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Abstract

The typical child in the U.S. spends 13 years in primary and secondary schools. One goal of schools is to standardize students' knowledge of core subject matter so as to make them responsible and productive citizens when they reach adulthood. In large part, then, schools are designed to inculcate American ideals into members of society, beginning at an early age. Most American ideals are gendered in various ways. As such, schools teach both formal and informal lessons about gender to all students. The gender binary is used to order children's behavior, and it is built into the curriculum. The school context enables, constrains, and gives meaning to children's gendered interactions. But children also work together to create their own meanings and to innovate in their negotiations of gender in the school context. This chapter examines the research on gendered interactions at school and explores possibilities of using sociological research for social change.

1 Introduction

For most children in the U.S. aged 5–18, school dominates their daily lives for at least nine months out of the year. Not all schools are identical in form or function. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, most (about 90%) children attend public schools, while a minority (10%) attend private schools. About 7% of public schools are charter schools, or public schools that are governed by local organizations that can change some of the rules affecting other public schools. Even though not all schools are alike, they have much more in common than they have differences. Schools in the US are overseen by the US Department of Education, as well as by state and local educational oversight boards. They are assessed and evaluated by standards. Schools aim to standardize students' knowledge of core subject matter so as to make them responsible and productive citizens when they reach adulthood. As such, we treat schooling as a formal institution in society. Schooling is a largely stable institution, structured by a formal curriculum, but also shaped in fundamental ways by informal lessons about people's roles in society. These lessons are connected to American understandings of race, class, sexuality, and gender, as well as other social meanings systems. This chapter is about the ways that schools are formally structured by gender, recognizing that gender, race, class, and

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sexuality all intersect. It also explores ways that students themselves both reproduce and challenge gendered meanings in schools. In the next section, I discuss research on schools as social structures, and the ways that gender differences are built into that structure both literally and figuratively. Schools are shaped by a “gender regime” that orders daily life around gender difference, primarily, making a binary construction of gender seem natural and inflexible. After that, I shows how children themselves participate in the gender regime in their everyday interactions. They both reproduce the gender regime by following the rules unquestioningly, and they also challenge and rewrite the rules creatively. And, finally, I discuss ways to restructure schools altogether, to potentially decouple schooling from gender difference and reduce school’s role in reproducing gender inequality in society.

2 Schooling: An Important Institutional Context for Shaping Children’s Gender

The institution of schooling is complex. Schools are physical spaces, both indoors and outdoors. Indoors, schools are comprised of hallways, bathrooms, locker rooms, classrooms, and offices. Outdoors, schools have play areas, sports facilities, and parking areas. The size, quality, and configuration of these spaces depend on the school’s location, age, and resources. Students are officially organized within these spaces by age, activity, and aptitude, and unofficially by sex, class, and race/ethnicity. School spaces have historically been designed to control and manage large groups of students (Sitton, 1980). But the institution of schooling is more than its literal structure: schools are formally organized by rules and procedures. All teachers are trained to sift and sort children according to skill and ability while also keeping them orderly and under control. Standardized tests are used to assess not only individual student learning but also the effectiveness of entire schools. As such, testing mandates shape schools in myriad ways,

including the content of curriculum and how classes are organized. Schools have long been recognized to be agents of social control (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

For decades, sociologists have been examining the ways that the institutional context of schools affects gender and vice versa. The physical space of schools alone is overtly gendered, with signs in many places literally marking which sex can use which parts of each building. But every aspect of the organization of schools shapes gender relations and expectations of students. Thorne (1993) says that schools are much more segregated by gender than are homes, neighborhoods, churches, and other spaces where children spend their time. Kessler, Ashenden, Connell, and Dowsett (1985) demonstrate that schools actively construct gender. They write,

...the school as an institution is characterized at any given time by a particular gender regime. This may be defined as the pattern of practices that constructs various kinds of masculinity and femininity among staff and students, orders them in terms of prestige and power, and constructs a sexual division of labor within the institution. The gender regime is a state of play rather than a permanent condition. It can be changed, deliberately or otherwise, but it is no less powerful in its effects on the pupils for that. It confronts them as a social fact, which they have to come to terms with somehow (42).

In other words, the term, “gender regime” refers to the way that gender is built into the structure of schooling so as to treat people differently, usually unequally. This section will examine the ways that the gender regime operates in schools to control students and shape expectations of students as gendered people.

3 The Gender Regime in Schools

In his study of masculinity in schools, Swain (2004, 170) argues that schools are important for shaping children’s gender in two ways: first, schools provide the “...setting and physical space in which the embodied actions and agencies of pupils and adults take place.” Second, schools’ “...structures and practices are also

involved as an institutional agent which produces these ‘masculinizing practices,’ and which allows various patterns of masculinity to flourish.” Swain shows that, although all schools affect gender, individual schools do so differently, depending on local personnel, rules, and use of space and resources. Following Connell (1996) and Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), Swain shows that gender is produced and reproduced in the school context through four mechanisms: management/organizational practices, student-teacher interaction, curriculum, and sports/games. This is a useful framework for unpacking the ways that gender is structured into schools, so I borrow it here to discuss other studies.

3.1 Management and Organizational Practices

Thorne (1993) studied elementary school children’s interactions in classrooms during structured time and on playgrounds during less structured time. She showed how teachers use gender to organize students: children are told to line up boy–girl. They may be seated at boys-only and girls-only tables. Gender is used to threaten children so that they behave. For example, a teacher might tell a boy, “If you don’t work quietly, I’ll move you to the girls’ table.” Extra-curricular activities are gendered too: foursquare is for girls, and football is for boys (children may break these rules, of course, which I discuss below) This gendered organization is effective at maintaining social control because, as Thorne argues, girls are seen by boys as contaminating, as having “cooties.” Teachers reinforce this culture of difference by segregating students by gender: they separate girls and boys from each other, and from activities deemed appropriate for one category over another. Although Thorne’s study is decades old, the use of the gender binary to structure classrooms remains common (Myers & Raymond, 2010) with negative consequences for both boys and girls. One major consequence of this segregation is the underrepresentation of girls identifying with “boys” subjects, regardless of their aptitude

for these subjects. We see this gap most glaringly in “STEM” fields: science, technology, engineering, and math (Cervonia & Iverson, 2011).

Official school policies are often shaped by gender as well as race. We can see this most clearly when we analyze policies that regulate behavior in school. As Monahan, Van Derhei, Bechtold, and Cauffman (2014) explain, many schools began adopting “zero-tolerance” discipline policies in the 1990s. These policies levy harsh punishments, such as suspension, on students who violate school rules, even after only one incident. Monahan, et al. argue that zero-tolerance policies have been used to punish black and Latino students in general, and to punish boys of color in particular. Specifically, Morris and Perry (2016) use extensive school records to show that black students are six times more likely and Latino/as are twice as likely to be suspended than whites. Boys are much more likely to be suspended than girls. When schools suspend students, they are sent home, often without any adult supervision. These students are less attached to school, perform poorly in school, and have a greater likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system. Monahan, et al. link suspension to what has been called the “school-to-prison pipeline,” which disproportionately affects boys of color (see Wilson, 2014). Given evidence that race and gender bias zero-tolerance policies, they argue for more individualized approaches to school discipline.

3.2 Student-Teacher Interaction

Teachers are major “sanctioning adult” figures in most children’s lives (Thorne, 1993). The teachers do most of the sifting and sorting that occurs in schools, which means that they have a great deal of power over students’ opportunities and experiences. Not all of their sifting and sorting is based on evidenced ability, such as test scores. While there are certainly stellar teachers in U.S. schools, many of them make decisions according to preconceived notions of ability that are unconsciously grounded in sexist and racist (and other problematic) understandings of

different children's abilities. Social psychologists call these preconceived notions, "expectation states" (Goar & Sell, 2005), and they have a powerful effect on how children are tracked academically as well as on how students view themselves and each other. For example, recent studies have examined the ways that teachers overtly and inadvertently sexualize girls in school. Again, teachers do this because of their own preconceived ideas about what is "appropriate" for children's bodies, sexual knowledge, and sexual activity (Myers & Raymond, 2010). Paechter (2011) points out an oxymoron in how teachers regulate children's bodies sexually: when teachers notice children's bodies at school, it is because they have been interpreted to be problematic, even pathological. She says that there are so many panics about children's bodies at school that teachers feel compelled to teach children to control their bodies. Paechter says that bodies are "schooled" in gendered ways: how they sit, how they dress, how they move. And all of this is viewed by teachers through adult, sexualized lenses, which has the effect of shaming girls' bodies. Ringrose and Renold (2012) call this "the schizoid entanglement of sexual empowerment and sexual protection for the schoolgirl child" (338), which harms both boys and girls. They call out school dress codes, ostensibly designed to keep students' bodies covered, as mechanisms through which adults shame girls as "sluts," and show how dress codes contribute to hostile learning environments.

Research shows that, if a teacher has pre-determined that certain groups of children are not likely to succeed in school, then that teacher is unlikely to invest in, challenge, and advocate on behalf of those students. Grant (1994) showed how elementary school teachers' lenses affected the ways that they interacted with and instructed young black girls in their classrooms. Rather than rewarding black girls for focusing on their own school work and improving their skills, teachers rewarded them for their social skills. In particular, teachers praised black girls for being helpers, enforcers, and go-betweens. When black girls helped out in the classroom, cleaned up, washed the erasers, and helped their peers with

classwork, teachers praised them. When black girls enforced classroom rules among their peers by telling on them, reminding peers of the rules, etc., teachers rewarded them. When black girls acted as conduits of information between peers and the teacher, teachers rewarded them. All of these activities distracted the girls from their own classwork, undermining their personal academic progress, but they made the teachers' jobs easier. And because the teachers did not see black girls as likely to have challenging careers, they rewarded social, interpersonal skills that befitted the service jobs teachers assumed these girls would have.

Race and gender also have been found to intersect in teachers' evaluations of boys' abilities. Ferguson (2001) shows how, even at a young age, black boys are singled out in school and made examples of. Using data collected with the help of a 6th grade boy called "Horace," Ferguson describes students' experiences in the "Punishing Room," or in-school detention room, which the children call the "jailhouse." Black boys like Horace seem to be held to a higher standard than other children, and teachers have a lower tolerance for their behavioral disruptions. Teachers and students—both those targeted for punishment and those who are not—all internalize the narrative that black boys as a group are "trouble makers." And this narrative helps to reinforce racially biased zero-tolerance disciplinary policies discussed below.

Latsch and Hannover (2014) use expectation states theory to show how another gendered narrative is playing out in classrooms: the "failing boys" narrative. As Kleinfeld (2009) has argued, part of a post-feminist backlash against programs designed to help girls in schools is a new narrative claiming that boys are "in crisis"—that boys are losing ground because girls are getting more than their fair share of attention in schools. This narrative is prevalent not just in the U.S. In their experimental study in Germany, Latsch and Hannover show that boys hear the "failing boys" narrative from the media, and they align their efforts in school so that this prediction becomes an outcome, regardless of boys' actual abilities. Latsch and Hannover offer strategies for teachers

to interrupt this narrative, focusing on how they use the stereotype of boys to motivate them to work harder rather than accepting it uncritically. However, such interventions will only be successful if teachers are alerted to their own pre-conceived, subconscious biases against boys.

3.3 Curriculum

Conventional wisdom asserts that there are gender differences in children's aptitude. Specifically, people believe that boys are better at analytical skills and girls are better at social skills. And so parents and teachers channel boys into math and science, while channeling girls into humanities and arts. Because so many people have bought into this conventional wisdom, they look for confirming evidence wherever they can find it. As Fausto-Sterling (1992) has shown, believing is seeing. Scientists routinely test for gender differences in math, science, and verbal ability. Usually, boys and girls score about the same, which means there is no statistically significant difference. Because of a bias toward statistical significance in the peer review publication process, studies showing no difference have a harder time getting published. Therefore, the studies that *do* get published tend to emphasize gender difference. But as both Fausto-Sterling and Guiso, Monte, Sapeinza, and Zingales (2009) show, when differences do exist, they are very small. And yet, they confirm conventional wisdom and continue to shape curriculum in overt and subtle ways.

Cervonia and Ivinson (2011) study the ways that gender is infused into the STEM curriculum even for young children. They conduct a semiotic analysis of moment-to-moment instruction and interactions during science lessons with 7 and 8 year olds in the UK. They find that the pedagogy and content used in science lessons themselves are layered with messages signaling that science is a masculine subject, leading to the exclusion of girls whether they have scientific aptitude or not. They say that the classroom consists of "social-cultural streams" communicating with kids in a gendered way:

For example, when a teacher introduced an activity about forces by setting up apparatus in which a car was rolled down a ramp, the juxtaposition of a masculine artefact within the contexts of science, together with a masculine topic, created a semiotic assemblage that reinforced the masculine valence of the subject. Neither teachers nor children were likely to be aware of this in an explicit way. Had the teacher replaced the car with, for example, a toy donkey (with wheels in their hooves) or a figure of a woman driver in the car, she would have introduced a feminine element into the assemblage (464).

Concepts like gravity, velocity, and mass have no gender, and you need not be one gender or another to understand or test them. But, as Cervonia and Ivinson show, teachers themselves approach STEM subjects as masculine, and they build masculine messages into the curriculum, (probably) unwittingly reproducing their own gender biases. Girls get the message all along the pipeline into STEM fields, and even those with the aptitude and initial inclination often switch out of STEM majors once they take these courses in college (Stout, Dasgupta, Hunsinger, & McManus, 2011).

3.4 Sport

In *The Men and the Boys*, Connell (2000) argued that sports is a major arena in which masculinity is mapped onto male bodies. Focusing on competition (winning), endurance, and strength, sports are an organized, institutionally supported way that gender is structured in, by, and for schools. Sports underscore hegemonic masculinity and the rejection of femininity by urging boys to "man up" (Myers, 2012), and praising boys when they endure intense pain without showing emotion (Oransky & Maracek, 2009). Although not all boys will succeed as athletes (Renold, 2004), the glorification of sports at school shapes boyhood in general. Messner (2011) argues that school sports are important gendering agents for both boys and girls. He points out gender essentialism and categoricalism in policies that impact boys and girls in school sports. For example, although Title IX enabled girls—disproportionately those from the middle

class—to enter sports that had previously been open only to boys, Title IX does not call for the gender integration of school sports. Boys and girls can both play soccer in high schools, but they rarely play on the same team. Essentialist beliefs about boys having more strength, size, and athletic prowess than girls affect regulations in most competitive sports, especially at the Olympic and professional levels. Not to dismiss the importance of bodies in sport, but these regulations amplify sex and gender differences rather than focusing on similarities (Fausto-Sterling, 2007). Ideologically, gender segregation within sports reifies binary understandings of gender and contributes to a larger structure that devalues femininity. Within that context, when boys and girls do play together, say, in soccer, girls complain that boys won't even pass them the ball.

Messner (2011) explains that race, class, and socio-historical context are important factors for children's involvement in different sports over time. Messner's historical analysis of one California high school shows that girls of all classes and races were involved in organized sports in U.S. schools before WWI, but starting in the 1920s, Asian and Latinas participated in intramural sports only, and white middle class girls "... achieved social status not as athletes, but as cheerleaders. As public exemplars of what Connell (1987) calls 'emphasized femininity,' cheerleaders helped to construct male football players as midcentury exemplars of hegemonic masculinity" (156). Cheerleading is certainly athletic, requiring physical prowess, teamwork, and training like most other sports. But as Adams and Bettis (2003) and Grindstaff and West (2006) have shown, cheerleading is a socially accepted vehicle for the reproduction of traditional femininity, even while girls are competing physically "like boys."

4 Ideological Underpinnings of the Gender Regime in Schools

Although scholars have problematized the ways that schools as institutions help to reproduce gender inequality in society, gender remains part

of the structure, curriculum, and practices within schools because doing so resonates with most people ideologically. In other words, it makes us feel comfortable. There are three major ideological frames (Ridgeway, 2009) that ensure the persistence of the gender regime in schools in contemporary US society: neo-liberalism, post-feminism, and heteronormativity.

4.1 Neo-Liberalism

Giddens (1991) observed the ways that "self-help" discourse began to shape ideologies about social problems. By focusing on individual choices as the key to one's success or failure, the neo-liberal ideological frame treats individuals as autonomous agents and minimizes the power of larger social structures and forces over people's life chances. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) critique neoliberal messages in media, writing, "What has intensified in our neo-liberal, individualizing times is the psychological imperative to improve and transform the self through the ready resources made available in self-help culture which dominates popular culture" (235). They show the impact of neoliberalism in television programming designed to capitalize on the audience's revulsion of gendered bodies that result from making "bad choices:" fat people, people with eating disorders, etc. The message is that you can choose to be healthy, and if you choose otherwise, then you deserve abjection. Ringrose and Walkerdine write, "Psychology and its attendant experts play an important role in mediating disgust and repulsion (of self and others) generated in the dynamic of abjection, offering up the possibility of rules through which rehabilitation through regulation can become available to us all" (235). Focusing on individuals' roles in their own abjection makes fixing their problems seem simple: just change your behavior. Risman et al. (2018) argue that neo-liberalism is such a pervasive frame that it has even found its way into feminist theories, shifting analyses of gender inequality from a focus on structural forces to an individual level focus on a-contextual interactions and identity

choices. Focusing on choices might empower some people to find relief from the deleterious constraints of the gender regime, but it does not threaten to undo the gender regime itself.

The ideology of neo-liberalism reinforces the gender regime in schools in subtle ways. By placing the likelihood of a student's success in her or his own hands, we can then hold them responsible when they do not succeed. For example, a few years ago, the Harvard Business School did an experiment with their graduate students. The women students performed as well as men on tests, but they did not score as high on classroom participation—which made up 50% of their overall grade. Professors said the women did not participate as often as the men, and so they penalized them. The women said that they did participate, but the professors never called on them. So, as Kantor (2013) explains, Harvard ran an experiment: They sent observers to every class and counted who raised their hands and how often they were called on. It turns out that the women *were* raising their hands, but the professors called on men instead. A feminist response to this problem would be to train the professors to treat the men and women students equitably so that grades were not affected by sexism. But Harvard took a neo-liberal response instead: they said the women were not raising their hands properly. So they trained the women students how to raise their hands more aggressively: to sit on the edge of their seats and to shoot their hands high and fast into the air. This response ignores the structural problem that led professor to call on men instead of women, and it blames the women for not getting called on: if you raise your hands like men, then you'll get called upon. Neo-liberal ideologies permeate schooling at all levels—even in the prestigious halls of Harvard Business School.

4.2 Post-feminism

Post-feminism is part of a larger shift toward neoliberalism. Stacey (1990) defined post-feminism as "...the simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central

goals of second wave feminism" (339). In other words, we no longer need feminism because we have successfully eradicated gender inequality. Girls and women affected by the post-feminist frame have bought into the narrative of self-determined success and given up the concept of sexism. They see sexism as an individual-level problem, negating its import so as to claim personal power and avoid a victim stance. Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik (2013) say that "...postfeminism is a powerful tactic that effaces structural oppression in order to convince girls—as well as boys—that girls can 'have it all'" (187). In their interviews with girls in school, they find a "doubleness" expressed by the girls: the girls deny the existence of sexism in their school, but they simultaneously report experiencing it. Pomerantz et al. argue that gendered expectations of girlhood may prevent girls from being able to articulate critical, feminist understandings of gender inequality:

First, they may have used postfeminism to maintain a "nice" persona so they would not have to blame anyone for the social injustices they saw around them. The desire to be seen as nice is a commonly noted feature in girls' identities... and is often attributed to girls' learned performance of femininity, which does not include "masculine" traits, such as anger or rebelliousness. Niceness is also part of the idealized neoliberal girl subject, who does what she is told and pitches in where she is needed. To be nice is to be a compliant global citizen. The opposite is someone who protests, whines, and asks for special treatment rather than dealing with their own problems. Second, girls may have used postfeminism as a strategic move away from victimization. Girls simply did not wish to describe themselves as disempowered (203).

Post-feminism allows us to believe in "fairy tales" (Messner, 2011) in which girls can do anything that boys can do, while also blaming individual girls when they fail to live up to their goals. The gender regime remains intact. Feminism is dismissed. And gender equality is assumed to be a *fait accompli*.

4.3 Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is an ideological frame that shapes expectations for most children from birth.

It is the expectation that all people will (and should) be heterosexual. Martin (2009: 190) defines heteronormativity as “the mundane, everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted as normal and natural.” Gender and heterosexuality are interconnected (Connell, 1987). Thorne and Luria (1986: 176) state, “In our culture, gender and sexuality are deeply intertwined, especially for adults; ‘woman/man,’ and especially ‘femininity/masculinity’ are categories loaded with heterosexual meanings.” As children, girls are taught to be opposites of boys, socially complementary, because they are expected to partner with them sexually when they become adults (Jackson, 2009). For children to do gender properly, they must adhere to heteronormative ideals. They compel each other to follow prescribed heterosexual scripts (Rich, 1980), continually realigning gender performances with them.

Schools build heteronormativity into many rules and practices. For example, school events such as winter formal dances and proms, presume heterosexual coupling and pressure students into enacting heterosexualized rituals (Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007). The recent popularity of “promposals,” in which boys stage elaborate, public ways to ask girls to dances, and vice versa. The social media site, Pinterest, has 1000+ ideas for the best promposals. Dress code policies aimed at girls dressing modestly are often justified by saying that boys are distracted when girls wear revealing clothing. This presumes that boys are heterosexually interested in their girl classmates. Students are punished when they do not conform with heteronormativity. In fact, LGBTQ+ students are at a greater risk of self-harm than straight students, as a result of being stigmatized and bullied (Pearson et al. 2007). More examples of the consequences of heteronormativity in schools will be discussed below.

5 Children’s Interactions Both Reproduce and Challenge the Regime Within the School Context

So far, I have described the ways that structural and ideological forces shape the gender regime at schools. But social structures do not affect everyone equally. Students may be differentially constrained and enabled by social forces (Giddens, 1986), and they can also negotiate the structure in various ways—sometimes following the rules and reproducing the gender regime (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and at other times challenging the gender regime (Deutsch, 2007). Children exert agency (Corsaro, 1997) and construct gender relations within schools on their own terms (Paechter, 2012). Baker-Sperry (2009) says that students’ negotiation occurs within the context of everyday routines, which are stable and predictable within schools. Baker-Sperry notes that researchers tend to record disruptive incidents in which children use their agentic power so as to challenge the rules. But she urges us to also capture incidents when children use their agency to comply with rules. Kessler et al. (1985) say that a great deal of what occurs among students at school goes unnoticed by institutional agents. They say there is an “unofficial school” going on that results from students’ constructions and negotiations with each other. In this section, I will discuss the ways that students reproduce the gender regime through their everyday interactions, and then I will discuss the ways they challenge the gender regime.

6 Reproducing Gender

West and Zimmerman (1987) observe that, although there are a lot of gendered rules and expectations placed on people in society, they do not have to follow them. People have agency and

can choose to break the rules or make new rules altogether. When people break the rules, however, they are punished. Thus, as West and Zimmerman argue, most people follow the rules. By following the rules, people reinforce those rules. The literature shows that children reproduce the gender regime in schools through three major practices: by embracing (literally) heteronormativity; by sifting and sorting themselves by subject; and by policing each others' gendered enactments in school.

6.1 Embracing Heteronormativity: Crushes and Kissing Games

Students perform heteronormativity through their daily rituals and games. Adults are often surprised at what children understand about sexuality. Holford, Renold, and Huuki (2013) write, "Young children know and explore sexuality with each other, but—aware of adults' need for childhood innocence—often keep this secret, in what Best (1983) calls the hidden 'third curriculum'" (712).

Thorne and Luria (1986) showed that early adolescent boys and girls (ages 9–11) constructed heteronormativity differently. Girls in their study shared secrets to establish intimacy, making them "mutually vulnerable through self-disclosure" (183). Boys expressed "contagious excitement" (181) when they violated rules together. Contagious excitement was a sign that boys were "learning patterns of masculinity" (182). Similarly, Renold's (2006) study of 9- to 11-year-olds showed they "practiced heterosexuality" in ways that maintained traditional gender scripts and emphasized heteronormativity. For example, children engaged in a boyfriend-girlfriend culture at school in which boys asked girls to date them, and then boys "dumped" girls "like dirt." Girls who dated had higher status among their peers than those who did not. Even though boys participated in the dating scripts, they did so unromantically, associating romance with femininity. These pre-adolescent children reinforced the gender binary in their interactions at school.

Building on this research, Laura Raymond and I (Myers & Raymond, 2010) argue that heteronormativity is not only the product of a coming-of-age transformation. Instead, it is an everyday part of life, even for very young social actors. It does not only emerge from the gender divide, but is also reproduced by and for young girls themselves. We conducted focus group interviews with elementary school girls. The girls came to the focus groups knowing that we would be talking about girls' interests. Even though our recruitment flier never mentioned boys in any way, many girls seemed to expect "girls' interests" to include boys. They were openly surprised when we did not ask about them. The girls turned the tables on the interviews, reframing girls' interests as heteronormatively boy-centered. These girls performed heterosexual desire long before adolescence: It was an everyday issue for them. Girls as young as first grade brought their preexisting boy-centered language to focus groups: "hotties," "crushes," and "dating." Their heteronormative expressions created cultural meanings within the group. For example, the 2nd and 3rd graders decided to tell each other about their crushes:

Brooke (2nd grade), said, "I want to go last." She stood up, looking down upon her peers seated on the floor, and she waited until she had their attention. When it was quiet, she said, "I like-like Noah." The group began squealing, and Brooke held out her hands and yelled, "But that's not it!" She stood silently, grinning. The whole group started chanting, "Who else? Who else?" Brooke waited several seconds, and then announced: "Jesse." The girls rolled on the floor, howling. Alicia yelled, "Oh my gosh!" Morgan exclaimed, "I'm on fire!" (176).

These girls expressed what Thorne and Luria (1986) call "contagious excitement." Children are typically prohibited from sexualized discourse. In the focus group context, these girls reveled in this performance of heteronormativity. These girls measured themselves and each other according to their perceptions of boys' interests, even when no boys were present. And, like Renold's (2006) sample, these girls reported that the only way to interact with boys at school was in the context of a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship.

Holford et al. (2013) studied “kissing games” among 5 and 6 year old children. They say that kisses have “intense affective power” among children. Adults react to kids’ kissing chase games in a binary way: it’s either hypersexualized aggression or it’s innocent old fashioned fun. They write, “Within young children’s peer cultures, as viewed by adults, the kiss is over-coded, laden with interpretations that may simultaneously imbue it with meaning and strip it of power” (711). Research has shown that young children are actively engaged in making and interpreting sexualized meanings, despite adult assertions that they’re too young to understand. In fact, to make these arguments with a straight face means that adults are willfully ignoring the infusion of heteronormative romance narratives throughout childhood. Their study reveals the elaborate rituals some children create in their kissing games, as with this group of 5–6 year old girls who play kissing games with a boy, Petteri, in a tower on their playground in Finland:

When enough girls are in the tower, they stand around the edge of the tower in a small semicircle. Petteri stands near the entrance of the tower, chanting a nursery rhyme while pointing at each girl in turn. The girl who falls at the end of the rhyme is chosen by Petteri to be kissed. One or two others then take hold of the girl, while one or two take hold of Petteri. Petteri and the girl kiss – their lips are pressed together for a long time. The other children hold them still by their heads and/or bodies. The girls sometimes try and resist during the kiss, but Petteri doesn’t (717).

These data underscore ways that children use their bodies to seek and express pleasure in socially complex ways within the school context. Heterosexuality and a gender hierarchy are ritualized and reproduced through this game and others that are created by and for children.

6.2 Self-sorting by Gender

In her study of elementary school aged children, Thorne (1993) found that children usually sort themselves by gender. While this finding might lead some people to conclude that gender differences are hard-wired into children, there is

plenty of evidence that they are socially constructed. If gender segregation were hard-wired, children would always segregate regardless of the social context. Thorne found that the degree of gender segregation differed by context: in their neighborhoods, they segregate less than at school. At school, children typically prefer to be in same-gender groups. Gender segregation was more pronounced among children of the same age. Gender segregation was also more common in crowds: the children segregated more on the crowded playground than in classrooms. Children’s self-sorting by gender manifests itself in many ways. Because subject-matter is gendered as discussed above, boys and girls sort themselves into appropriate gendered coursework. This starts very early. Baker-Sperry (2009) studied elementary school children’s gendered agency regarding classroom interactions and learning. She found that boys refused to discuss the book *Cinderella* because it was a “girls’ book.” When boys refused to participate, girls became anxious that the boys were not acting like good students and overcompensated to please Baker-Sperry. She writes, “...it was a ritual of pushing and one-upping on the part of the boys and a much more subtle concern on the part of the girls that this was not acceptable behavior, or that the outcomes would be unpleasant” (45). So the boys rejected material associated with girls, and the girls enacted gendered behaviors to try to correct the problem. Rejecting all things associated with girls can have problematic outcomes for boys. As Diprete and Buchman (2013) show, boys try to appeal to other boys for respect and cultural capital by rejecting all things associated with girls, including trying hard in school. As a result, many boys are underachieving in schools.

But this self-sorting cuts both ways, affecting girls as well as boys. A great deal of scholarship has been published on girls who opt out of subjects associated with boyhood: Science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM subjects. Girls are underrepresented in most STEM fields despite their aptitude for performing well. For example, Archer, DeWitt, Osborne, Dillon, Willis, and Wong (2013) focused on

“science keen girls,” whom they describe as having the requisite skills for excelling in science, and yet who express no interest in pursuing careers in science. Many of these girls aspired instead to careers that emphasized feminine traits, such as caregiving fields like teaching and childcare, and glamorous fields like fashion, modeling, and show business. These science-keen girls rejected their STEM skillset—which, it should be noted, is often economically rewarded within the job market—in favor of more gender appropriate aspirations. Archer, et al. found that girls who *were* interested in science careers were typically middle class, and they spent a lot of time doing identity work to “reconcile” their science interests with their identities as feminine girls. These girls recognized that doing science—a “boy subject”—could mark them as boyish, and they worked to combat that image.

6.3 Boys Negotiating Power and Status

Schools themselves promote heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000), and schools are an important context in which children vie for status (Swain, 2004). Connell has shown that there are multiple masculinities and multiple femininities, with one form of masculinity dominating all others: “hegemonic masculinity.” All boys and men are measured by hegemonic masculinity, even though most boys and men will never accomplish it. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, 844) explain that “To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women.” Women, girls, men, and boys all engage in this policing. Masculinity is embodied and enacted through displays of strength, athleticism, risk-taking, and heterosexual prowess.

Swain (2004) said that earning and maintaining status require a great deal of interactional labor. In his study, Swain finds this about boys’ negotiation of status: “Ultimately, the boys’ position in the peer group is determined by the

array of social, cultural, physical, intellectual, and economic resources that each boy is able to draw on and accumulate” (171). Some schools permit some capital and restrict others. For example, dress codes can limit expression of cultural capital. Sports may be of major importance in some schools, while physical aggression outside of sports may be more common vehicles in others. He says that when masculinity is based on toughness and/or hardness, this status can always be contested. Thus, toughness is not the most stable resource for accomplishing and maintaining status among boys. Most boys in his sample avoided fighting, and many relied on humor and athletic prowess to garner capital instead. Fashion was also important—even when school uniforms were strictly enforced, kids could acquire status through wearing name brand sports gear.

Mora (2012) argues that, in school settings, boys perform heterosexualized masculinity. High status boys dictate which masculinities have more capital. Mora says that interactional dynamics associated with race and ethnicity complicate matters more—ethnic boys put on a “cool pose,” portraying tough exteriors shaped by the “code of the street.” He studied 6th grade boys from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, finding that these boys earned status from other boys through the objectification of women. Renold (2004) found the same thing in her study of non-hegemonic 10–11 year old boys in the UK. These boys failed to live up to the tough, cool boy standard in many ways: They were picked on by popular boys for being too bookish and non-athletic. But even these “othered” boys reinforced dominant masculinities by treating hegemonic boys as the standard. These boys longed to be “normal.” They adopted the misogynist practices of their bullying classmates, rejecting all things feminine, including girls. Renold says that, ironically, “they appeared not to make the connection between the devaluing of femininity more widely and the subordination of non-hegemonic masculinities” (261). Rather than altering the gender regime, non-hegemonic boys actually helped reinforce the traditional order. Because heterosexuality is a major component of

successful masculinity, boys spend a lot of energy addressing it. As Korobov (2005, 228) writes, “adolescence is a time when young men in particular begin to routinely practice forms of heteronormative masculinity that may implicitly or explicitly sanction sexism, homophobia, and ‘compulsory heterosexuality.’”

6.4 Teasing as Policing

Although not all children follow the gender rules at school, there are consequences for those who violate them. Children police the boundaries through teasing. As Hyde and Jaffee (2000, 289) say, children’s peer groups are “fundamentalists about gender conformity.” Thorne (1993) found that children self-segregated by gender in same-age groups, as compared to mixed-age groups. As part of her explanation for this segregation, Thorne noted that same-aged boys and girls who play together are subjected to heterosexualized teasing, calling them “boyfriend and girlfriend.” This teasing was unwelcomed by children, so they did not play together (see also Myers & Raymond, 2010). Mixed-age children were less likely to be teased in this way. In addition to heterosexualized teasing, children also play “cooties” games. For example, if a boy has to sit with girls at lunch, he might be teased by his peers for having caught cooties from the girls. Thorne argued that cooties signify contamination from cross-gender contact, particularly contamination from girls. The notion that femininity is polluting is very old, yet it is reinforced by children’s everyday games.

There is a lot written about the power of teasing among boys for reinforcing the gendered order. As Mora (2012) writes, “On the streets, those who did not defend themselves or seek retribution were ridiculed and called “punks,” “pussies,” “bitches,” and/or “fags”” (443). Pascoe (2005) calls this discourse “fag talk.” In Pascoe’s study, kids used “fag” to mean weak and unmanly. Fag talk was central to boys’ joking discourse. At the same time, however, fag talk was a potent threat—boys could be targeted at any time by anyone. Pascoe writes,

Fag talk and fag imitations serve as a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships... The fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism (330).

Calling someone fag was also a clever way to announce to other boys, “Not it!”

Ramlow (2003, 108) says that homophobic comments are effective because they ultimately demasculinize men: “Being called a ‘faggot,’ a ‘pussy,’ or ‘gay,’ then, is not always or overtly about the material fact of sexual difference or same-sex relations; it is about the failures of heteronormative masculinity.” In name-calling, many boys use “gay” and “girl” interchangeably (Orankys & Maracek, 2009). Indeed, Epstein (1997) argued that, in primary or elementary school, the worst thing a boy could be called is a girl.

Youths’ increasing use of social media and other technologies for teasing each other has led to many studies on the harmfulness of cyberbullying. Through the use of internet technology, children can tease each other outside of school for things that happened at school, and vice versa (Mark & Ratliffe, 2011). For some children, cyber-teasing is overwhelming and leads to self-harm (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013). The 2016 documentary, *Audrie and Daisy* (Cohen & Shenk, 2016), for example, tells the story of two high school Freshman girls from two different towns who experienced the same thing: Both were sexually assaulted at parties and then mercilessly tormented via social media afterwards. Audrie committed suicide after one week, and Daisy struggled for years to get her life back. The internet allows for a new level of heterogendered shaming to occur in a very public, devastating way. And, as film-makers Cohen and Shenk show, perpetrators involved in such incidents often go unpunished.

7 Challenging Gender and Crossing Boundaries

Despite the great pressure on children to conform to the gendered order in their everyday interactions in schools, children do challenge the gendered order too. When they challenge or break the

rules, they help “undo gender” (Deutsch, 2007). Thorne (1993) found that, although most children prefer to play in same-gender groups, some children crossed gender boundaries regularly. In particular, children who were considered to be “tomboys” and “sissies” crossed gender lines as a matter of course. A tomboy is a girl who does “boy stuff,” and a sissy is a boy who does “girl stuff.” Tomboys are considered to be going through a “phase,” which they will eventually grow out of. In the meantime, being a tomboy is not seen as problematic for girls until they reach the age where they “should be” dating boys. At that point, girls are pressured to reject their tomboyhood and embrace conventional heterofemininity. Being a sissy, on the other hand, is never a culturally valued status. Boys come to be seen as sissies when they over-associate with girls—when they become contaminated by femininity. Sissyhood is not seen as something that boys will grow out of, and these boys are teased viciously (Mora, 2012; Oransky & Maracek, 2009; Pascoe, 2005; and Ramlow 2003). Both tomboys and sissies can cross gender lines, then, but both must negotiate costs for doing so. Thorne found other circumstances under which children could cross without costs to their identities. First, popular children could cross without damage to their statuses, because they were insulated by their popularity. Second, boys could do “girl things” without cost if they were only participating to disrupt the girls’ games. For example, they could play house if they mocked the game and the girls while doing so. (Of course, this second type of crossing does not undermine or challenge gender, but instead reinforces it.) And lastly, children in Thorne’s study could cross successfully if they were sincere, persistent, and had the skills to contribute to the gendered activity. Thus, Thorne shows that crossing without contamination is possible, but doing so requires a great deal of negotiation.

Many subsequent studies have focused on crossing (see Renold, 2006; Myers & Raymond, 2010). For example, in their research on middle school children, Risman and Seale (2015) found that a lot of what used to be considered to be challenging to the gender binary is no longer

seen as such. Girls playing sports used to be seen as gender-crossing and now it is normative. Girls can be athletes without contaminating their femininity, as long as they wear dresses occasionally. Wohlwend (2012) studied children’s play negotiations in a kindergarten classroom. In her study, she found two 6 year old boys, Daniel and Anthony, who fit Thorne’s (1993) third category of crossers: Daniel and Anthony frequently pretended to be Disney Princesses, and they did so with sincerity and acumen. Wohlwend shows that crossing for these boys required a lot of extra interactional labor:

During princess play, the boys moved among identity layers in intertexts (1) to pivot to fantasy play worlds where they could enact Disney Princess and fan identities, (2) to anchor their own improvisations of shared meanings and identities in their co-constructed play narratives with other children, and (3) to negotiate power relations in transgressive media play (595).

Although these boys were atypical in this classroom, they crossed successfully and broke down gendered assumptions about who can play what games at school.

Bartholomaeus’s (2011) study of hegemonic masculinity among 6–7 year old boys at an Australian school showed that hegemonic boys recognized and respected gendered boundaries, and they looked to higher status boys as cues for how to act. Nevertheless, these high status boys were also willing to challenge gendered boundaries. When discussing books in class, they sometimes identified with girl characters instead of boy characters. They occasionally played “girl games,” and they adhered to interactional rules usually associated with girls. For example, they argued that it was better to be nice and follow rules than to act up in class. These boys expressed complex gendered ideals. They also reported being subordinated by adult masculinities, which Bartholomaeus argues, is an under-explored problem faced by boys. If adult men sanction gender innovations among boys, it is harder for boys to challenge gendered barriers.

Some children challenge gendered boundaries because the gendered boundary itself is oppressive to them. As Thorne (1993) showed, not all

children prefer to be in same-gender groups. Gender queer and gender nonconforming children may find gender homogenous groups to be hostile to them, and therefore seek out gender diverse groups (see also Risman et al., 2018). As Paechter (2012) says: “Being dominant is hard, continuous work, and for many children it may be a relief not to be caught up in that situation of constant mutual surveillance” (234). As more gender categories open for children at schools, the salience of gender categories themselves will be challenged, and the rigidity of gender structures themselves may become destabilized.

8 Using Empirical Research to Interrupt the Gender Regime at School

Although the gender structures within school are largely stable and have a great deal of constraining power over children’s interactions, we can change them and do things differently. We see that children themselves do gender at school in a variety of ways already. Paechter (2012) encourages researchers to focus on this transgressive actions among students and think about their potential for undermining gender hegemony in schools. Administrators, teachers, and parents can and should make deliberate, educated changes based on empirical research, so that children can have even more freedom to interact in new, innovative, and empowering ways. Teachers can use new pedagogies that remove gendered barriers to certain fields, expand and reward diverse learning styles, and encourage intellectual expression. For example, Archer et al. (2013) show that pedagogy impacts the extent to which girls—particularly poor and ethnic minority girls—identify themselves as scientists. McCoy, Byrne, and Banks (2012) argue that society has associated being a hard-working, serious student with being a girl, and we’ve associated academic disengagement with being a boy. This association harms boys, but we can undermine that by restructuring classroom activities and reward systems: “Adopting

structured activities/concerted cultivation practices normally associated with females has a positive effect on the attitudes of boys towards their schooling—‘playing female’” (175). Therefore, by recognizing, problematizing, and rejecting false gendered boundaries in every aspect of schooling, we benefit children of all genders.

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