny jokes, spending time with her family (during the school week she pines for the weekend) and anything that has to do with our dog, Mia, our “schweenie” – go ahead, look it up. Mia is an odd looking dog with an underbite whose favorite activity is to sit close and breathe in your face. Besides this quirk, she is a sweet dog and an old soul, just like Mali. If Mali is feeling “mixed up,” frustrated, or like she just needs a friend, we’ll find her snuggling with Mia on her bed, or lying together under the warmth of the sun in our backyard. They get one another.

Droves of kids love Mali because she is so kind. And while Mali has a few close friends, she actually prefers to be around adults most of the time. Recently, I took a group of thirteen undergraduate students, and Mali, to Northern Ireland on study abroad. We motored around the country, shoved into a medium sized van. We were always on the move, staying in new locations, and kept an exhausting schedule. She was constantly, at all times, with my students—which for college kids on a trip overseas, could have been annoying. Instead, she and my students stayed up late, night after night, playing games like spoons, Catchphrase, and bullshit—which Mali refused to say because she deemed it “bad” so she called, “bullship!” They also built forts with blankets in the shared living spaces of the houses we rented, and baked cookies and Rice Krispie treats so they had late night snacks after the pub. She bunked with students in their rooms and giggled with them until the early morning hours. She and my students explored beaches, castles, schools, and cities together. I was so deeply moved that my students treated her so well, and I thanked them for this at the end of the trip. They, however, were confused and told me, “Well, she’s awesome!” “We love her!” and “She’s like one of us!” She had made thirteen genuine friends. It is extraordinary that a nine year old would make friends with college students, but it is not all that extraordinary for Mali. People of all ages think the world of her.

Mali is self-determined. She knows who she is and does not care about what other nine year olds deem “normal.” She’s happy to be her. She voices how lucky she is to have the life she has. How remarkable. When I tuck her in bed at night, I will often take a few moments to
snuggle. I burrow my head into her shoulder and tell her all the great things she is and tell her I love her. Often she will respond, “I know, I rock…I’m awesome.” I hope she knows this always.

As for Maria, our space cadet/sour patch kid, she epitomizes randomness. Maria is, for the most part, predictably unpredictable. She lives in her head for large swaths of the day, and only engages with people and her environment when it interests her. She can lose herself in any context and under any condition. This means that we have to continually keep watch of her. What is interesting is that when she wants to engage, she is wickedly perceptive. For example, we spent this past summer in Paris—a city that was new to us—so navigating the busy streets of the city with Maria proved quite stressful. Wherever we walked Maria would slip her hand out of ours so she could chase pigeons, run up flights of stairs, point and announce that certain statues were “naked,” and pause to look at random things—a leaf, a jagged brick in the wall of a building, a dog in a store window, or just the sunlight trickling through trees. She was rarely where we wanted her to be: holding a hand, next to our side. However, on occasions in which we got ourselves lost, Maria would tune-in and lead us back to our apartment. This also happened once in the Louvre. Maria and I spent a few hours in the museum and I became completely turned around. She took my hand and marched me twenty or so minutes through hallways, up and down stairwells, winding through exhibits, and exactly to the exit in which I was hoping for, announcing, “See Daddy. It’s just right there.”

Her ability to tune-out provides her with resilience. Anything she does not care about simply does not exist in her world. Recently, I took her to an academic conference and she sat through seven hours of boring talks with only a Kindle and pad of paper. She did not complain once. Instead, she read, drew, and spun herself in circles looking at the ceiling.

Maria rarely minds being tuned-out. However, every now and again it does result in her missing out on some things—for example, ideas shared during important family conversations, what day of the week it is (she wakes up most days by saying, “Is today the weekend?”), and simply observing what’s going on (like that time she mistook a
large bat flying around her bedroom as a moth). She will probably call bandanas, “damn-banas,” and easels, “weasels,” for the rest of her life because every time Yara and I correct her she simply looks right through us, then says, “Whatever, I don’t care, sometimes you say wrong things…I can say it however I want.”

From early on, Maria has had a special affinity for animals. When she was just a toddler, she played “guinea pig” for hours every day. She used her crib as a crate, and begged us to come pet, and feed her through the rails. She eventually became a “puppy” and this lasted for several years of her life. There were many family dinners in which Maria simply barked responses, licked her paws, and ate off her plate like a dog. If we misinterpreted the meanings behind her barks, she became angry, clenched her teeth, and would give us a growl. It was only when we got our second dog, Zoe, a Chihuahua/Jack Russell mix, did Maria feel that she could graduate to “puppy trainer.” She’s often found dragging Zoe around the house, sternly giving orders, or crushing her in her arms snuggled on a chair. Maria loves roughly.

Though Maria also has deep interests in reading, drawing, towers and tall buildings, geography, history, and goofing around, dogs (particularly Zoe) dominate her mind. She has told us that she will either live in San Francisco or with us when she gets older and will be the owner/manager of a “dog hotel.” For now, however, she spends a lot of time setting up imaginary spaces—most of them homemade using cardboard and other scrap materials—for dozens of plastic miniature dogs. She creates dog yoga studios, housing communities, airports, restaurants, new foreign lands, and so on. The dogs are situated within these sophisticated pretend worlds with jobs, families, social lives, and interests.

Maria takes everything a little personally. For instance, whenever someone burps, she feels it was directed at her—and so she burps in retaliation. How she has come to thinking and doing this, we will never know. In large groups, she will often accuse Yara and I of not listening to her, which I think might be a typical second kid complaint, but it occasionally results in her claiming, “You don’t love me.” When it is just her and an adult, however, she gets super trippy and asks weird questions like, “Is today tomorrow?” “If we get one more dog would it
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be more than other people?” “Can I have a dollar? Because, hey, I have
two eyes and I can see it.” Once I overheard her ask Yara, “Mommy,
would you rather have a normal husband, or a husband with a human
body and a Shar Pei head?”

Maria loves to put on a show, to make people laugh, particularly
her big sister. She is bold with her jokes, and if you are lucky enough
to meet her—you could be the butt of one. She often makes fun of
doctors, wait staff, and other strangers she does not know. She likes
teasing her family too. To play a joke on us, she secretly convinced
her grandmother to wrap up a toilet plunger and give it to her as a
Christmas gift.

Maria is incredibly loving toward her friends and her family, but
she never really wants to be obvious about it. When I drop her off at
school, I yell out, “I love you,” and she responds, “I love you, but not
more than I love Zoe.” When I tuck her in bed at night, I begin to say
sweet things and attempt to snuggle for a bit, but she pushes me away,
stiff-armed, and says, “Ok, I know, you love me, I’m special, blah,
blah, blah. Can you get out now?” and “Good night, jerk.” Blissful.

I love Mali and Maria for who they are. And Yara and I have worked
hard to not dictate who they must be. We want them to develop their
own interests, explore life, and express themselves in ways that make
sense to them. Of course, we offer guidance and security, but we love
learning who they are outside of us. We understand Mali and Maria as
brilliant, complex, real, and uncompromised beings. And perhaps, it
is our collective societal responsibility to try to understand people, all
people, in these ways. It is how I want everyone to understand Mali
and Maria. I think they deserve it.

Tragically, though, when Mali and Maria go to school they become
simplified. Teachers, and others at the school, make assumptions and
quickly ascribe them to being “like” others—most notably, other girls.
Not only does this violate Mali and Maria’s sense of individuality, it
violates the other girls too. And the boys for that matter, because they
too become primarily recognized as something other than what it is
girls are.

Of course, this kind of simplification might be perceived “normal”
because this is what is done in the “real world.” And it is true—I do
understand that the vast majority of people in our society “makes sense” by generalizing, categorizing, and placing people in boxes. Maybe people simplify because it is what they can do most immediately. Yes, maybe it is about efficiency—I am trying to convince myself here. But, always? And is this fair? Should we not try differently? Aren’t you…well, you?

Sure, your race, gender, sexual orientation, the job you hold, car you drive, type of food you eat, and everything and anything about you provides some pieces to the puzzle about who you are, but should it not be up to you as to how those puzzle pieces are shaped? And what the whole puzzle looks like when pieces lock into place? And should we not honor each piece as it is important to itself, but also to the whole? That one piece of the puzzle (one identifier) should not overshadow or distract us from the whole (from who you are)? I guess I am wondering, should your identity be how you perceive and define yourself, not how others (simply) see you?

Though we still do it, perhaps more secretly, it is at least publicly recognized taboo to generalize and stereotype by race, ethnic background, disability, religion, and other areas of difference. But every day I encounter vivid moments of gender differentiation on display. Recently I walked by a restaurant and noticed a sign in the window, attempting to be funny, that read, “Caution! Blondes at Work!” I often overhear people saying things like, “Boys will be boys,” “Behind every good man there’s a woman,” and “Women, you can’t live with them, you can’t live without them.” And people generally agree, “Men aren’t sensitive” and “Women are ‘catty’ in groups.” Why is this acceptable? Imagine this:

“Caution! Blacks at Work!”
“Christians will be Christians.”
“Behind every good disabled person there’s a non-disabled person.”
“Hispanics, you can’t live with them, you can’t live without them.”
“Jews aren’t sensitive.”
“Tall people are catty in groups.”
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These sentiments, if shared aloud, would be recognized as discriminatory or flat out crazy. We would not accept the “logic” behind these statements. We would probably even challenge them! I know I would walk into a restaurant and complain if they hung a sign that was racist, xenophobic, or bashed religion.

But in our society and in our schools we make assumptions, create generalizations, uphold stereotypes, design experiences, and hold different expectations about how girls and boys, women and men, just “are” and should be. I am calling this act of gender discrimination facilitated by stereotyping, “sextyping.”

Sextyping

I believe in the revitalization, redefinition, and stylization of the term “sextyping.” There have been several instances when researchers employed the term “sex-typing” (note the hyphen). However, this term was never clearly established and became loosely understood as both an assumption making process as well as an adherence to certain gendered performances—much like “gender typing” (note the space). Gender typing has been defined as a process by which children develop gender identity by acquiring “the motives, values, and patterns of behavior that their culture considers appropriate for members of their biological sex.” Sextyping, as I mean it, is not something acquired, but rather something that is done to someone else. Sextyping is the act of stereotyping what an individual’s preferences, likes/dislikes, interests, abilities, and so on, are according to how the individual is (assumed) sexed within the traditional male/female binary. I propose “sextyping” because the words “sexist” and “sexism” conjures up the kind of defensiveness that is mostly unhelpful. Responses to “you’re being sexist” commonly result in anger, frustration, or shallow deflections that the accuser must be some sort of crazy, unrealistic hippie or feminist. And “stereotyping” simply lacks punch. “Stereotyping” must also be strung along with several other words—e.g., “you’re stereotyping what color balloon that boy might want.” Sextyping gets to the point.
In my opinion, people sextype more frequently and openly than participate in any other form of discrimination. We especially sextype children. I argue that sextyping is made possible in part by patrolling the borders of what we collectively know as “femininity” and “masculinity.” If children, especially boys, violate these borders, adults become unnerved, even actively concerned. Some adults worry about how border crossing children might grow up. Children have a difficult time with border crossers as well, but only as much as they have learned to be concerned. Often on the playground one can hear boys ridiculing other boys by calling them “girls” (the worst insult for a boy) for getting upset, asking for help, or by engaging in a so-called feminine activity. And girls patrol the borders in the same way—by ridiculing other girls who dress “too boy,” play mostly with boys, and so on. Boys and girls will blatantly tell the opposite sex, “You can’t like...because you’re a...” I am not blaming children here for their sextyping—I am blaming adults! Adults have socialized our youth to understand gender as binary and to patrol borders, to sextype. Adults have taught children to be “boy” and “girl” before “kid” or “human” and that it is part of their responsibility as part of their sex/gender to ensure conformity. There is a moment of leniency when girls are allowed to be “tomboys.” In fact, many parents and teachers find girls performing masculinity “cute” as long as it does not persist deep into adolescence. As I see it, these performances are accepted because they, “pay homage to patriarchy.” Boys, however, are rarely praised for acting feminine because it is a “violation of patriarchy.” Yes, it is all about honoring and defending patriarchy. I once heard Ruby Bridges say, “Racism is a grown-up disease and we must stop using our children to spread it.” I loved this, partly because I think you can substitute “racism” with many things and it still works—“elitism,” “xenophobia,” “homophobia,” “hate,” and yes, “sextyping.”

I do not agree with adults who sextype others, particularly children. However, I understand that when they were children their families, neighborhoods, media, and schools sextyped them. Additionally, I understand that since gender is predominantly performed without devoting safe space to deconstruct it in our daily adult lives, then the tradition of sextyping simply carries on. It is what feels and appears
natural. And “what appears ‘natural’ acquires the status of being fixed.”23 However, I expect more from schools. Schools, I believe, should be places where they disrupt the fixed, the status quo, and (re) imagine and grow a society that is better than what generations before us worked to reproduce or maintain. That is, schools should be a site of new ideas, social reorganization, and social mobility—not social reproduction.

Schools, however, have a lot of work to do. Looking at my kids’ brief educational history there are several eyebrow raising moments:

**Blocks for Boys; Dolls for Girls**

At the end of almost every day of kindergarten, I walked into Maria’s classroom to find “free time.” During this time boys played (almost exclusively) with boys, and girls with girls. Boys played with blocks, cars, and puzzles while girls played dress-up, with dolls, and quiet board games. Of course, at times, there were exceptions, but this was the general scene. Maria mostly played by herself because what she really wanted to do did not fit the culture of the room. She sensed it.

I doubt she was told she could not do one thing or another, but at the same time I am sure it was not made apparent that she could be her. In an environment like school—one that is controlled, contrived, and imposes adult authority—kids need active permission to take risks, to be as they desire. Otherwise, they end up performing a version of what they perceive is “correct.” There was very little/no effort on the teacher’s part to encourage or insist that kids must take turns playing with everything available to them.

**Buzz Lightyear Pencil Box Fiasco**

When Mali and her classmates first began experimenting with pre-writing the teacher decided to buy all of the students pencil boxes to stay organized. This was a nice gesture as she bought these with her own money. However, one day while I was in her classroom I noticed that Mali was given a pink puffy snail pencil box while many of the other students had Buzz Lightyear boxes. Then I noticed it was only
the boys with Buzz Lightyear boxes. Mali had for at least two years of her life obsessed about outer space, so, of course, she liked Buzz Lightyear.

I asked Mali why she did not have one of these pencil boxes. She said, “Because the teacher said they were for the boys.”

I responded, “Well, did you ask for one?”

“No, because Ms. Markle said they were for the boys.”

“Oh. Did you want a Buzz Lightyear pencil box?”

“Yes. But daddy, they were only for the boys.”

“Want me to help you ask if you can have one?”

“Um…,” she said nervously, “Okay, but you have to talk.”

So the next day, I could not find the teacher when I dropped Mali off, but I left a note on her desk. It was a nice note explaining that perhaps she did not know (and of course, she did) but Mali loved space and was bummed about not getting a Buzz Lightyear pencil box. I asked, “Could she have one?”

I saw the teacher at the end of the day and she apologized by saying, in front of Mali, that she knows “Mali likes boy stuff, so she’ll do better by including her in boy things.”

I responded, “I think you have it wrong…there isn’t boy stuff, boy things or girl stuff, and girls things, there’s just stuff and things! How is being an astronaut/space explorer male or female? It’s just cool.”

The teacher gave me a blank stare and apologized again.

Over the next several weeks Mali would inform me when the teacher made an effort of letting her know she can do boy things. I imagined her announcing to the class, “Let Mali play with the blocks…remember, she likes to play with boy toys too.”

I wondered, how might this damage Mali?

Patriotic Princesses

Near the end of her first grade year Mali asked me, “Daddy, are you going to go to my patriotic concert?”

“Sure!”

“I don’t want to be in the concert though.”

“Why?”
DEAR MRS. BALDWIN, I'M CONCERNED

“Well…the girls have to wear tiaras.”
“Why’s that?”
“I don’t know. Mrs. Baldwin just said girls have to wear tiaras and boys have to wear cowboy hats.”
“Oh…well…what do you want to wear?”
“Cowboy hat. I wanted to wear the one I got when we went to Texas.”
“Want me to ask Mrs. Baldwin?”
“No!”
“Why not?”
“Just because…I don’t want you to…It’s just the way it is.”

It was evident to me that Mali, at the ripe age of just-turned seven, figured out that adults dictated the rules of gender and that children should not challenge this position of authority. Just a few years earlier, during the Buzz Lightyear pencil box fiasco, she was less comfortable with teachers imposing strict gender roles.

Despite Mali’s plea, I discussed this issue with my partner and we decided to secretly email the teacher something like:

Dear Angela,

Hi! Hope you had a restful weekend. I’m emailing today with something that came up…Remember, gender, sexuality and schooling is what I’m always thinking about and I’m a geek…so don’t take this personally! 😊 Mali told us about the patriotic concert and that for this performance the girls are expected to wear tiaras and the boys to wear cowboy hats. She REALLY wants to wear a cowboy hat! (We were just in San Antonio and she bought one!) We told her that maybe she should ask you about it, but she was terrified at that suggestion! I think for two reasons…1) she thought since you already assigned roles it would be a “violation” of your authority and 2) if she were the only girl to switch, there might be some peer jeering. So…she doesn’t want anything to be done now—and that’s fine with us too. I just wanted to let you know of her feelings. And for future events with other kids, maybe you can offer (and encourage student) choice? Or pick items that aren’t so polar opposite? Or even better you could just
have all students wear the same thing (tiaras one year, cowboy hats the next)!

Thanks! See you at the concert!

Scott

Mrs. Baldwin was a perfectly nice person. She strove to be the penultimate professional—and in my experience, worked hard to do the little things “right”. Of the dozen or so emails I had sent her prior to this one she answered them immediately. This time, however, it took her three days to issue a response. And her email carried a different tone—concise, formal, and defensive:

Dear Dr. Richardson,
I understand your concern and am willing to allow Mali to have a cowboy hat.
If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me or my principal (copied on this email).
As always, I appreciate your communication.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Baldwin

Obviously, Mrs. Baldwin problematized me and my email. It is also completely possible that she never really fully thought about how the decisions she makes in school provide cultural meanings (in this case gender). Or if she has thought about it that she believes it is completely appropriate for the girls to learn how to be the kind of girls she understands to be correct, and boys to learn how to be the kind of boys she understands to be correct. Regardless, my simple provocation made me the issue not gender, or Mali’s desires.

Daddy & Daughter Sweetheart Dance

Around Valentine’s Day, my children came home with a “Daddy & Daughter Sweetheart Dance” flyer. It announced that all elementary aged girls, for $25, could bring a date—their dad, or another male over the age of 15—to a special “night of love.” I thought about going, just to see what it was all about, but I backed out. Really, I could
not bring myself to subjecting one of my daughters to an event so steeped in heterosexualized grooming. The “daddy-daughter dance” has long been ritualized at weddings, which compliments the father “giving the daughter away”—to be owned and/or deflowered—and this elementary school’s effort was an early (perhaps subconscious) attempt at introducing girls to being their “dad’s.” Masked in sweetness, I found the line between “cute” and “romantic” to be a blurred one at best. Then, of course, was the problem that it did not allow boys to the dance. Nor did it allow girls the option to bring anyone female. (Sorry kids, the “Two Moms-or-Two Dads-or-Single Mom-or-Parentless-or-Otherwise & Kid Sweetheart Dance” has yet been invented or deemed important).

Mardi Gras Parade in the 2nd Grade Hallway

Edgewater Elementary proudly celebrates a diverse collection of American holidays. This includes, “Fat Tuesday.” This past Fat Tuesday, I waited for Mali and Maria on the sidewalk moments before dismissal. When the bell rang a flood of kids exited the building. Maria smiled and walked proudly toward me, showing off her newly acquired Mardi Gras beads. She looped her thumbs under the beads, lifted them up toward me and said, “Look Daddy! I got beads from the parade!”

I asked, “What parade?”

“The Mardi Gras parade!”

“Oh…hmmm…ummm…you were in a parade? That’s how you got those beads?”

“Yup. Lots of older kids were on the side and we walked down the hall. We had to yell, ‘Hey Mister, throw me some beads!’ Then they would throw us beads.”

Of course, we know how beads are acquired during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. The teaching of, “Hey Mister…” is particularly disturbing. This is another example of grooming, particularly female students, for performing successfully in a highly sexualized, heteronormative American culture. Just yuck.24

I could go on…but you get the idea, right?
Though I found these events troubling, they went on with no concern from other parents, teachers, or administrators. In fact, when I made small talk to the typical drop-off/pick-up parent crowd, I asked, “Wasn’t it weird how…?” I consistently received blank stares or a troubling, “What do you mean? I thought it was cute.” There is something to say here about the way people interpret and narrativize events. In reading these events, they seem crazy, but I wonder if you were working at my kids’ school and witnessed these happenings if they would have raised any red flags? Would you even notice? By the way, I am completely aware that there are plenty of other acts of sextyping or sexualization that occurred, that I had likely missed, because I too have been socialized to see the binary as normal. It is difficult to break.

Given that my kids have knocked up against these so-called, “educational events,” and I have had to struggle with understanding them, I wondered how teachers have allowed these things to happen. Did they not know who my kids were? I imagine that though you have not met my kids, I bet that with the limited information I shared about them here, if I were to swing by your house, drop them off, and say, “So…I’ll be back in a few hours,” that once you got over some initial shock, you would find some fun stuff to do. And I bet this stuff would be designed around their interests—that you would take into consideration of who they are. Why was the school more concerned about sextyping (my) kids than designing instruction and an educational environment that honored their personalities? This got me thinking…

Maybe these teachers were just too busy to get to know their students. But I wonder, is this excusable?

Maybe when these teachers were kids, they were so successfully sextyped, groomed, and socialized so that now they only understand the world as one that is perfectly gendered. But I wonder, as adults were they never exposed to thinking differently about gender (at least in their teacher preparation programs!)?

Maybe it is simply more efficient for these teachers to sextype. But do these teachers not see themselves as individuals, as complex human beings? That is, can they connect with the fact that even if they largely
perform or identify feminine or masculine, that they also do not fit with others who identify similarly? And this could be true for their students too—that they should not make assumptions about them?

Maybe they would claim that the school inhibits them from challenging sextyping. Often teachers blame the school system, or claim that parents might “get upset,” from enacting “progressive” practices. But I wonder, have they tried and been told “no?” And must they radically “challenge” stereotypes? Could they just not reinforce them? Yes, I understand that this is still a method of challenging, but maybe it is more discreet. And so what if it makes parents upset? Is it their job to be non-discriminatory? Equitable? Fair? To realize the fullest potentials of their students? To offer an intellectual space that challenges the status quo? To not be OK with social reproduction—to want more for their students? To want a better world?

I do not think I am being too unreasonable here. I think those who work in schools need to take upon themselves the moral and ethical responsibility to wonder about what is required of them so that students become self-actualizing and self-determining individuals. This will not happen if teachers and their schools institutionalize gender.

NOTES


3 Judith Butler provides the most important conceptualization of gender as performance. See: Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

4 I also do this work because I am a feminist. David Tyack & Elisabeth Hansot said that the work of feminist researchers (particularly since the 1970s) hope to make schools a more equitable place for all children by studying three overlapping themes, “(1) patriarchy, which encompassed the whole of society as the unit of analysis and described universal male domination; (2) sex-role stereotyping, which stressed the individual’s internalization of cultural gender roles; and (3) institutional sexism, which addressed the inequalities built into institutional structures and policies.” See: David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot, Learning
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8 C. J. Pascoe, Dude You’re A Fag, 7.


10 Idid., 71.


15 Andrew Niccol, The Truman Show, Film, Peter Weir (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 1998).


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19 Thorne, *Gender Play*.
20 Richardson, “Blurred Lines of a Different Kind.”
24 This was a tipping point for me. I was outraged, particularly after all of the other sexist, misogynist, gendered practices I kept quiet about. I had a meeting with the principal and addressed it by literally saying, “This mardi gras thing…what the fuck?!” She agreed it was ridiculous, but that she had a difficult time stopping the teacher who coordinates it every year. I pleaded for her to do her job as a supervisor.
CHAPTER 2

GETTING INTO IT

My interest in the institutionalization of gender grew primarily out of concerns I have about the broad socialization process (in and out of schools), my undergraduates performances of stereotypical gender roles, and the impact schools have had and will have on my children. But I have also noticed gender at play while teaching public school, supervising student teachers, and consulting several school districts. All of these experiences influenced me, in one way or another, to formally conduct research so that I can explore the process of how gender is institutionalized, including the problems of sextyping. I hoped, along the way that I might gain some insight about how to deinstitutionalize schools, or at least, make kids more resilient to schools’ efforts of institutionalization.

Constructs and perceptions of gender are deeply impacted by a wealth of cultural factors, and I desired to study several urban and suburban school districts. However, I was unable to do this kind of comparative work. Urban school districts—short staffed, underfunded, and burdened by other concerns (namely, state testing)—were unable to invest energies in hosting a researcher like me. One superintendent candidly told me, “If you’re not here to help us raise proficiency rates on our tests, or decipher the state’s new teacher evaluation system, we are uninterested. I mean, we are totally interested in gender equality, but you know what I mean…we just can’t put that before pressing demands.” Of course, I could (and wanted to) protest, “Gender equity isn’t a pressing demand?!” However, I knew I would not change his mind. My work simply was not important enough to them.

Superintendents in three suburban school districts, however, with very little hesitation, agreed to have their schools participate in the study. At the onset, I met with each of them and explained that I wanted to observe schools as they are and that if I told teachers, principals, and others that I was studying gender, they would likely
change their behaviors. Therefore, we agreed it was appropriate for me to employ deception; only superintendents and my university knew the real focus of my work. I recruited teacher participants by sending emails stating that I wanted to study, “narratives of success…how teachers and students embodied achievement.” This reaped dozens of positive responses and soon I had forty-five different classrooms ready to be observed.

Each school district resided in different counties, and closely resembled my kids’ school district. They were suburban districts that tilted rural. All three school districts, however, were experiencing a slight shift in demographics. Just a few years before, at least 95% of all students were White, and the great majority of them came from middle and upper class families. The school districts now ranged between 5,200 and 7,700 students with a combined average of 88% of whom were “White,” 4% “African American,” 4% “Latino,” 2% “Asian,” and 2% “Other.” Approximately 32% of all students received free/reduced lunch. There are claims that “suburban schools are a major attraction to minority populations because of their reputation of providing significantly better educational opportunities than their urban counterparts.” There are also claims that this increase in diversity (ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic) brings new “challenges” to suburbs and their schools. These so-called “challenges” are predominantly perceived because the influx of “new” cultures—their simple existence—threaten the dominant (White middle and upper class) culture. All three school districts and their communities, in my observation, worked tirelessly to uphold “whiteness.” It was evidenced in the manner real estate was marketed and residents recruited friends to become their neighbors. The goal of many of these residents, particularly parents, was to maintain:

sufficient social distance and geographical isolation to separate themselves from people of other classes, races, or ethnic groupings and to be in the proximity of others from their own social group. This separation becomes part of the social reproduction of the upper class; whether parents explicitly use such terms or not, elite children quickly learn that some people are ‘our kind of people’ and all others are not.
Teachers dismissed the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy—to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of sociopolitical or critical consciousness,” as “not the job of the school,” “absurd,” and “going too far.” A social studies teacher, claimed:

This community’s values have been here for a long time. I’m not ‘against’ being more culturally sensitive, but the dominant culture isn’t urban. I think, then, it is just difficult to say we have to do things different to accommodate just a few. Sometimes you get parents in here thinking it should be the same [as the urban school they moved from], but they made a decision to come here. I think it’s on them to adapt.

While it is a limitation that rural and urban school districts were not included in this study, observing how gender was produced within these mostly middle and upper class Euro-centric schools is deeply important. If we desire gender equity, then, we must hope that these suburban school districts—whose kids will likely grow up to own, control, and govern much of America—are actively studied, challenged, and ultimately changed.

METHODS

I was lucky to have three field research assistants—Sabrina, Khoan, and Samantha. Before doing any observations and interviews, we held meetings to design codes and observation tools, invent methods that would allow us to share data, and conduct literature reviews. Once we felt organized we began our work in schools. We spent September through November in all forty-five classrooms. It was a whirlwind. Each school was very hospitable. Then, out of the forty-five we selected nine classrooms that represented “the middle” of what we were observing, and followed them closely from November through June. These nine classrooms—three in each level (elementary, middle, and high school)—were chosen because we characterized them as “typical” of what we saw and believed they revealed how schools institutionalized gender for students on a consistent basis. This consistency, I believe, grounded students in what was thought, and expected to be, “normal.”
Meaning, these contexts normalized the on-going institutionalization, and traditional performances, of heteronormativity and male/female roles. The “extreme” classrooms—those atypical because they were highly sexualized/gendered, “neutral,” or operated under pedagogical dispositions that honored gender equity and social justice—provided a different, but equally valuable insight about how gender is at work within schools. Data in these extreme classrooms were collected quickly, and so we did not feel as though our energies needed to be employed in these settings for an entire year.

We chose our nine “middle,” or “focus,” classrooms—all from the same school district (Monroe Valley S.D.)—for three primary reasons: 1) theoretically, a lengthy and concentrated look into these classrooms would provide a deeper understanding of how gender becomes culture; 2) practically, we could organize our data to more easily and fairly represent “daily life,” and; 3) logistically, our resources would not be spread too thin. Each classroom was observed approximately fifteen times after our initial visits. In each observation, lasting between one and three hours, we attempted to see a variety of procedures. Lengthy observations were crucial because I wanted to know what gendered messages manifested for children in elementary school within, and while transitioning between, different subjects, lunch, recess, specials, special activities, and so on. I understood that formal instructional time was just one kind of opportunity for gender to be institutionalized. Sitting in middle and high school classrooms for several hours at a time, allowed us to see how teachers’ approaches to different “leveled” subject matter, content, and children varied. Though we drew generalities, and took note of the “extremes,” from our forty-five initial classrooms, our nine focus classrooms gave us the opportunity to develop narrative case studies:

Perhaps the simplest rule for method in qualitative casework is this: Place your best intellect into the thick of what is going on. The brain work ostensibly is observational, but, more basically, it is reflective...Qualitative case study [as is narrative and ethnographic work] is characterized by researchers spending extended time, on site, personally in contact with activities and
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operations of the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on.11

Framed within evolving understandings of experiences, our goal was to enter into productive spaces of narration by focusing “the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within individuals’ experiences.”12 During each observation we used an electronic document that we created, prompting us to organize our notes within particular themes: Environment; Instructional Decisions; Informal Language; Language Between Adults; Body Language; Preferences; Literature (Self-Published); Literature/Materials (Curricular Programs); Complicity/Inaction; Other. At the end of each observation, the electronic document was immediately uploaded to our shared Gmail account so that the entire research team could access all notes. It was particularly helpful when two separate researchers, during the same observation, filled out this form independently. Beyond using this standard document, we also recorded notes in other ways that felt right to us. I often kept what I called “time studies.” I used my phone as a stopwatch to record the “attention” (type/quantity/quality) given by teachers and to whom. Sabrina, a logical and straightforward thinker, often wrote the obvious. She was dutiful in scripting important conversations and keeping track of student interactions. Sabrina was particularly useful when baseline/descriptive data needed to be collected—she was the most reliable out of the four of us to make observations on her own. Khoan, who is quite philosophical, often spent most of her energy developing theories about what she saw. She wrote several explanations for each observation made, which challenged us to see differently and consider alternative explanations. Samantha had the most unique approach, which concerned me at first. She alternated between large periods of time quietly, intently, and deeply “looking,” and making visual representations—sketching and diagramming—her observations and interpretations. It turned out that these representations were extremely helpful, especially during the post-coding writing process. During data analysis, we employed a “negotiated coding approach” allowing us to discuss our “codes to bring most coded messages into alignment.”13 This method of negotiated agreement helped move us beyond inter-
CHAPTER 2

coder reliability and toward a “state of intersubjectivity, where raters discuss, present, and debate interpretations to determine whether agreement can be reached.”14 We constantly thought through possible and alternative explanations15 and looked for emergent themes16 in a manner that organized our ideas.

During the final month of school, I conducted interviews with the teachers of the nine focus classrooms, and several others—including those in other school districts—who I felt might understand how schools institutionalize gender. These additional interviewees held interesting positions and additional responsibilities in their schools—as coaches advisors, department heads, extracurricular programmers, and so on—throughout their lengthy careers. I was on edge about the interviews because the teachers did not know that I spent the year specifically thinking about gender in their classrooms. Toward the end of each interview, after I “interrogated” their answers to my questions and brought up observations I made of their teaching in the hope to get more answers about how they performed, cultivated, and imposed gender. I revealed what I was researching. Approximately half of the teachers reported that they held no grudge for being deceived. Many wanted me to share my findings and to contact them if I needed more help. The other half felt trapped and worried that my description of them would paint them as sexist, or favoring boys or girls. I do not think this was because they were concerned others might read this work, figure out who they were, and think poorly of them, but it just hurt them to think that they might have created inequitable environments. They all cared deeply about their students. Guilty feeling teachers would shift uneasily in their chairs, and say things that exposed deep concerns they probably have not shared often, “You don’t think I care for the girls more, do you?” or “I don’t know, I do have a different attitude with the boys, but it isn’t because I want them to do better…what do you think?”

One group of teachers felt betrayed more than the others. Teachers at Williams Elementary School, who were all close friends, politely declined to answer any more questions post-interview and refused to participate in a proposed focus group that would read a draft of the manuscript and provide me with additional feedback. Ten months
after the interviews were concluded, the superintendent reported that teachers at this building felt “extremely uncomfortable,” however, he did not specify what this meant. Since none of the teachers withdrew from the study and the principal did not contact me, I was unsure how to think about this report. So, though unnecessary, out of good faith to ease the concerns of the superintendent—and perhaps the elementary school participants—I destroyed their data, and the rest of the data collected in the school district, and promised to not include it in future publications. This loss of data was semi-insignificant as this school district did not house any of our “focus” classrooms. This data merely supported the conclusions and descriptions we made regarding Monroe Valley S.D.

It is important to reiterate that regardless of how teachers responded to the news of my deception, none asked me to discard data about them and their classrooms. They all felt that this work was important. Though generous, I wanted to be cautious. I never like deceiving people, and I hope to never write something that could bear some sort of personal or professional consequence. After all, these teachers desired to be helpful, and on all accounts they were well-intended and good people who did what they thought was best for their students. Yes, some did create inequitable environments and harmful narratives about masculinity and femininity, but they were not consciously out to damage or advance certain kids. Therefore, I utilized “light” composite nonfiction when necessary, if I felt that I would “out” a particular teacher and their classroom. This is not a methodological conflict for many reasons, but primarily because, “my purpose is not to tell their [teachers’] special stories, but to use aspects of their experience to make some useful general points.”17 I wanted my work to represent how the institutionalization of gender is commonly found in many classrooms, schools, and districts.

Throughout the research, I employed the lens of a curriculum theorist. Many perceive “curriculum” as an instructional program—a reading series, math set, science kit, and so on. But understanding curriculum in this narrow way limits the dynamic meaning of the term. “Curriculum” is derived from the Latin, “currere,” which means the “running of a course.” The curriculum is everything and anything that
impacts the course of students’ experiences. This includes programs and units of study, but it also includes things like the way the day is organized, the affect of the teacher, and the physical environment of the school. Adults, to some degree, impact all experiences students have in school.

Many studies by curriculum theorists seek to explore or expose one faction or kind of curriculum (e.g., the hidden, null, written, rhetorical, c/overt, operational, extra, formal, phantom, received, or intended). I considered using some of these categories/ways of thinking as coding systems, to organize this text, explain findings, and so on. However, I did not find that it enhanced what I aimed to do: I wanted to narrate, to be descriptive. I wanted to be freed from the overwhelming burden of trying to explain how all observations/instances of institutionalization fit within discrete, yet intersecting, curricular categories.

I found it helpful to continually wonder about students’ experiences, and whether or not they were the result of mindful or mindless adult decisions. I hypothesized that mindful experiences, those that were deliberately planned, mostly occurred during direct instruction with students. Whereas the less mindful, even mindless, experiences—but experiences that transmitted knowledge and culture nonetheless—happened mostly during informal times: transitions between classes, walking in the hallway, at lunch, and so on. Schools shape students’ experiences during informal moments because they have made decisions about how they would control the environment. Schools choose how long recess is, the kind of play equipment available, and what classes will socialize on the playground together. They choose hallway policies, the physical design of the school, and rules and consequences. School boards, administrators, and teachers have some choice (and they are probably mindful about it at the time) about every aspect of the curriculum. Though they were likely mindful when making initial decisions, implementation often becomes “mindless.” There is little intent to “teach” something to students, or transmit culture in a particular way in-between the bells or during “non-instructional time.” What is interesting, however, is that these informal moments become deeply important for students. Students often report that they learned
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the most in school while at the cafeteria table with their friends, in a student club, or exchanging notes in the hallway.

I am interested in mindless and mindful decision making for a simple reason. If school districts, teachers, programs, policies are institutionalizing gender and they are doing so in a mindful manner, then this research becomes an interesting study of a culture that desires to replicate specific versions of masculinity and femininity for boys and girls. If they are mindlessly institutionalizing gender then this research becomes a way of wondering why, bringing consciousness to practice, and beginning the process of figuring out what schools actually do and desire.

MONROE VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT, U.S.A.

Community

Monroe Valley was a medium sized suburban school district. It encompassed two small towns located just within the east and northwest borders with many mini-mansions and developments sprinkled in-between. Farms consumed large pieces of land in the west and southwest, and a mid-sized city, Pierce, was approximately ten miles from the eastern district borderline. Pierce was a typical all-American midsized city. It was once known for industry and tourism, and acted as an economic hub for much of the Northeastern U.S. region. Then, things changed. It is now in an era of reinvention. Micropubs, galleries, chic boutiques, and organic based restaurants are claiming Pierce “hip.” White people presently living in Pierce are either older residents who grew roots in the city many decades ago, or young hipsters—the “urban farmer” type.

Families in the Monroe Valley S. D. territory rarely visited Pierce. Horror stories of the “big city” were spun in the suburbs. Mostly tales of crime. Vague stories like, “My friend’s aunt’s sister knew someone who went to Pierce to buy a…and in the parking lot she was accosted by these two black guys…” tempered any ambition to go to the city. That is, unless it was “First Friday.” During the first Friday of each month galleries swung open their doors offering wine
and cheese, bands played in restaurants and parks, and special events were orchestrated for children. White people from the suburbs flocked to the city. The very next day, things went back to normal.

Besides feeling adventurous and artsy every once in a while, suburbanites did not need the city. They created markets of their very own with restaurants, movie theaters, shopping malls, and the like, making it unnecessary to travel far. If Monroe Valley families went beyond district borders for leisure, it was on vacation to a different state or nation.

_Schools_

The school district had six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The high school was known for its International Baccalaureate program, high achievement in athletics (basketball for girls, wrestling for boys) and success rate for getting kids into college. “A few students,” the high school assistant principal told me, “slip through the cracks and just disappear after graduation. Most go to college, trade school, or begin working.” Monroe Valley is considered a “good district” though teachers, and particularly parents, often lament that Jameson School District, an über wealthy district due north, scores “the best in the county” on state performance exams. The current superintendent of Monroe Valley, Kenneth Kreskil, was an ex-principal who departed from Jameson after a bitter argument. Teachers suspected that the hyper-standardization and unreasonable “pushing” they experienced from Kreskil was because he desired to topple Jameson. Competition like this, whether out of vengeance, elitism, or something else completely was not uncommon between the many suburban school districts in the county.

_Teachers & Administrators_

Monroe Valley School District teachers were an eclectic crew. Some teachers sustained entire careers at Monroe Valley. Others jumped around from school district to school district, sometimes all over the world. And others were fresh out of college. Although they were diverse in experiences, sad to say, they were not diverse in their pedagogical
approaches. The current era of standardization crippled Monroe Valley teachers. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, Common Core, standards based language arts and math programs, and district wide lesson templates all impacted the way teachers taught: the same. By looking at their lesson plans, the physical environment of their classroom, and their teaching strategies, there was no discernable way to spot veterans from rookie teachers. There were very few moments during the day when teachers found space to do something beyond or different from the test. Some teachers, tried to provide some “buffer”21—to destress students from the constant rat race of school—by employing humor. At the end of the day, as students lined up to go home, one elementary teacher sung silly songs she had written. A high school English teacher, Jay Mascenik, always wrote an incredibly corny joke of the day followed by a false agenda on the board. One morning it read:

Person 1: Someone said you sound like an owl?
Person 2: Who?

Agenda (super important!):
1. Review: How to make a perfect milkshake.
2. Might there be a man on the moon? Do you like R.E.M.?
5. Dance party!!!

In the hallway, between classes, a middle school teacher, Beth, would yell out random history facts to kids—particularly at kanoodling couples pressed against lockers. She was good friends with the music teacher who every now and again would bring an instrument into the hallway, lay down a hat for “donations,” and play a tune. These small bits of fun were often appreciated by both teachers and students. It helped them to survive the boredom that the typical school day brought. These moments told me that hidden in these teachers’ souls were people who wanted to make learning fun and engaging.

From the very beginning of my time in Monroe Valley, I made a general observation that holds true in most school districts I have observed or worked in: the elementary school teachers were caring
individuals who desired to nurture young minds. These teachers were mostly full of hope and believed that students, with the right counsel and educational opportunities, could be someone. These teachers were optimists. The middle school teachers, on the other hand, were mostly pessimists. There were several teachers who loved working with middle school aged children, but there were equally as many who desired to “play in the big leagues”—high school. High school teachers, not all, but certainly a good many, were cockier because they were the “gatekeepers”—they would help “make” or “break” students who would go off to college, or find a path that is suited for their talents and abilities. High school teachers thought it was odd when I told them that middle school teachers pined for their jobs, unless they were once teachers in a middle school. Most high school teachers jockeyed for the “best” classes—the AP and honors sections. Such assignments were a badge of honor demonstrating that they were, among their colleagues, the most knowledgeable in their field.

Mostly, elementary school teachers were interested in children, middle school teachers in procedures and control, and high school teachers in subject matter.

Administrators were bean counters and politicians, but they wanted desperately to be well liked and held in high-esteem. They were continuously trying to find ways they could talk about their accomplishments. In faculty meetings, they would brag about people they met at conferences, compliments received by the superintendent, and notices in the local newspaper. Most of their backgrounds consisted of teaching a few brief years and attending a diploma mill, receiving an Ed.D. (applied doctorate in educational leadership). For the most part, these administrators knew very little about instruction. Teachers deeply distrusted them. Administrative observations of teachers were almost instantaneously disregarded. “I’d like to see what they can do in the classroom…and then I’ll take their comments seriously,” and, “They only give a shit about student performance on test scores…they want their bonuses. So, I know that anything they have to say to me doesn’t have anything to do with student learning,” teachers would say. It was true, administrators were deeply concerned over their schools’ test scores, and they received bonuses for meeting certain criteria. Scores were compared between schools. All wanted to be on the top.
Monroe Valley was a conscientious disseminator of information. They took great pride in keeping parents and the community “informed.” They were extremely meaningful about what was conveyed, and how it broke to the public. One parent who recognized this deliberateness called it “propaganda.” Jon Davenport, the principal at Randolph Middle School and Clark Kent lookalike, however publicly called it an “open platform of communication” which included personally taking to Twitter. Davenport tweeted throughout the day about academic or athletic achievements, early dismissals, faculty features, and special events. These tweets were always boastful and they read like a proactive PR campaign. Other on-line sources included principals’ messages, teacher blogs, and school webpages.

In a closed door meeting, a top central administrator admitted that the school district makes an effort—to a fault, he believes—to never communicate the needs and challenges of the school district. He said:

It is completely unreasonable that any school district wouldn’t have their share of problems. I think it might worry parents who live in reality. Some of our students are continually getting suspended, are caught up in groups of kids that are making poor decisions, are failing in school, and we only communicate, ‘Everything here at Monroe Valley is great!’ Not only does it come off disingenuous, but it could also come off like, ‘Monroe Valley is great…it is just your kid that is the fuck-up!’…It’s certainly important to emphasize achievements, but I don’t think much progress is made if we whitewash everything. It’s important to reach out and ask for help, to include others that might have answers. I mean, I’m kind of astonished they let you in here to do this work…you know how many professors we turn away who want to do research or help us in some capacity? Tons.

School districts like Monroe Valley are known for espousing certain educational goals—though, these might be propaganda too. But to a certain degree, I suppose we should take these seriously, as the “official,” “espoused,” “premeditated,” or “formal” curriculum—but as far as I am concerned, I cannot be sure if communication of this type
is “mindful.” It may be mindful on one hand because the messengers tried to put forward certain kinds of impressions, and have been to a degree “premeditated,” however, I am skeptical that these messages really align with what happens, or what schools actually do. Take for example:

*We ensure a physically safe and academically rigorous environment for all students at #MVSD #JRRMS #Proud* – Jon Davenport Tweet

I doubt all students feel safe, particularly those who find themselves in the “counter culture” or “minority”—kids who identify queer,23 are not “white,” and so on. I also doubt all students feel academically challenged. Surely there are students who go unchallenged most days, who sit in their classes bored to tears, who skip school altogether because they find it useless.

The “Principal’s Message” or “Principal’s Welcome” seems to be a fundamental component of school websites. Arguably, the principal’s message is part of the unofficial curriculum since it is not a legally binding document or a formalized program of instruction. But that it is formalized in writing and issued to the public, I find it to be a decree of sorts, announcing, “this is our school.” Principals, and other administrators, have a significant impact on the cultural climate of schools and one would think that their words would carry great weight. But again, in this age of standardization where No Child Left Behind and Common Core reign supreme, and the act of “public” institutions bowing to the needs of certain powerful political and cultural regimes (such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) is commonplace, I doubt “collaboration, critical thinking, and effective communicating,” or “opportunities to explore, discover, and create” is happening to any consistent degree in most of our nation’s schools. Additionally, I am skeptical that teachers can dedicate much energy to students and their needs (as claimed in the principal’s message) after they work to align instruction to standards (with every lesson, every day), are constantly learning new canned standardized curricula designed, live in fear of administrative demands, and are continually testing the hell out of their students.
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The staff at Fisk Elementary focuses on developing 21st century learners who are capable of such skills as collaboration, critical thinking, and effective communicating. This is accomplished by providing students opportunities to explore, discover, and create. Along with a strong emphasis in the basic skill areas of language arts, math, science, and social studies, students are provided experiences in art, library, music and physical education.

I look forward to meeting all of you as we work together to provide each child a safe, caring, and joyful place to grow and learn.

(Josie Fisk Elementary website, Jan. 2013)

Public messages not only attempt to inform the public, or try to project a certain vision about goals of the school district, but it provides some insight (mindful or not) about how the district may recognize, honor or understand diversity. Meaning, we get a peek at the culture of the district. Most written messages are "out" of gender—which might be problematic...like being "color blind"—but, visual images, particularly those that picture people, are not. Monroe Valley chose to have surprisingly very few images on the district webpage. On the home page, there were seventy-eight possible links a visitor could choose. Seventy-five of these links (e.g., "Transportation," "Calendar," "Athletics," "Special Education," "Library," "About MV," and "New Hires") connected visitors with pages that did not have any visual images only text. The three links included pictures of people: "Alumni," "Career & Technical Services," "Athletics." Featured one large picture of recent grads who "signed" to play for universities. These student athletes wore t-shirts, hats, and jackets signifying their new school. The athletes were separated by gender. Males constituted two rows, one standing broad chested and the other kneeling. Females sat on the floor, legs crossed.

NOTES

1 Researchers, in my view, cannot fully separate "self" from "work." Those who try to do so—usually so that they can claim "generalizability"—I find are extremely disingenuous. Lived experiences and socialization as an academic has a deep impact on how researchers see and represent data. The old saying, "research is 'me-search,'" holds true. So, I do not avoid my biases and lenses, but rather...
CHAPTER 2

spend a lot of time trying to understand how I “know.” “My responsibility as an ethnographer was not to forget my own story, but to know it well and to refer to it constantly to make sure that it was not blinding me to what I saw or focusing my attention on only some of what I saw.” See: Penelope Eckert, *Jocks & Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in the High School* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1989), 27.

I have no empirical research to back up my theory, but I suspect that increased standardization has thwarted school districts’ willingness to be open to a diverse range of research opportunities.

All school districts, schools, personnel, and students have been assigned pseudonyms. In some cases, I employ composite non-fiction, altering and blending details so that I can accurately capture emergent themes in the work and to further disguise the identities of those involved. Additionally, readers are often anxious about the generalizability or representational nature of narrative/ethnographic works like this. I think it is best addressed the way that Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa did in their groundbreaking work *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*: I “make no claim about the representativeness or typicality” of the three suburban school districts used in this study, “other than to say they are not atypical” (p. 8). See: Joseph Tobin, Yeh Hsueh and Mayumi Karasawa, *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited: China, Japan, and the United States* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

This was a vaguely espoused research plan, but most teachers were simply happy to help and did not inquire much about my work. In fact, many teachers took to emailing me, even texting at times, to simply share stories for one reason or another.


Ibid.


Unfortunately, this teacher’s use of “urban” meant “Latino,” “African American,” and “other” ethnicities/races.

bell hooks, *Ain’t I a woman?*

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15 Though I went in to this research looking for how schools institutionalized gender, I had to be open to the idea that maybe I was wrong.

16 This method of coding and process of seeking emergent themes is consistent with the field of narrative inquiry. See: D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, Narrative Inquiry Experience and Story in Qualitative Research (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2000).

17 Theodore R. Sizer, Horace’s Compromise, 8.


19 Students who attended Monroe Valley S. D. were no different than the thousands of students I have met and taught over my career. They were unique individuals with varied interests and experiences. That said, they predominantly shared white middle-class values. Young children, prior to attending kindergarten, were socialized by their families, communities, media, and environment at large to perform stereotypical masculinity and femininity.


22 There were only three male teachers in the elementary school. The two youngest (with 13 years of experience combined) reported that they were being “groomed” for administrative positions, even though they had little interest in this line of work. The third described himself as a “salty old dog” and told me that “administrators, parents, and district politics just gets in the way. I’m not shy about telling them to go to hell...but, I’m one of the few teachers left with a moral compass and guts.”

23 Most students in Monroe Valley S.D., like many of their generation, reclaimed and preferred the term “queer.” Many find it less oppressive and appreciates that queer as “an identity category...has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself and that ‘queer’ declines to reduce gender to sexuality.” See:
CHAPTER 2