

SESSION 7: Classroom Dynamics

Readings to complete before class:

- (1) Orenstein, Peggy. "Learning Silence: Scenes from the Class Struggle." Chapter 1 in *SchoolGirls: Young Girls, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*. New York: Doubleday (1994). ISBN: 0385425759.
- (2) FAF chapter 3: "Missing in Interaction."

Discussion notes:

(1) Orenstein: "Learning Silence"

- "Amy walks to the far side of the room and, as she takes her seat, falls into a typically feminine pose: she crosses her legs, folds her arms across her chest, and hunches forward toward her desk, seeming to shrink into herself. The sauciness of the playground disappears, and, in fact, she says hardly a word during class. Meanwhile, the boys, especially those who are more physically mature, sprawl in their chairs, stretching their legs long, expanding into the available space" (p.7).
- "When the girls... do speak, they follow the rules... When Amy volunteers her sole answer of the period, she raises her hand, too. She gives the wrong answer to an easy multiplication problem, turns crimson, and flips her head forward so her hair falls over her face. Occasionally, the girls shout out answers, but generally they are the easiest, lowest-risk questions, such as the factors of four or six. And their stabs at public recognition depend on the boys' largesse; when the girls venture responses to more complex questions the boys quickly become territorial, shouting them down with their own answers... [The teacher] doesn't say anything to condone the boys' aggressiveness, but she doesn't have to: they insist on—and receive—her attention even when she consciously tries to shift it elsewhere in order to make the class more equitable." (p. 9).
- "I don't raise my hand in my classes because I'm afraid I have the wrong answer and I'll be embarrassed" (p.11).
- Classroom interactions as power struggles.

(2) Failing at Fairness: "Missing in Interaction"

- To preserve order, most teachers use established classroom conventions such as raising your hand if you want to talk. Intellectually, teachers know they should apply this rule consistently, but when the discussion becomes fast-paced and furious, the rule is often swept aside. When this happens and shouting out begins, it is an open invitation for male dominance. Our research shows that boys call out significantly more often than girls.

Sometimes what they say has little or nothing to do with the teacher's questions. Whether male comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them. However, when girls call out, there is a fascinating occurrence: Suddenly the teacher remembers the rule about raising your hand before you talk. And then the girl, who is usually not as assertive as the male students, is deftly and swiftly put back in her place. Not being allowed to call out like her male classmates... will not psychologically scar [her]; however, the system of silencing operates covertly and repeatedly. It occurs several times a day during each school week for twelve years, and even longer if [she] goes to college, and, most insidious of all, it happens subliminally. This micro-inequity eventually has a powerful cumulative impact" (*Failing at Fairness* pp. 43-44).

- "On the surface, girls appear to be doing well. They get better grades and receive fewer punishments than boys... Reinforced for passivity... As victims of benign neglect, girls are penalized for doing what they should" (*Failing at Fairness* p. 44).
- "When we videotape classrooms and play back the tapes, most teachers are stunned to see themselves teaching subtle gender lessons along with math and spelling." (*Failing at Fairness* p. 46)

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