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On-Site Search for Gender Equity

The context of girls-only schooling, particularly in coeducational public schools, became an intriguing one to me almost immediately after I had completed research that examined how teachers committed to gender equity in their teaching practice (Streitmatter 1994). As I observed eight teachers working with students from preschool through high school ages, it became increasingly clear to me that only one of the eight was achieving much in the way of gender equity for her female students. That middle school science teacher believed in the conceptual framework of equity, where she intentionally gave more resources to the girls than the boys. Girls answered her questions and initiated their own, and boys who shouted out answers or in other ways tried to dominate the class were disciplined. She was successful, to some degree, in empowering several of her female students, but she acknowledged that it was a constant struggle, and she sometimes fantasized about having a girls-only class.

At about the same time, a former student, a teacher at a middle school in Arizona, called to say that she was teaching a girls-only math class. She was troubled about the concept, about her capability to do a good job, and about whether the

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class was even *legal.* She was a strong believer in equality and integration and raised many intriguing questions:

> What possible benefits could be gained by isolating girls, especially in a traditional male domain, such as a math class?
>
> Didn't girls, alongside boys, have to learn to achieve as well as boys?
>
> Wouldn't this give boys the idea that girls needed extra help in order to be equal?

While she had read a little about gender issues—and, having two daughters of her own, cared about it—she didn't feel that she had enough preparation in gender equity to adequately cope with these questions. Finally, she asked:

> What about Title IX?
>
> Wasn't setting up this class illegal, because they were denying boys the ability to enroll?
>
> How could any of us who were raised with the Civil Rights movement and the women's movement believe that any form of separation could be beneficial?

All good questions. The all-girls class appeared to be antithetical to the values of integration and our hope for a color- and gender-blind society. Was she right in believing that she, and others teaching such a class, need to have a firm foundation in feminist theory and especially pedagogy? Would a teacher in such a class, without that training, do harm? And, of course, she was right about Title IX. When reading the law, it's clear that single-sex classes are stipulated as illegal, except for classes for pregnant girls and one or two other situations.

The contemporary discussion of gender equity, and particularly the experiences of girls in public schools, began with the passage of Title IX in 1972 as part of the Education Amendment Act. The fundamental premises are equal opportunity, equal access, and fully realized integration. Parallel to the principles of racial integration in the broader society, par-

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ticularly in U.S. public schools, Title IX focuses on providing full access to participation in all functions of schooling, regardless of gender. In other words, with only minimal exceptions, discrimination based on gender in public schools is prohibited.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, female and male students found the barriers were lowered to auto mechanics and home economics classes as well as interscholastic sports. Most of the prestigious universities and colleges that previously had admitted only men began to enroll women as undergraduates. The outer layer of discrimination, denial of access, was peeled away. Female, as well as male, students found greater freedom of choice and participation within the realm of public schooling, as enforced by public policy.

And now, as the next century looms, the question is not whether Title IX has provided support for gains in gender equity, particularly for female students. Rather, it is whether by virtue of the rigid way in which it is interpreted, Title IX allows us to go further in fulfilling the original intent of true equality.

In Section 106.35, Title IX addresses single-sex schools and classrooms:

> [A] recipient [of federal funds] which is a local education agency (LEA) shall not, on the basis of sex, exclude any person from admission to (a) any institution of vocational education operated by such recipient; or (b) any other school educational unit operated by such recipient, unless such recipient otherwise makes available to such person, pursuant to the same policies and criteria of admission, courses, services, and facilities comparable to each course, service, and facility offered in or through such schools. (Hollinger 1993)

Because Title IX does not explicitly regulate admission policies in K–12 public schools, except for vocational schools, single-sex schools are not prohibited when comparable educational opportunities are made available to the other gender in a comparable facility. The key word is *comparable.*

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Recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions regarding admission of female cadets to The Military Citadel of South Carolina (The Citadel) (Sanchez 1996) and Virginia Military Institute (VMI) (Excerpts . . . 1996) demonstrate the Court's current interpretation of *comparable* as *separate but equal.* The Court ruled, in both cases, that there was no demonstrable reason for the denial of admission of women to these military institutions.

In the case of VMI, a leadership training program for women was established at nearby Mary Baldwin College. The plaintiff convinced the Court that neither the curriculum, the methods of instruction, nor the facility at Mary Baldwin were similar enough to VMI to be considered comparable.

The fundamental argument by The Citadel in defending male-only admission was that there was a need for a single-sex school for military leadership training, and in admitting women, the culture of the program would be fundamentally altered, rendering the school unable to fulfill its mission. Here too the Court supported the principles of integration and equal access by determining admissions policies of The Citadel to be discriminatory, based on gender.

Courts have held similar views on single-sex, single-race public schools. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, school districts in Baltimore, Milwaukee, and New York opened African American, publicly funded academies for males with the intent of providing unique schools for African American males. The establishment of these schools was predicated on evidence that African American males in many urban neighborhoods are at greater risk for dropping out of school, for delinquent or criminal behavior, for lower career aspirations, and for early violent death than African American girls.

The curriculum was purposely chosen to reflect positively on African American male contributions and experiences, and the schools were largely staffed by African American men. In all cases, the schools' boards or the courts ruled that these academies had to admit girls or close, because they violated Title IX by not providing comparable settings for girls. Although public policy allows for the existence of single-sex schools, in practice, there are very few that go unchallenged, regardless of the case made for purpose and need.

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Despite the federal prohibition of establishing single-sex classes, a growing number of local schools' education practitioners have turned to the creation of girls-only classes in order to address issues of gender bias. However, Section 106.34 of Title IX specifically states (with extremely limited exceptions) that single-sex classrooms within coeducational K–12 schools are not allowed:

> A recipient shall not provide any course or otherwise carry out any of its education program or activity separately on the basis of sex. . . .

The three exceptions to this regulation are contact sports, classes where human sexuality is taught, and classes for pregnant girls, all based on an argument of the need for safety or privacy (Hollinger 1993). With those few exceptions, the development of girls-only classes is clearly a violation of public policy.

Beginning of the Study

After receiving the call from the middle school teacher and pondering the questions about her girls-only class, two doctoral students and I observed the class, as well as other classes at her school and those at two high schools. During a four-year period, we interviewed teachers and others, talked with school administrators, chatted with a number of parents, and spent many hours interviewing the girls while they were enrolled in the classes and, in some cases, for several years after that.

I also spent some time at a well-established, private girls' academy in Connecticut in order to talk with administrators, teachers, and students who were connected with that school, the existence of which was based in part on the fact that it is single-sex. Would people within these vastly disparate sites talk about the same issues with regard to single-sex schooling for girls? Over time, it became apparent to me that a girls-only environment has value, whether the girls are from upper- and upper-middle-class homes in Connecticut or they are middle class or poor and living in the western United States. I became

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convinced that single-sex public schools and/or single-sex classes in coeducational public schools should be an available option, especially for girls who do not have the economic means to choose private, single-sex schools. While the comments of the interviewed adults connected with the girls-only classes in the public schools were convincing, the voices of the students who participated in the classes were compelling.

Self-Esteem and Safety

Other factors, especially declining self-esteem (beginning in early adolescence) and safety, increasingly impressed me as critical issues that deserved consideration. While I addressed the self-esteem issue through conversations with the girls and teachers, the safety issue was not examined directly. But it became clear that many of the girls valued their girls-only experiences in part because they felt better about themselves, and, in some sense, safer.

Although the qualitative data in this book do not present as vivid a picture of declining self-esteem in girls as that in Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), some of the issues are the same. Pipher's work illustrates the dramatic downward spiral of self-esteem and confidence in early-adolescent and adolescent girls. Pipher's accounts of the struggle of girls moving from childhood through the mine field of adolescence to adulthood examine issues of eating disorders, coping with mixed messages about what and who to be, as well as issues that have direct bearing on schooling.

As girls' holistic views of themselves change for the worse during these years, girls also appear to reconstruct their views of themselves in relation to particular subject matter taught in schools. Pipher speaks of one girl after another who, in junior high or middle school, describes herself as no longer liking math, no longer being smart in math, and feeling uncomfortable or afraid in science classes. Many of the girls in her work also have learned to "dummy down." That is a lesson we would not expect with the advances women are making regarding

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greater opportunities in the work place and the *politically correct* rhetoric that *women can do anything men can.*

Pipher found, and our study suggests, that young adolescent and adolescent girls of today sometimes experience peer pressure—from boys and other girls—to avoid getting good grades. Smart girls in elementary school get good grades, but smart girls in middle and high school do so at the risk of being unpopular, snubbed, and called names. Pipher's 1994 book depicts the extent to which so many young women are at risk in our schools; the risks are physical through sexual harassment and assault, academic through declining confidence and self-esteem, and emotional as they struggle to define themselves.

In *SchoolGirls* [*sic*](1994), Orenstein also describes the phenomenon of the decline of self-esteem in young adolescent girls. Conversations with, and observations of, girls of diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds from two California middle schools reveal the girls' sense that they are less visible in classes, that they are less often heard. They mean this literally, in the sense that they are called on in the classroom less often than boys, and metaphorically in that their capabilities are taken less seriously than those of boys by teachers, boys, and other girls.

Sexual Harassment

Some of the girls in Orenstein's work also felt victimized by sexual harassment in the schools and in their neighborhoods. One story is of Jeanie, who was taunted by boys about the size of her breasts. The principal was frustrated by Jeanie's lack of assertion in defending herself and in seeking help from the adults in the school. The principal also was frustrated by the silence and acquiescence of the other girls. This prompts the question: Do girls take it as a matter of course that they will be called names, restrained, and physically accosted by boys?

Lee, Croninger, Linn, and Chen (1996) examined the extent to which middle and high school students reported that they had been sexually harassed or that they had perpetrated

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harassment on someone else. Their results indicated that vast numbers of students believe they are victims of sexual harassment (83 percent of the girls and 60 percent of the boys in a sample of 1,203 students) and that girls are much more likely to be the recipients of it. Their work also reviews a number of theories about why sexual harassment exists. These theories range from the biological theory that says due to hormones and greater body size, males can be expected to be the perpetrators of sexual harassment, to the critical theory approach that stipulates sexual harassment occurs because within the broader society, sexual aggression is tolerated and even encouraged through the media and Madison Avenue advertising, as an instrument of capitalism.

Lee et al. (1996) call for schools to become places that are sensitive and open to discussions of values that might lead to greater understanding of issues, such as sexual harassment, and thereby have the effect of diminishing it. If taken seriously, this constitutes a call for considerable reconstruction of schools. According to most feminist theories (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule 1986; Lewis 1990; Stone 1994), schools are places where power resides with males and indeed the entire structure is male dominated. In order to create schools where gender bias no longer exists, where females can be equal participants and beneficiaries of a positive educational experience, the existing framework of schools would have to be de-constructed and redesigned to become very different places. This process would have to go far beyond an emphasis on value of the individual, where issues of gender could be topics of discussion.

There is no question that school administrators, teachers, and parents today are more alert to issues of sexual harassment in schools than in earlier years. Most schools are now required to have written policies about sexual harassment along with defined punishments for it. But policies and consequences only work if harassment is understood for what it is, and then reported.

In 1989, our daughter, in the first grade, happened to mention that she could not wear a skirt to school the following day, because the boys had declared it "flip-up day." At the time, she

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did not know to call this incident *harassment,* but she certainly knew something was wrong. She also understood that this group of boys should not have that kind of power over her. Further, she decided that if the adults in the school could not or would not protect the other girls and her from this aggression, she would forgo wearing skirts altogether.

By the time she was in sixth grade, she had experienced another incident. Almost daily, her writing teacher left the classroom to supervise another group of students in an adjacent conference room. When the teacher was out of the room, several boys would circle the tables where eight girls were seated, and through motions and sounds, simulate sexual intercourse. The girls experienced this on an almost daily basis for four months before several of us parents learned about it.

"What did you do?" we asked our daughter.

"We tried to ignore them," she said.

We were stunned, just as the principal in Orenstein's (1994) story was exasperated by the girls' silence. How many other occasions had there been in which she and the other girls accepted harassment and looked the other way? How often, and with good reason, had they believed that the adults in the school would not take their concerns seriously? In this case, the boys were disciplined by receiving a lecture about appropriate classroom behavior, and the teacher was directed not to leave the classroom. The incident was explained as a lapse in discipline, when perhaps it should have been seen as a great deal more.

In *SchoolGirls,* Orenstein (1994) tells of other times of sexual harassment that the girls she interviewed had experienced. Most were not reported, and the girls tended to internalize them as part of their expected experience, hurtful as it was.

Although sexual harassment is not directly addressed in our four-year study of girls-only schooling, the issues of self-esteem and safety were examined in various ways, and I was increasingly convinced that the girls-only environment provided the students with a place of respite. They seemed to create their own culture in which they did not need to struggle with issues of classroom control by boys. They knew they were visible and

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heard and that they could focus and participate. The girls convinced me that their girls-only classes were right for them, regardless of the theoretical drawbacks to segregation as well as the more concrete problem of violation of Title IX.

Obviously, my intent in this book is to make a case for girls-only classes in public, coeducational schools. In the following chapter, we will examine current public policy, specifically Title IX, in the face of contradicting local practice. Folded into the debate are the positions of the National Organization for Women on single-sex schooling, the function of a division of the U.S. Department of Education in hearing complaints about violations of Title IX, and the views of administrators who have been, or currently are, involved in girls-only settings. Later we will briefly examine the history of females' schooling in the United States, current research on the state of gender equity for girls in coeducational public school, and a review of feminist theory. Interviews with teachers, administrators, and more importantly students, provide supportive data that strengthen the case for girls-only classes in public schools. Results of this longitudinal, qualitative study will suggest that we revisit the intent and current limitations of Title IX.

It should be noted at this time that fictitious names for the profiled schools, as well as the teachers and students who actively participated in this study, have been substituted for their real names.

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