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William Ayers, Therese Quinn, David Stovall

Unintentional Gender Lessons in the Schools

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Andrew P. Smiler
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For most children, schooling represents their first contact with a governmental institution of social control. As such, schools provide an important setting for transmitting socially held values. These social values include beliefs about gender-appropriate behavior, and most of these lessons are transmitted informally through school structures, teachers’ comments, curricula, and students themselves. These gender lessons are particularly important in America, where gender is an organizing cultural principle (Bem, 1993) that influences academic and vocational performance and choices, family roles, sexual behavior, and other aspects of daily life such as “polite” behavior. Within a patriarchal and heterosexist society that purports to have prohibited gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, we might question what lessons students learn about gender and how they do so.

In this chapter, gender is defined as a set of socially constructed expectations about the roles and behaviors that are identified as “appropriate” and “expected” for girls and boys. For American girls, these expectations include being kind, caring, deferring to others, focusing on their appearance, enacting a passive or reactive approach to dating and sexuality, and, eventually, becoming primary caregivers in their families. By contrast, boys are expected to be independent and unemotional, seek status and power, take an active or agentic role in the dating and sexual realms, and become the primary breadwinners in their families. The result of these paired expectations is that members of the population are encouraged to focus on only certain gender-appropriate aspects of their personality and their interests, while abandoning others because they are “inappropriate.” For educators, this may translate into differences in classroom participation rates (i.e., girls deferring to boys) as well as course preferences and encouragements (e.g., for girls in English courses, for boys in math). Ultimately, this might lead to later vocational and occupational differences such as women’s “choice” to leave the workforce to be an at-home parent and the “wage gap.” Taken to the extreme, the combination of female passivity and reactivity along with male status and violence may lead to situations that facilitate domestic violence. Creation of a just society requires that these discrepancies—based upon American preferences related to biology—be addressed and eliminated so that individuals have the opportunity to make life-choices that will help them achieve their full potential without being restricted by cultural assumptions about gender.

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which schools contribute to and reinforce these gender roles, as well as ways in which schools can counter these messages. Particular attention is given to the ways in which gender roles are highlighted and enforced by the school structure and students, as well as the outcomes of conformity and non-conformity to gender roles. I begin with a more detailed discussion of the “content” of femininity and masculinity and children’s adherence to these ideals, followed by the ways in which schools, teachers, and children highlight, maintain, and enforce these boundaries and...
the consequences for those who violate gendered expectations. Discussion then shifts to two specific sites of interaction between the school and students. The first of these sites explores the gender-typed messages in extracurricular activities, especially athletics, and the second focuses on adolescents’ romantic and sexual relationships. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of challenges to the institutionalized binary conception of gender. Each section of the chapter includes ways in which gendered-expectations might be minimized and equality achieved.

Gender Content and (Non-)Conformity

At present, American culture places pleasing others at the center of cultural expectations of femininity. Accordingly, girls and women are taught to prioritize personal relationships, express emotion, defer to others, be nice, and be physically attractive (i.e., be visually pleasing) while also remaining virginal (to please their future husband) (Mahalik et al., 2005; Tolman & Porche, 2000). Combinations of these directives instruct girls to avoid direct interpersonal conflict and to privilege others’ feelings and perspectives over their own. Boys and men receive a cultural message that emphasizes being not-feminine. They are directed to be unemotional, take risks, be in charge/make decisions, be tough, and be sexually promiscuous (Connell, 1995; David & Brannon, 1976; O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986). Combinations of these directives instruct boys to control women. Directives for girls and boys influence individual beliefs, traits, and behaviors. It is important to note that these gender ideals have changed over time in the United States (Kimmel, 1996; Stearns, 1994); vary across cultures (Connell, 1995; Gilmore, 1990; Herdt, 1994); and limit the gender options to two (Gilmore, 1990; Herdt, 1994).

In the United States, these conceptions of femininity and masculinity are often conceived of as opposites (Bem, 1993), although they may be better understood as complements. This positioning contributes to the idea that homosexuality represents “gender inversion” (see Bem, 1993 for discussion) and the stereotyping of gay men as “effeminate.” Scientific investigation, as well as anecdotal evidence (e.g., “lipstick lesbians”), indicate that gender is separate from sexual orientation (L. Diamond, 2003; M. Diamond, 2002).

From the time children enter elementary school until their midteens, the average child tends to show greater conformity to gendered notions of appropriate behavior; there is a slight decline in gender-appropriate behavior among older teens (Galambos, Almeida, & Petersen, 1990; Liben & Bigler, 2002; McHale, Updegraff, Helms-Erikson, & Crouter, 2001). Theoretical and empirical approaches have highlighted the input of parents and other family members, age-mates, schools, and the media through explicit teaching (e.g., “boys don’t cry”) and children’s observations of sex-segregated activities (e.g., Bem, 1993; Eckes & Trautner, 2000; Gelman, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2004). It is important to note that most youth also demonstrate a low to moderate level of gender-inappropriate behavior during this time (Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993, 1994; Tolman & Porche, 2000) and that some youth are more nonconforming than conforming (Striepe & Tolman, 2003).

Thorne’s (1993) ethnography provides a detailed examination of children’s gendered behavior within schools. Over the course of two years at two different elementary schools, she observed children before, during, and after the school day. Children rewarded each other’s gender conformity through social acceptance, inclusion, and higher status (e.g., popularity). She observed that gender enforcement was particularly common among students whose teachers highlighted gender, especially through comparisons between girls
Thorne also noted that the importance and attention to gender varied throughout the day and could shift from one moment to the next. She described, for example, an occasion when a boy and a girl were playing tennis against each other and had not mentioned their gender; they were simply playing against each other. After several other children joined the game and the configuration eventually became two girls playing against two boys, the children then described the game as girls against boys. This label arose only after the active players fit the categories.

Although the importance of gender varies throughout the day, children consistently notice both gender-appropriate and gender-inappropriate behavior. Children and adolescents who violate gender norms often find themselves excluded and ridiculed by both same-sex and other-sex peers (Bartlett, Vasey, & Bukowski, 2002; Bem, 1993; Striepe & Tolman, 2003; Thorne, 1994), and boys are often punished more harshly than girls (Bartlett et al., 2002; Maccoby, 1998). Some gender nonconforming children are eventually diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder (GID) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), which is indicated by strong and persistent cross-gender identification, including preference for clothing and activities typically associated with the other gender. Depression and poor self-esteem are also common, but are not indicative of GID. When brought to treatment, these children typically complain about the reactions of family, peers, and others to their behavior; they are rarely disturbed by their own “gender-discrepant” behavior (Bartlett et al., 2002; Bradley & Zucker, 1997). Treatment emphasizes the acquisition of gender-typical behavior and the reduction of gender-atypical behavior (Bradley & Zucker, 1997). Although these children receive a psychiatric diagnosis, their “problem” is one of not being accepted by the people in their environment and their “cure” is conformity.

Overall, children experience an environment that prioritizes conformity to cultural expectations over individual preferences. Pressure is transmitted through social exclusion and ostracism, which appears to lead to low self-esteem and depression. Moreover, the mental health system is complicit in enforcing these norms (by identifying nonconformity as a diagnosable illness and prescribing conformity) and may further stigmatize those who are now officially “different.” This system of gender enforcement leads to a restriction of individual preferences and maltreatment of those who violate social gender norms.

Things may be changing, however. GID has recently been questioned as a valid diagnostic category (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2002). Evidence indicates that less than 10% of GID diagnosed children maintain this diagnosis into adolescence or adulthood but more than 60% of GID diagnosed children self-identify as gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals during adolescence or adulthood (Bartlett et al., 2002, 2003; Bradley & Zucker, 1997, 1998). This long term evidence suggests that the childhood GID diagnosis is an excellent predictor of later homosexuality. Because homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness, some have argued that GID should also lose its status as a mental illness. It seems likely that the GID diagnosis is being used to “catch” gay youth and force them into therapy; GID treatment may be directed at changing sexual orientation (Pickstone-Taylor, 2002), a treatment goal that the American Association of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, and the National Association of Social Workers, among others, have deemed unacceptable (Just the Facts, n.d.).

**Extracurricular Activities**

From the summer of 2004 through its settlement in the spring of 2005, American sports fans and other news watchers received regular updates on the sexual harassment charges
filed against basketball star Kobe Bryant. For many observers, the most unique aspect of the case was the fact that criminal charges were filed against an elite player; criminal trials of lower-status professional athletes had become commonplace. Such crimes have also been committed by high school athletes, perhaps the most shocking of which was the gang rape of a developmentally delayed adolescent girl by the all-male Glen Ridge, New Jersey high school football team (Lefkowitz, 1998). Accordingly, we might then ask what it is about male athletics and athletes that fosters these behaviors. (To my knowledge, there have been no accusations of this sort against female athletes.)

Examinations of high school athletics are particularly important because extracurricular activities (of all types) provide an important context for adolescent development (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). Surveys consistently show that 70 to 80% of adolescents report participating in at least one extracurricular activity (Brown & Theobald, 1998). One sample of upper-middle class American high school students reported a 93% participation rate in extracurricular activities, with an average of 7.7 hours per week in school-based athletic activities (and 4.9 hours per week in non-school-based athletics) (Fuligni & Stevenson, 1995).

It is important to note that these settings are not value free, and that adolescents can and do acquire value messages from these settings. James Youniss has been particularly interested in how adolescents’ values are related to and influenced by their experiences. His review of the literature indicates that adolescents who participate in “service” or “prosocial” activities (e.g., volunteering) tend to be more motivated by moral and political beliefs and values than their peers. Volunteering typically reinforces these beliefs and values and tends to increase the differences between adolescents who volunteer and those who do not (Yates & Youniss, 1996). More importantly, these activities emphasize “feminine” characteristics such as care for others and cooperation, values that underlie many social justice movements.

By contrast, athletics provide a different set of values. The most obvious of these is competition, which is inherent in any athletic contest. Interviews with retired professional, semiprofessional, and amateur (e.g., collegiate, Olympic) male athletes revealed that athletes also competed with teammates and friends in a variety of realms outside of their sport, including competition for girlfriends (Messner, 1992). At the cultural level, the most prominent American men’s team sports (e.g., football, basketball) have been described as homophobic and sexist (Adams & Bettis, 2003; Messner, 1992). One ethnographic study of Little League baseball revealed this pattern of sexism and antihomosexuality among the boys and some of their male coaches; less-skilled boys and boys who violated social norms were called “sissies,” “girly,” or “fags” (G. Fine, 1987). In addition, (professional) media tend to disproportionately emphasize men’s sports, discuss women’s personality characteristics and appearance (but not men’s), and otherwise minimize or de-emphasize women’s abilities (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002; Sabo & Jansen, 1992). Overall, athletics and its media presentation emphasizes many aspects of the currently dominant image of masculinity (see also David & Brannon, 1976; G. Fine, 1987; Messner, 1992; Smiler, 2006).

Collectively, these findings suggest that participation in extracurricular activities leads to greater adoption of the values associated with those activities. Volunteer activities, not surprisingly, promote values such as cooperation and caretaking that are associated with many social justice movements, whereas athletics tend to promote patriarchal values. Because these values are also consistent with cultural notions of femininity and masculinity, service is likely perceived as less valuable than athletics and may be less appealing to many youth. If these implicit values translate into later beliefs and behaviors, then they set the stage for women to be overrepresented in service-oriented professions and
overrepresented at (less competitive) lower levels of the corporate ladder. In addition to
maintaining the imbalance of men in powerful positions, these “outcomes” would also
lead to lower wages for women and would thus maintain women’s financial dependence
on men.

There are several ways in which extracurricular activities might be altered or examined
that could diminish these effects. One approach would be to minimize the prominence
of sports over other activities. A quick examination of my own high school yearbook, as
well as the current yearbook of my local school district, reveals a substantially greater
number of pages (and presumably faculty positions) devoted to athletic activities than all
other activities (combined). I suspect that high school newspapers and other vehicles for
informing students are similarly biased toward athletics, and do not routinely mention
other activity groups. And to the extent that student-run news sources (e.g., newspaper,
radio) mimic professional media, the presentation may be biased in favor of male over
female athletes (Billings et al., 2002; Sabo & Jansen, 1992). Accordingly, school staff
responsible for these media could promote equality (of activities) by requiring parity in
coverage of athletic and nonathletic activities, as well as equal coverage of women and
men.

The classroom is another potential site of intervention. Here, students could be helped
to think critically about the “texts” that accompany professional sports. Differences in
the amount and placement of text in local newspapers are obvious; differential treatment
in the use of first names (a diminutive, for women) and surnames (respectful, for men)
and the focus on personality and appearance would likely become apparent with relatively
little effort. Questions could also be directed to often undiscussed topics, such as
the relative paucity of media coverage of women’s sports, the presentation of women as
sexual objects (e.g., Sports Illustrated’s swimsuit edition), or the participation of sexual
minority members (and the lack of televised images of the partners of gay male athletes).
This deconstruction process would help students recognize the narratives employed and
their associated values, and is a necessary first step in questioning the status quo.

This deconstruction could also be used to illuminate distinctions based on ethnicity
and social class. Messner’s (1992) interviews suggested that children’s and adolescents’
choice of sport are guided in direct and subtle ways based on the youth’s ethnicity and
social class; non-Whites and members of lower classes tended to be steered toward more
violent sports (e.g., boxing, football). In addition, descriptions of ethnic minority group
members likely differ across sections of the newspaper (e.g., sports, local news). The
influence of social class could also be examined, particularly as it relates to a child or
adolescent’s ability to pay for equipment, league fees, and training/coaching. Examination
of these patterns would help students challenge stereotypes and identify systemic
inequalities regarding access.

Dating and Sex

More than half of American high school seniors report voluntary experience with coitus
prior to their high school graduation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005).
Many more report voluntary experiences of oral sex (especially fellatio) and the vast major-
ity (>90%) report passionate (or “French”) kissing (Darling & Davidson, 1987; Horne &
Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005; O’Sullivan, 2005). These activity rates are broadly similar to
other industrialized countries, such as England, France, and Sweden (Haggstrom-Nor-
din, Hanson, & Tyden, 2002; Hofstede, 1998; Ponton & Judice, 2004), but American
adolescents report a substantially greater proportion of pregnancy, abortion, and sexu-
ally transmitted infections (STIs) (Hofstede, 1998). Gendered behavior plays a key role
in this. Adolescent boys who report greater adherence to masculine norms tend to view
dating as more adversarial, report greater levels of control of their girlfriends, are less
likely to use condoms, and are more likely to believe that their girlfriends have primary
responsibility for birth control (Chu et al., 2005; Pleck et al., 1993, 1994). At the same
time, adolescent girls who report greater adherence to feminine norms report greater dif-
fi culty discussing birth control with their partners and are less likely to use birth control
(Tolman, 2002; Ward & Wyatt, 1994). These are important issues for schools not only
because they affect the health and potential life courses of adolescents, but also because
most adolescents find dating and sexual partners within school-based face-to-face (vs.
online) social networks (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002).

Most adolescents begin to date during adolescence, and the age at which this behav-
ior begins is more closely related to the adolescents’ social maturity than to biological
puberty (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebrenbrunner, & Collins, 2004). Data on heterosexual
activity from adolescents and undergraduates suggest that an individual’s first romantic
kiss typically occurs before age 14 (O’Sullivan, 2005; Smith & Udry, 1985) and first vol-
untary intercourse occurs around age 17 (Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Smiler, Ward, Caruthers,
& Merriwether, 2005). Less is known about youth with same-sex attractions, but the
data suggest that first voluntary same-sex genital sexual activity also occurs around age
17 (Savin-Williams, 2005).

As with any “new” behavior, adolescents begin with no direct experience. In contrast
to many (all?) other adult-sanctioned behaviors for adolescents, adults provide adoles-
cents with relatively little guidance either before or after they start dating. Research with
high school students and undergraduates reveals that parents typically provide “not”
messages (e.g., “do not have intercourse,” “do not get pregnant or impregnate anyone”) and stress the importance of love (Smiler et al., 2005; Ward & Wyatt, 1994). American
schools provide similar messages, when they address the issue at all (Irvine, 2002; Levine,
2002). This pattern indicates that adults are withholding information from adolescents (a
form of “adultism”). The lack of information does not seem to prevent adolescents from
experiencing coitus, but appears to inhibit their ability to use or access items that would
prevent disease transmission and pregnancy. Potential results include unwanted pregnan-
cies and STIs, including herpes and HIV, all of which could potentially be avoided if
adults provided adolescents with the necessary knowledge and resources.

When adolescents are provided with sex education in schools, it typically consists of an
“abstinence-only” curriculum that presents abstinence as the only method of disease and
pregnancy prevention, emphasizes the failure rates of contraceptive devices, addresses
only heterosexual behavior, and reinforces gendered notions of sexuality (sexually driven
males and gatekeeping females). Since the mid-1990s, American schools that accept fed-
eral funds have been increasingly required to adopt this curriculum (Irvine, 2002; Levine,
2002). Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that these programs have little effect on the
general adolescent population (Rostosky, Regenerus, & Comer-Wright, 2003; see review
by Ponton & Judice, 2004). These programs may only benefit adolescents who were com-
paratively more religious than their peers; religious adolescents are more likely to abstain
or defer their first coitus (Miller, Norton, Fan, & Christopherson, 1998; Rostosky, Wil-
cox, Comer-Wright, & Randall, 2004). Reviews of methodologically rigorous empirical
studies rely on a relatively small number of published findings and indicate that students
who receive abstinence-only sex education have less contraceptive knowledge and may
be more likely to become pregnant or impregnate someone (Bennett & Assefi, 2005;
DiCenso, Guyatt, Willan, & Griffith, 2002).

Desirous of information, adolescents may then turn to the Internet. Here, they may also
find abstinence oriented websites, as well as websites that adopt a “comprehensive”
approach such as Columbia University’s “Go ask Alice” (www.goaskalice.com). These websites include instruction on the use and success rates of contraceptive devices, discuss relationship issues, and (typically) address sexual minority issues (Bay-Cheng, 2001; see also M. Fine, 1988). However, these websites may be difficult to separate from the pornographic websites also identified by search engines (Bay-Cheng, 2001; M. Smith, Gertz, Alvarez, & Lurie, 2000). Adults who hope to prevent adolescents from accessing pornography or encountering “obscene” language on the Internet through the use of filtering software may also prevent adolescents from accessing these sites, and may again deny information to adolescents.

Given the general lack of information from parents and schools, it should be no surprise that adolescents tend to identify their peers and the media as the two most important sources of sexual information (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002). Popular media, which provide demonstrations of how to behave in romantic and sexual situations, may be consulted privately, repeatedly, and with little/no fear of embarrassment, and thus are a particularly important source of information. Unfortunately, mainstream media are heavily stereotyped and present an image of male sexuality that is natural, promiscuous, and power-oriented alongside an image of female sexuality that is sexually appealing, sexually chaste, and responsible for limiting men’s sexuality; discussions of pregnancy and disease protection are extremely rare (Carpenter, 1998; Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnnerstein, 2005; Ward, 1995). Recent evidence has revealed that adolescents who are exposed to greater amounts of sexual content on television, as well as greater amounts of degrading musical lyrics, report an earlier age of first intercourse and a faster progression through “precoital” behaviors (e.g., petting; oral sex) (Collins et al., 2004; Martino et al., 2006).

Collectively, these findings suggest that the minimal and largely stereotypical portrayal of dating and sexuality to which American adolescents are exposed does little to prepare them for the realities of sexual behavior and likely contributes to an environment where STIs and pregnancy, both of which are easily preventable, occur with greater frequency than they otherwise might. This situation places the health and the future of adolescents in jeopardy, and it does so simply because adults refuse to provide adolescents with the information and materials they need to care for themselves.

The most obvious—and most controversial—solution would be for schools to provide more substantive sexual education. This would allow schools to provide adolescents with the information they need; that is, schools could genuinely educate adolescents about sexuality. Moreover, if schools were to adopt a normative or “positive” approach to sexual development and behavior (Haffner, 1998; Russell, 2005), they could acknowledge that sexual development is part of growing up and that individuals vary in the rate and ways in which they demonstrate their sexuality. Further, educators could contextualize sexuality within a relational and health-promoting framework that would highlight the importance of values, decision-making, mutual respect, and responsibility. The Sexuality Information and Education Center of the United States website (http://www.siecus.org), includes a “clearinghouse” of sexuality education curricula that have been empirically validated.

Less obvious, but still highly useful, would be for teachers to help students think critically about the sexualized “texts” they see in the media. Here, students might analyze the content of popular magazines such as Seventeen or popular television shows and deconstruct the portrayals of ever-present male sexual desire and women’s roles as gatekeepers (e.g., Carpenter, 1998; Ward, 1995). Critical examination of these stories would help students recognize this particular portrayal of sexuality, which likely does not match their own experience. Omitted stories, such as safer sex discussions and tech-
niques, homosexuality, female sexual desire, and male refusal could also be discussed in the classroom. This broadening of the conversation would provide students with a wider range of behaviors to choose from, alleviate pressure to conform to gendered patterns of sexual behavior, and would be more inclusive of sexual minorities. As a result, students with varying experiences would likely see a connection between their own experiences and the curriculum, thus facilitating learning. More importantly, it would emphasize the diversity of actual experience.

Binary Constructions of Gender and School Structure

Around the United States, schools are increasingly being challenged on policies based on the binary American gender system that identifies many activities as either “feminine” or “masculine” and prohibits individuals from crossing these boundaries. The current challenges are very different from the push for equality in offerings in the 1970s. In the last few years, children, adolescents, and their parents, occasionally with legal representation, have sought to violate American gender norms. In one instance, a Finnish adolescent boy residing in the United States was not allowed to play field hockey because his high school categorized it as a women’s sport; in his native Finland, the game is played by both women and men (Kadaba & Shea, 2005; see also “ACLU wants boys allowed in high school cheer tourney,” 2006). Greater controversy is raised in instances where a child sees her- or himself as a member of the other sex (“transgendered”) and wishes to be treated as such (Pfeiffer & Daniel, 2000; Reischel, 2002). In the typical case, a biological male who identifies as female wants permission to function as a girl, including being recognized by a different name than appears on his birth certificate, wearing girls’ clothing (which may violate school policy), and in some cases, using the girls’ bathroom and (physical education) changing rooms. Schools are also asked to protect these children from gender and sexual harassment.

Schools could expand harassment differences to include gender-based insults. Perhaps more effective would be the elimination of gender comparative processes within schools. Thorne’s (1994) research revealed that children in classrooms where teachers did not highlight sex differences were less likely to use this categorization themselves. Recently, Rebecca Bigler (2006) has drawn parallels between efforts to end gender prejudice and discrimination and earlier efforts to end racial prejudice and discrimination. Noting that any teacher who began class with “Good morning Whites and Blacks” would quickly be fired and potentially jailed, she has asked why teachers should be allowed to begin with “Good morning girls and boys”? Similarly, teachers might ask children to form two lines based on color of footwear (e.g., light vs. dark) instead of sex.

Finally, lessons on gender could be explicitly incorporated into the curriculum. Although many such lessons exist, from discussions of gender-specific expectations as they relate to literature to the influence of the women’s movements on U.S. history, they typically focus on the outcomes of gender differentiation. Lessons that question the idea that there are only two genders (and two biological sexes) would help students develop critical thinking skills, while also acknowledging the transgendered and intersexed populations, who are presently ignored (for examples, see Gilmore, 1990; Herdt, 1994). Lessons that identify occasions where gender is and is not important, highlight findings that most children and adolescents display only moderate levels of enactment of gender norms, and emphasize similarities between women and men would facilitate equality and minimize belief that there is a “battle of the sexes.” Discussion of the ways in which gender roles limit different aspects of human functioning, especially when combined with cross-cultural examples (e.g., emotionally expressive Italian men and emotionally stoic American men) would
facilitate students’ understanding of culture and the ways in which cultures construct gender. Broadly, attention to these topics would likely increase the range of acceptable behavior for girls and boys and minimize the “naturalness” of gender.

If our goal is to create a truly just society, we must explicitly address gender in a meaningful way in schools. Ideally, this would occur through explicit inclusion and discussion of gender as part of the curriculum. Curricular changes are not sufficient, however. Teachers, administrators, and other involved adults must also demonstrate greater tolerance for those who transcend strict American gender categories, much as they accepted and encouraged women’s struggles for greater access to education and prestigious occupations in the 1970s. As such, educational institutions must demonstrate greater tolerance for gender “atypical” behavior and support a broader diversity of genders within the school. Ultimately, schools should become a place where gender categories (and their associated biological categories) become irrelevant to the day to day lives of students, teachers, and staff. Elimination of these subtle sources of gender bias, combined with explicit examination of beliefs about gender, will allow children to achieve their full potential without having to struggle against restrictive cultural assumptions about gender.

Notes

1. Throughout this chapter, I will discuss (gender-)appropriate and (gender-)inappropriate behavior. This choice is consistent with much of the literature on children’s gender-related behavior. However, because the appropriateness of such behaviors is determined by our culture, more accurate terms might be “culturally desired gender-related behavior” or “culturally appropriate gendered behavior.” These terms should be understood as equivalent.

2. Although I speak of only two biological sexes, female and male, humans are not sorted into only these two biological categories. Intersexuality has become increasingly recognized since the early 21st century, largely as the result of biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) Sexing the Body and the activism of Cheryl Chase, who founded the Intersexual Society of North America. Fausto-Sterling argues that there are (at least) five sexes.

References


