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Performing Gender in the Elementary Classroom

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PERFORMING GENDER IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

gail masuchika boldt

GAIL MASUCHIKA BOLDT was an elementary school teacher in Honolulu, Hawaii, from 1990 to 1997, and a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM) from 1993 to 1999. She left elementary teaching in 1997 to spend more time with her newborn, and from 1997 to 2001, supervised student teachers for UHM. Gail began at the University of Iowa as an assistant professor in elementary education in 1999. The narrative materials in this and previous publications come from her years of classroom teaching and teacher education.

I was observing in a kindergarten class. The children were sitting on a rug in a group and the teacher was querying them with a single question and recording their responses on large chart paper. Her question was, “If you could choose to eat 100 of something, what would it be?”

The responses started off well enough. The children had just spent part of the morning sorting Cheerios, pretzels, M&M’s, and other small foods into piles of 100. The answers initially referenced this work:

“I could eat 100 raisins,” said one child. The teacher wrote, “Jill—100 raisins.”

“No! I don’t like raisins. I would like to eat 100 Goldfish crackers,” came a response. The teacher wrote, “Chantel—100 Goldfish.”

“Yeah,” tossed in another. “Or I would like 100 Nerd candies.” Onto the chart: “Ben—100 Nerds.”

A boy sitting in the back row called out, “Well, I would eat 100 hot dogs!” I looked at him. He was grinning and looking from his teacher to the other children and back to his teacher again.

“What?” called out classmates. “100 hot dogs? You can’t eat 100 hot dogs!”

The teacher weighed in. “Do you really think you could eat 100 hot dogs?”

“Yes,” the boy responded. “I know I can.”

The teacher then added the words to chart: “Tommy—100 hot dogs,” and Tommy smiled triumphantly.

Now the floodgate was open. Boys’ hands shot up across the group:

Jose— “100 hot dogs.”

Ben— “I want to change my answer—100 hot dogs!”

Tony— “100 hot dogs.”

Wesley— “100 hot dogs.”

The laughter of many of the boys and a few of the girls grew with each hot dog response. Several children were becoming visibly excited in their movements and posture.

The teacher was accepting the responses without comment, but some of the children, mostly girls, appeared to be increasingly uneasy or frustrated with the rising energy level, and a few of the girls attempted to bring things back in line.

“I would eat 100 Fruit Loops. They’re little and a person could really eat them,” Julie said, shooting a glare at a cluster of boys. Several girls nodded or spoke their agreement.

One of the girls, however, attempted to join in the fun. She called out, “I could eat 100 hot dogs, too.” She looked around to the boys, presumably seeking smiling approval, only to find herself being thoroughly ignored. The teacher, however, smiled at her and recorded, “Chelsea—100 hot dogs.” The teacher then quickly took a few more responses from the children, and brought the activity to a close by announcing, “It was very interesting to hear what you might like to eat 100 of. While I don’t have 100 hot dogs to offer any of you, you know that we have many of the other foods you mentioned, and after recess we will come back in to make a snack. You can choose or ignore foods from each of our bowls of ingredients, as long as in the end your snack has 100 pieces in it.” With that, she sent the children off to line up for recess. In my fieldnotes book, I closed the observation with the following comment: “There is nothing that can’t be turned into a performance of gender!!!”

My goal in this paper is to raise questions about teachers’ interventions into children’s exchanges around gender in elementary classrooms. I use the previous vignette to argue that gender is ever-present in the classroom, that even in exchanges and activities that seem to have nothing to do with gender, children in our classrooms are constantly making assertions about the meaning of gender and the authenticity of their own and others’ gender performances.

I will speak to the question, “If a teacher does interpret this exchange as being at least in part about gender, what, if any, response is called for?” To address this, I return to my own years of elementary classroom teaching and child rearing. My observations as a teacher and a parent lead me to believe that

children are often able to talk about difficult gender issues in the abstract, in response to a book or an item on the news, in ways that are fair and non-stereotyped. However, when conflicts and concerns arise over gender-related conflicts in the classroom itself, children (like adults) rarely see their own investments in gender in such neutral terms. Understanding children's behavior, beliefs, interests, and words in relation to gender through the lens of "identity performance" (Butler, 1990, 1993; Boldt, 1996) can help classroom teachers understand the significance of gender performance to children. This is an important prerequisite to initiating discussions about gender in the classroom. I question the idea that the children's beliefs about gender and enactments of gender are less mature and more problematic than those of adults, and further argue that gender is an important category of being for both children and their adult teachers. I will raise questions about when to intervene, what form intervention might take, and what we can hope for from our intervention.

Performing Gender

Perhaps the most important perspective in gender studies in the past decades has been the move to understand gender—femininity or masculinity—as a performance, rather than an attribute. The work of Judith Butler, a leading feminist theorist, informs us that while what many of us experience what it means to be a boy or a girl, or a man or a woman, as natural, we are, in fact, performing an idea of gender that has been made to seem natural to us since the day we were born. Children and adults signal their understanding of the rules of gender by performing gender norms in behavior, desires, gestures, talents, interests and physical stylization such as gait, vocal styles, and postures. We play games, speak, move, and express emotions in ways that feel like and appear to be our own, and that also identify us as having an ethnic, class, gender, and sexual identity. Butler argues, however, that these behaviors are not natural, but only appear natural because we repeat them so incessantly. This repetition creates the appearance of stable and taken-for-granted ways of being in relation to standard identity markers.

If gender is a performance of norms rather than an expression of who we naturally are, what is it that compels us to perform gender so incessantly? The answer to this is complex. They are, for one thing, socially compulsory performances. These performances—acting like a boy/acting like a girl—are not chosen, but are rather enforced from birth. From the time we are born, gender is used to explain to us who we are, and why we are as we are. As young

children, we learn to use meanings of gender—what we learn it means to be a boy and what we learn it means to be a girl—to understand ourselves and what is expected of us, and to gain social approval and pleasure. When, for example, my son and my niece were both babies, I noticed that while their behavior was very often the same—rolling over, spitting up, laughing, cooing—the things that others noticed and praised, and how they were described, were gender specific. My son’s actions—pulling himself to standing, for example—were often interpreted as proof that he was a “strong boy” or a “typical active boy,” while my niece, performing the same action, was more often praised for having a good disposition or for looking cute.

I am not alone in these observations. There is a whole body of work that points to substantive and predictable differences in the way infants’ and toddlers’ behaviors are interpreted and explained through reference to gender (Mondschein, et al., 2000; Connor-Green, 1988; Burnham and Harris, 1992). From the time he was born, my son’s gender-meaningless behavior was understood as a marker of “proper” gender; he was told that being a boy meant being strong and active and he was praised for it. Social approval was framed around reading his development as gendered, and this approval was a source of pleasure and meaning for him (and perhaps for his parents, as well). My niece, likewise, learned to experience being a girl as a primary source of meaning, pleasure, and approval. Gender functions in our society to tell us what sorts of behaviors, beliefs, and interests are “normal” within our identity groups; and in sharing those things with others, we get the rewarding satisfaction of that community’s approval.

At the same time, however, we can never forget that along with the pleasure of identity there is always a threat. Butler reminds us of what we all know: that those who do not perform in gender-specific ways within an acceptable range are punished. The force of social sanction enacted through peers, family, friends, strangers, professionals (teachers, counselors, lawyers, doctors) threatens to fall squarely on the heads of those who do not conform to the norms. Butler suggests that identifying and punishing “gender offenders” bestows the social privilege that comes with being perceived as “normal” to those who toe the line, and it also communicates what happens to those who step over the line. The driving threat behind demanding narrow gender performance comes from the punishing nature of homophobia. Boys who behave in ways that are not deemed masculine enough find themselves punished by the worried intervention of adults and by the social ostracizing by other children who find them weird or accuse them of being “fags.” For girls, the worry and

accusation tend to be somewhat different: they fear (or others fear for them) that in not being feminine enough they will be unattractive to boys and to the other girls who judge them by their perceived desirability to boys. It is important to note that all of us, regardless of how we experience and perform gender, have the potential to gain pleasure and even approval for “who we are.” I would not contribute to the difficulties of being a gender bender by suggesting that it is a life of unrelieved misery. But it is clear that some identities carry more of a burdensome threat of social reprisal than others.¹

We perform identity, then, with both fear and pleasure. Insofar as any of us believe that gendered identity—doing it right as a male or a female—comes naturally to others, our own doubts and uncertainties can cause us tremendous anxiety. We can end up wondering what is wrong with us; we can end up fearing that others will notice our lapses and accuse us of not being proper females or males; we can fear the withdrawal of social approval, love, and protection. I have noted many times the look of confusion and worry on the face of this or that boy in my elementary class when he talks about liking something, only to have other boys say, “Ooooooh. That’s for girls!” The boy in most cases quickly backpedals from the position, stating something like, “I didn’t mean that thing. I meant something else.” Even when the child defends his or her position, it is fairly unlikely s/he will mention it again. Both boys and girls end up having things they like at home, privately, but rarely discuss publicly, or with only one or two trusted friends, or they abandon those likes altogether, claiming that they never really did like them or only liked them when they were “babies.”² When, however, our performances of gender are taken up approvingly by those around us—a girl proclaiming, “I love *My Little Pony!*” and the girls around her responding with enthusiasm, “I do too!”—we can experience relief and pleasures of all kinds. We can explore our interests in a community; the interests can create and solidify social bonds that give us feelings of warmth, belonging, and satisfaction.

It is with these ideas in mind that I return to the kindergarten scene.

Hot Dogs and Masculinity

In my fieldnotes journal, I characterized the opening vignette as a “performance of gender.” Tommy’s proclamation of the obviously unlikely statement, “I could eat 100 hot dogs,” can be read as making an assertion of his masculine gender in at least two ways. Both hot dogs, themselves, and the ability to eat many hot dogs are easily understood as masculine claims. Its not

that girls don't eat hot dogs; it is rather that as a cultural reference, eating hot dogs conjures a train of association both to phallic imagery and to activities that have been accepted as masculine—sports events and camping come immediately to mind. Even given that hot dogs are more often a children's food, eaten by both girls and boys, than an adult food, part of the absurdity of Tommy's statement is the size of hot dogs in comparison with the other foods named—Cheerios, raisins, etc. Tommy asserts a hearty, even macho appetite that leads to a Herculean feat of eating that is far from a feminine ideal. It is, after all, adolescent girls and not adolescent boys who are supposed to learn to curb their appetites, to only pick at their food on their first dates.

More importantly, perhaps, is that I read Tommy's statement—"Well, I would eat 100 hot dogs!"—as a claim about what it means to be a boy in kindergarten. The claim I hear is this: "I am exactly what little boys are supposed to be—the little "bad good boy." Ferguson (2001) argues that for boys in elementary school, there is pressure to be good, but not too good; to be naughty, but not too naughty. She argues that we do not want schoolboys to be out of control, but those boys who are too submissive and well behaved are also not quite the ideal. They are somehow seen as too feminine or too prissy or weak. After all, go the discourses of American boyhood, the boys we like best are just a little unruly, a little tousle-headed, slightly naughty and rambunctious in a charming, good-at-heart way. They are little rogues.

This is exactly what I am suggesting that Tommy signals to his classmates and teacher. He is not out of control. He answers the teacher's question and the answer he gives, while clearly silly and impossible, is not rude or disgusting. It is not truly naughty. He signals to his teacher that he has heard the question and is complying, but only to a certain degree. He is not, after all, one of the goody-goody boys who comply completely with the demands of the female teacher (and here Ben signals that he understands this implied accusation by quickly changing his response). Neither, however, is he a boy who would go too far.

That this becomes a communal session of affirming "boy-ness" is clear in the responses of many of the other boys, as well as of some of the girls. Many of the boys turn their attention away from the teacher and begin looking and grinning at Tommy and each other. One after another requests and demands that his own answer is registered as, or even changed to, "hot dogs." It is not the answer on its own that threatens to disrupt the class order; the child did not, after all, say "100 boogers!" It is the momentum that is building

in the response of the other children. The boys are creating a community around the assertion of themselves as people who could and would eat 100 hot dogs, who could and would threaten to disrupt the class order by offering a slightly naughty response. As each boy adds his name to that “club,” he receives the smiles and nods of approval of many of his male peers. The girl who attempts to join the club threatens to break the unity of this gendered pleasure and she is rebuffed by being glared at or completely ignored. Meanwhile the gendered nature of the exchange is consolidated even further by the prim attempts of some of the girls to rally around the schoolgirl role of “little teacher” (Tobin, 2000; Thorne, 1993), answering in a way that carries a clear reprimand to the boys and that attempts to restore order. The teacher, probably wisely, carries on, placidly writing down “100 hot dogs” and bringing things back into order through the recess break and the instructions for the next activity.

My decision to spend this much time discussing one event was driven by the determination to assert that gender is, in fact, far more present in our classrooms than we usually notice. The teacher in this particular scenario did not consider that she was participating in a gendered event until we talked afterwards. Even then, recognizing it as gendered, she didn’t see it as especially significant. The question I want to explore next is was this a significant gendered event? If not, what would be a significant event? How should we talk to our students about gender and what do we hope to achieve?

My argument is that because we are performing gender all the time, everything that happens in our classrooms can be understood to have a gendered connotation, even if that connotation is not foregrounded, even if it is not the most important thing that is going on. In the hot dog conversation, gender was at the foreground of what was happening. A group of boys stole a few moments of pleasure and a sense of belonging, an exercise that in many ways is, in fact, a good thing. With this good-natured kindergarten teacher with many years of experience, the expression of high spirits was greeted with tolerance, even with a bit of enjoyment. There is one difficulty, however: to make it work, the boys seemed to feel that it had to be an experience that was exclusive to themselves. The girl who wanted to join in had to be excluded. This brings us to the great dilemma of gender identity.

Gender as Exclusion

In many cultures including dominant western cultures, the meaning of gender has been established through exclusion. How do we know what it means to be “girl” or to be “boy”? If we attempt to define these things, there seems to be no escape from defining them through reference to what they are not. To be “girl” is to be “not boy.” Even more doggedly and exclusively, to be “boy” is to be “not girl.” Men and boys, whether primarily gender-bending or gender-conforming, have suffered from this exclusion. For gender-bending males, there are, as I’ve discussed, the social sanctions of being too “girly.” For gender-conforming boys and men, “proper” masculinity carries the cost of anxious self-monitoring and self-exclusion from many potentially enjoyable ways of relating and being (Pollock, 1999). The suffering of women and girls has been in many ways more thorough because it has been more systematized in unequal status under the law. That is, in the equation of boy/not girl vs. girl/not boy, the girl/not boy side has been devalued, denied equal protection, access, and privilege.

As a feminist in the 1980’s and 1990’s, I believed with many others in a two-pronged approach to dealing with the inequalities brought about by gendered exclusions. One prong was to work for change at the level of law and public policy. The second prong was to argue that difference was the result of socialization, and that children could be raised to be gender-neutral. As a parent and an elementary school teacher, I made this goal a particular concern (Boldt, 2002).

It is, of course, important to understand that desires, interests, and styles are not inherently masculine or feminine. Both as a parent and as a teacher, I was insistent with children and adults that “anybody can like anything” and that “there are no such things as boys’ things and no such things as girls’ things.” My intention was to de-stigmatize interests and behaviors that get stigmatized as gender bending. I wanted to open up the possibility that any of us might be able to enjoy and desire things we previously did not allow ourselves to consider.

My perspective was not without problems. No matter how often I proclaimed that dolls are not girl things and *Yu-Gi-Oh* is not a boy thing, there are, in fact, few interests, behaviors, and desires that don’t carry some gender connotation, that aren’t likely to be more often done or desired by men or by women, by girls or by boys.³ As a teacher, I considered it a triumph if I was able to get girls interested in computers, math, or science. I rarely considered

that I did so by devaluing the pursuits that the girls often preferred in the place of these. I did not often question the value of computer use, or interest in math or science. Nor did I have nearly as much concern about or success in getting boys interested in the sorts of things that girls called their own in school. For the girls to pursue the interests and skills that were dominated by the boys seemed to promise a step toward privilege, or at least the approval of the teacher. There has long been a more-or-less accepted role of “tomboy” for girls. There is no broadly accepted parallel identity for boys, however; and for boys to associate themselves with things that are usually the province of the girls is often experienced by both children and adults as threatening, and as a step away from power and possibility.

What was missing from my perspective was an understanding of the meaning and pleasure that both children and adults gain from their gender performances. While I continue to believe that “gender differences” are social constructs, I also now understand that gender is marked precisely by the creation of patterned differences. I no longer think it is valuable to try to convince children to deny the powers of “girlness” or “boyiness” in their own lives and the lives of others. I also believe, however, it is the teachers’ responsibility to challenge the narratives that confirm that gender means exclusion and to provide alternatives both in action and in story in our classrooms.

Talking (and Doing) Gender in the Classroom

I cannot propose a “solution” that will allow us to talk about gender in our classrooms in a way that solves the problems of sexism. Rather, I believe that what we can do as teachers is to create environments in which we learn to negotiate gender. With this in mind, I am going to make two suggestions for thinking about gender in the elementary classroom.

The first suggestion is to look at ourselves as teachers with as much honesty as we can muster. There is a common perception and bias in research and writing that suggests that children are less perceptive and “mature” in their understandings of gender than adults. If we take a hard look at our own teaching practices, then we will find that as teachers, we are as likely to perpetuate gender stereotyping as are the children. There is a wealth of research that demonstrates that teachers treat students differently based on gender, and that these differences perpetuate exactly the problems many of us hope to address. Sadker and Sadker (1995), for example, find that boys are six times more likely to be called on than girls in group situations in school. They are far more likely

to be asked high-quality questions and to be praised and critiqued for the quality of their work. Girls, who receive far less of the teachers' attention, are more likely to be credited for good behavior and following the rules. While the Sadkers took note of the effect of socializing girls to low expectations, they didn't observe that this excess of attention paid to boys also means that they are much more likely to be noticed not complying and to be disciplined. Boys are far more likely to be sent to special education for behavioral nonconformity. Walkerdine (1989) found that teachers are more likely to attribute rationality and true understanding to boys' mathematical work—a subject area that is typically understood as “a boys' thing”—than to girls'. Newkirk (2002), meanwhile, suggests that teachers are more likely to praise and support girls as readers and writers. My own third- and fourth-grade students had no difficulty when I asked them to identify ways that various teachers treated boys and girls differently. They suggested that boys got in more trouble in my class than girls did, and that I did not tend to notice when the girls were “messing around.”

I read the Sadker and Sadker (1995) book when I was a teacher. One of the most striking things about their research is that it was often done in the classroom of teachers who were very conscious of gender issues, who identified themselves as practicing gender equity. Their point was that our expectations about gender differences are so engrained in us that they have become invisible. I took this as a challenge and decided to conduct a bit of research in my own class. My first step was to black out all the names and pronouns from the narrative reports I had written for the children at the end of the quarter. I then gave these to another teacher and asked him to predict whether each report was about a girl or a boy. Much to my horror, he had no trouble doing this with 100 percent accuracy. I was talking about the children differently. Just as the Sadker and Sadker research would have predicted, I was assigning the boys active descriptions about their accomplishments, while I predominantly wrote about the girls' personalities. I began to realize that tough talk about gender began, then, with me, with my own practices as a teacher.

I began to talk with the children about the informal research I was conducting. I talked with them about what the Sadkers found, what I was finding, and about how difficult it was to recognize my own complicity in gender stereotyping. I talked about what it was like when I was a child. I talked about efforts I was making to do better. And, I invited them to talk. I asked them to tell me what they noticed about gender in the classroom and at home. I asked them to participate in helping me think about it. I tried to make this a

conversation in which it wasn't about "getting it right" so much as it was about trying to understand how complex it is. One girl talked about how her father treated her and her brother differently. She talked both about how much it bothered her and about the kind of pleasures it gave her. This gave us an opportunity to talk about the rewards and penalties associated with "acting like a girl and acting like a boy." We talked about how that happened at school. We tried to figure out when it was and was not a big problem. It opened up important discussions.

This does not mean that the children in my class were suddenly transformed into perfect, gender-equitable beings. But it does mean that the first of my two suggestions—that we research our own gender biases in the classroom and include the children in the discussion—led to the second of my suggestions. This second suggestion is that we offer and invite as many narratives as possible into the classroom, to give children a way to legitimize their own gender-bending and that of others. I came to understand that although the social constructions of gender strongly influence what we are like, this cannot and should not be used to explain who we are. When adults or children in the classroom offered gender as an explanation, I was quick to counter it with other stories. A child says, "Girls like cute animal stories," and I invariably reply, "Anyone has the right to like stories about cute animals. Loving and caring for all animals, cute or otherwise, is wonderful human way to be. I happen to know many boys and men who love animals. I'll bet you can come up with your own examples. Or we could look on the internet at animal protection groups to see."

In all honesty, the kids rarely wanted to follow through with the "let's see" part of my speech. They knew I was going to be right and they conceded the point. They didn't want to go to the effort of proving themselves wrong. I also knew that many of the kids continued to feel that they were right in spirit, that cute animal stories were a girls' thing, and that boys' ought not to read or write animal stories unless they involved dragons or dogs. But an important part of my goal had become not so much to change the mind of every person, but to legitimize competing narratives and to create a structure wherein kids could successfully challenge the exclusions of gender.

As an example, I recall the day a small group of my third- and fourth-grade girls came in after recess very upset, and reported to me that a group of boys in our class would not allow them to play basketball. In the class argument that ensued, a girl suggested as an alternative that there be a rotation drawn up that allowed all the kids to take turns being in charge of different sports

equipment and different areas of the playground. Several boys howled in protest. Three of the boys in particular responded with comments like, “But the girls just waste the sports equipment because they’re no good at it. They don’t use it right. We have the right to that stuff because we’re stronger and better at sports. We’re bigger and faster than the girls. We play better. It’s wasted on the girls.”

In making this argument, these boys invoked a version of sports prowess that positioned them most favorably—that is, that sports are important, and that truly worthwhile engagement in sports was the special province of males because the sports performances that count are those predicated on being the biggest, strongest, and fastest. In making this argument, the boys appealed to a powerful American narrative. The sports that are most highly valued, that carry the highest financial rewards and rewards of celebrity, do, indeed, value strength and speed. In the argument, the boys made a proposition about what constitutes worthwhile athleticism, about who they were as boys, and who the girls were, relative to a conception of sports that supported their dominance and their exclusion of the girls as well as the boys they considered to be less athletic.

In the ensuing discussion, the girls ended up responding with two lines of argument. First, they asserted that there are many great women athletes, including a girl in the class who was faster and a better soccer player than any of the boys. This argument was of some help. That is, the increasing popularity of women’s athletics gives girls a plausible narrative to validate their interests in sports, and it did force the boys to concede that one of their own female classmates was an outstanding athlete; but it wasn’t enough. The boys maintained the ability to define what counted in sports by simply asserting that most male athletes could beat most female athletes any day. Thus, sports were defined as those things that were contests of size and strength. To support the argument that these were the sports that counted, they appealed to professional sports, pointing out the greater amount of money made by male athletes in comparison with female athletes, the greater popularity of men’s sports, and the number of professional men’s sports and teams in comparison with women’s sports and teams. As for the girl in the class who was a good soccer player, they noted that they were not talking about soccer, but about basketball.

The second tack the girls took was to argue that at school, things are supposed to be fair. This was a much more successful strategy, because it appealed to discourses about schooling and morality that often came up in their

daily lives in our ongoing discussions about gender in the classroom—that school is a place where we were working hard for everyone to have fair chances if they wanted them. In fact, after the girls shifted to fairness, most of the boys seemed to recognize that they weren't going to carry the argument and turned to another tactic. When one of the boys continued to argue that it was fair for the boys to get the equipment and not the girls, one of his male classmates, who seemed to want to cut their losses, said to him in an urgent tone, “No, no, don't say that. Say something else, like, ‘It's fair for the girls to get it some of the time.’”

Conclusion

As an elementary school teacher, I turned to Judith Butler's writing to try to make sense of my own questions about what children were saying and doing about gender in my classroom. I had two questions. The first was how do I understand and respond to the experiences of children in my class whose enactments of gender were not gender normative—for example, a boy whose behavior was stereotypically understood as “effeminate” or a girl who was seen to have the role of “tomboy.” This is a question that had I addressed elsewhere (Boldt, 1996), examining the reactions of classmates and myself to gender bending children in my classroom. The second question, the question I focused on here has been this: Why, in spite of my insistence that there were no such things as boys' things and no such things as girls' things, in spite of my efforts to create equal opportunities in the classroom, in spite of my critical attention to stereotypes in literature and daily life, did the children in my class continue to express preferences, attitudes, and behaviors that seemed so clearly delineated by gender? Why did most of the girls continue to refuse to use the classroom computers when offered? Why did so many of them so persistently play “cheerleader” during recess and populate their creative writing with bunnies, ponies, and fairy princesses? Why did so many of the boys write stories full of explosions, car crashes and death? Why did they feel the need to express such vocal disdain for “girls' things”? Why did even the non-athletic boys so often refuse to take up the criticism of the role of sports prowess in establishing their popularity ranking in the class and school? And, what could I do? What was my responsibility?

I came to understand, then, that most of us, gender-bending and gender-conforming alike, experience the confines of gender identity as both positive and negative. It is the deal we make, whether that promises a sense

of “being true to ourselves” or the possibility of meaning, community, and pleasure. The children in my classes, like the adults around them, were compelled to, and at the same time often wanted to, enact gendered roles.

As a teacher, I came to believe that an important first step to talking about gender and equity in my classroom was to be honest about all the pleasure I get from my own gendered identity and all the ways I understand the world through the organizational tool of gender. I needed to examine all the ways I “did gender” (Moss, 1989) to and with the kids in my class. This felt intellectually honest. In using my own struggles, discoveries, and mistakes as the material of class research, I hoped to demonstrate that everyone—not just children—struggles with these issues. I hoped to show that sometimes it was hard to admit that my pleasure involved excluding others because part of the pleasure was in the sharing of a sense of community, and I hoped that we could at least at times expand what counted as community. Most realistically, perhaps, I believed that gender would always be used in ways that were troubling, but that we were developing a bank of stories and images that would allow any of us to contest exclusions and to experience our own gender performances as legitimate.

What should the teacher in the kindergarten scenario that opened this paper have done? I think she did what could be done. She allowed the children’s fun. She accepted and recorded the girl’s assertion that she, too, could join in this fun—she, too, could eat 100 hot dogs. She accepted and recorded the other girl’s assertion that 100 Fruit Loops was an appropriate response. I was an occasional visitor to her classroom and thus was not privy to other things she may have said or done in the larger class context that supported or challenged the implied gender exclusivity of the event.

In my own classroom, I believe the exchange would have taken place in an environment in which those kinds of exchanges were sometimes noticed and commented upon, where perhaps another child could have acknowledged the assertion that it was okay for a girl to eat 100 hot dogs or for a boy to prefer 100 Nerds, even if the other boys did not choose Nerds. I know that neither the children nor I would challenge this all the time. I didn’t want to risk eradicating pleasure from the classroom by constantly critiquing and correcting, by insisting that everything has to apply equally to everyone all the time. I hoped that the children would come to have enough experience with these conversations that, if it mattered to them, they could stand up for themselves or for each other, or they could retort silently, to themselves or with significant

looks to others. I think often this would be enough—to know that exclusions could be challenged if it was important to do so at that moment. It is enough if we are able to help the children feel supported by us and by some of their classmates, to experience an authentic and safe sense of gendered self in the classroom.

These goals—that together we (teachers and children) explore the workings of gender in the classroom and in the world beyond, that we admit our struggles and foibles, that we tell many kinds of stories—are modest goals; they are not about grand gender revolutions. They are things that we all can do and they allow change to proceed in an environment that is, I hope, characterized by a sense of intellectual curiosity, active inquiry, and interpersonal care.

Endnotes

¹ An important issue in naming gender as “femininity” or “masculinity” that I do not address in this essay is that it fails to account for the increasing visibility of intersexed (hermaphroditic) adults and children who pose new challenges to traditional notions of gender. For a discussion of these issues, see Dreger, 1999 & 2000; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Kessler, 1998; Preves, 2003.

² There are, of course, exceptions to any of these descriptions. Individual boys took nontraditional positions and escaped serious social sanction. Classes varied in the rigidity of the norms they upheld and the intensity of the policing they practiced. In the final section of this paper, I offer two suggestions for how to make it more likely that kids will take nontraditional positions.

³ Of course, all this is more complex when other identity factors are brought into the analysis. Children are not simple “girl” and “boy.” Rather, their tastes, desires, interests, and behaviors are determined in a complicated mix of gender, race, sexuality, social class, and personal experience. In my class, for example, there were activities that were embraced by girls (e.g., hula) or boys (e.g., pig hunting) that marked not just gender, but ethnicity, in this case, Hawaiian-ness.

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