# Toward a Reconceptualization of Gender and Power in an Elementary Classroom

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One day I was reading a story to the third and fourth grade students in my classroom in Honolulu, Hawai'i, when one boy said loudly to another boy who was bothering him, "You're such a girl." I questioned the boy about what the comment meant and he reluctantly told me that it was an insult the boys often used against one another, "like calling someone ugly or stupid." I looked at the girls. They showed no visible response. I was as perturbed with their silence as I was with the boy's comments and I asked the girls why they didn't defend themselves. In a voice calmer than my own, a girl responded that they were used to the boys acting like they were better than the girls and that sometimes the girls just ignored it.

I found myself feeling upset about this exchange. It seemed to bear out my worst fears--that the boys actively and aggressively defined the category of "girl" in a degrading manner and that the girls passively accepted this characterization. As a feminist, the idea of girls as passive in the face of male aggression struck a particular chord. My interest in feminism began in the early 1980s when I worked as a college student at a battered women's counseling center. In coming to understand how women from every walk of life could appear at the center's doorstep, I began to read feminist theory that suggested that American society, through the devaluation of women, positions women as people who are legitimate targets of abuse. It was a scenario that resonated with my own experiences growing up. I came to feel that women's acceptance or at least acquiescence to men's violence, demands, and economic and political dominance made passivity a troubling position. When I became a teacher some years later, I hoped to find ways to counter the sexism I expected to see. I entered teaching in 1989 with the perspective of a critical educator (Freire, 1989; McLaren, 1989). My goal was to raise the consciousness of the children I taught, to help them to understand, identify, and root out all traces of sexism and gender inequity, and to create a class of sensitive boys and assertive girls.

Once in my own classroom, it wasn't difficult to find gender at work. Consistent with findings of research conducted in other elementary classrooms, I routinely observed groups of boys commandeering (or attempting to) the computers and class materials, sports equipment and playground space, and the majority of my time and attention (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Thorne, 1993). I regularly heard some of the boys verbally degrade the girls relative to both gender and sexuality and to see degrading or at least stereotyped representations of girls in writing done by boys (Lensmire, 1994; Dyson, 1997). It was also common to see the boys demanding narrowly defined, highly stereotyped masculine behavior from themselves and one another, sometimes through the use of taunts like "girl" or "gay" in order to maintain careful boundaries of what it meant to be a "true boy" (Boldt, 1996; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Ferguson, 2000).

At the same time, girls often seemed to fulfill my worst expectations by seeming to give in to the boys' demands and claiming little or no interest in things the boys claimed as their own. When I would institute fair rotations for sports equipment or computers,

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many of the girls would refuse their turns, saying they weren't interested. When I encouraged the girls to try out for school sports teams, many said they preferred cheerleading. When I assigned group leadership to a girl, she would often quickly acquiesce to an outspoken boy. At times a girl would tell me she didn't like science or math because they were "boys' things."

While most of the time the children seemed fairly satisfied with the interests and activities in which they engaged, I often felt deeply troubled by the choices and opinions the children expressed. It wasn't so much that there was anything wrong, per se, with what the children enjoyed or disliked, but I projected those choices onto a future trajectory--that the girls gave in too easily, compromised too cheerfully, and thus would, in the future, experience themselves as compromised in the important things, like careers, economic status, personal (potentially violent) relationships.

My thinking on these issues began to change as a result of reading Moss's (1989) *Un/Popular Fictions*. Moss argues that there is something deeply problematic about reading girls in school as always endangered, as the special object of our concern, as being unable on their own to engage successfully in society. She contends that positioning girls as "lack" is not particularly helpful to girls and can in fact perpetuate the very disempowered status we are concerned about.

The critical recognition of girls or women positioned as "lack" in western epistemology can be traced to de Beauvoir's 1953 *The Second Sex*. For de Beauvoir , the binary concept of "man" and "woman" positions woman not simply as the opposite of man but the absence or lack of man, the lack of everything that is constructed as powerful and desirable within masculine identity. Indeed, as Butler (1990) states, de Beauvoir sees the human person, the subject within misogynistic epistemology as "always, already masculine, conflated with the universal, differentiating itself from a feminine "Other" [which is] outside the universalizing norms of personhood, hopelessly 'particular', embodied, condemned to immanence" (p. 11). [1]

Walkerdine (1989) offers a powerful example of female as lack in relation to education. When Walkerdine asked teachers to evaluate both girls and boys as mathematicians, she found that boys, even in the face of evidence suggesting the contrary, are consistently evaluated as the possessors of rationality in the form of true understanding and true potential. Girls meanwhile are evaluated as the absence of rationality, with their success in mathematics being devalued by attributing it not to true mathematical understanding but to rote rule following.

After reading Walkerdine's work, I felt challenged to review my thoughts and assessments of each of the third and fourth graders who were my students. Reading through the narrative progress reports I had written each quarter for the children and their parents, I realized that I did indeed speak of girls and boys differently. I praised boys in my class more highly than girls. I spoke of boys as having potential even when there was little performance evidence to point to that. I admired girls' successes less. I saved my highest praise for girls' personalities rather than their accomplishments. I questioned the depth of understanding of even successful female students. Seeing these patterns in my assessments, I began to realize that I was taking those things that were

traditionally part of the "masculine realm" as the norm, the most desired, and that equality primarily meant girls learning to be more like boys and then being able to compete equally in "the male world."

I began to wonder what would happen if I looked at my students very differently, to see what would change in my perception of myself and the children in my class if I interpreted the girls in my class not as passive, as lacking in agency and endangered, but as at least potentially powerful. In this paper I will explore the potential of theorizing both power and gender in the classroom not as possessions or objective descriptions but as performative accomplishments that are in flux and vulnerable to contestation. I begin by documenting my reconsideration of a typical classroom event that helped me to feel that it was at least plausible to view gender relations as more dynamic than that allowed for by my previous subordination/dominance model. I will then suggest the new conceptualization of power that arose for me as a result of re-envisioning what was going on the classroom. I will look at the promise of this for gender equity, but will also highlight limitations of the ways I now see the children using gender. Finally, I will discuss how changing my view of girls as victims and boys as victimizers changed my conceptualization of the role I had played and could play in the classroom. [2]

**Re-Envisioning Gender Exchanges**

One day, not long after I began to look for ways to think about gendered exchanges differently, I was confronted with one of the ongoing hassles of teaching--getting the classroom cleaned up at the end of a messy activity. As I always did, I gave the entire class a quick speech about everyone pitching in and cleaning up quickly so we could get out to recess as soon as possible. Then I watched as most of the boys messed around while most of the girls did the work. As I scolded the boys who consistently avoided helping to clean up the classroom, I realized that secretly I admired their freedom. As I scolded the girls for doing too much, I realized that I not-so-secretly was worrying about the meaning of the girls doing clean-up chores day after day beyond their fair share. I was, I realized, envisioning the girls as passive and as training themselves into a life of serving men. I took the boys' freedom from cleaning as the enviable standard. Perhaps it annoyed me so because I usually hate cleaning and I grew up in a home where cleaning was always the job of my mother, my sister and me. In my home as in many American homes in the 1960s and 1970s, cleaning was simultaneously gendered and devalued. I began to consider that it was not the choice to clean that was itself troubling; it was that cleaning is positioned in the domestic sphere, that is the uncompensated or undercompensated work of women and servants and that this historically loaded scenario was playing itself out once again in my classroom (Tronto, 1993; McClintock, 1995).

I think there is a problem, however, with reading the same behavior--cleaning up the classroom, cleaning at home, cleaning in the past, cleaning in the future--as having always the same meaning. Does the role of "she who cleans" mean the same thing when my mother accepted it, when it was forced onto my sister and me, and when many girls seem to choose it in the context of the classroom? I began to realize that much of my annoyance and worry resulted from the fact that I was operating from an assumption that took male privilege as a given, that I routinely felt that those things which the boys claimed as their own--their interests, desires, and accomplishments--were in fact, really

the best, and that the girls' interests, desires, and accomplishments were second rate. I began then to consider what would change if I saw those who clean in our classroom as the ones who should be envied. There is nothing more inherently satisfying in messing about and getting yelled at than in sharing the camaraderie of others while performing the simple and quick activity of picking up the room, creating a pleasant environment for oneself and getting the praise and gratitude of the others. There is no reason to think that the girls were cleaning up for the boys.

I am not arguing that simply choosing something or finding something as pleasurable or tolerable means that there are no more problems, no more critical questions. How it is that one comes to accept or even desire a certain role or behavior and whether that desire is a good thing for that person is an immensely complicated question. Our choices have histories. People often come to desire things that aren't good for them, that are undervalued, or that are downright dangerous. Clearly there are larger forces at work when most of the girls or most of the boys engage in patterns of behavior. I am trying to sort out, however, five important questions: 1) To what extent is my assessment of the choices made by many girls, their desires or the roles they play, tied to my assumption that boys' choices, desires and roles are the admirable, normal, or powerful ones? 2) To what extent do I judge the choices, desires, and roles of girls as always referring to the boys rather than being self-referential, e.g., cleaning for the boys rather than doing it for the pleasure it brings to themselves? 3) To what extent am I conflating behavior with meaning, assuming that the same action means the same thing in every context or that to choose to do something in a certain context means that one is that thing, trapped into doing it or being it in every context? 4) Do behaviors, desires, and expressions mean only one thing, either clearly positive or clearly negative? 5) To what extent did my interpretation of events aggravate or alleviate the troubling constructions of gender in the classroom?

In the cleaning scenario, I obviously do not know what it meant to each person in my class who chose to clean or not clean, but it now seems obvious that my response to the situation had been exactly as Walkerdine's (1989) research implied--that even when girls were successfully engaging in an activity that I requested or demanded, I interpreted it negatively, as lacking relative to the performance of the boys whose obvious failure--not cleaning when told to clean--I turned into success. What I consistently erased in my assessment was the fact that the behaviors were not uniformly gendered--some girls did not clean and some boys did. In continuing to name this as a gender issue in such a straightforward manner, I may have been giving the children a message that accomplished what it was trying to challenge. That is, I told the children, "Why are you boys playing while the girls are doing all the cleaning?" I was essentially communicating what boys and girls are "like", setting up identity expectations in my criticism of the situation--that boys are those whose identity is formed in opposition to demands made by (largely female) teachers. They are those who are naughty and have fun at the expense of others, while girls are those who cooperate even when it means sacrificing their self-interests in the more valued activities. Why didn't I instead notice the girls who were not cleaning and the boys who were and say, "Why are some of you not cleaning when I told everyone to clean?"

When I accepted that the girls were performing primarily for the boys, I saw the girls as

if they were in a kind of danger from the boys, in danger of being taken advantage of, of growing up servile, or of learning to allow boys and men to take the best of everything. It is an unfair and patronizing understanding of the lives of the girls with whom I worked. At the same time, there is something sad, unfair, and inaccurate about viewing the boys only in this oppositional role, as those who are constantly potentially threatening to the well being of the girls, as themselves having unproblematic relationships with gender norms. It is easy to see the boys, in successfully demanding that they are more deserving of all that they define as "the best," in the light of the larger culture in which some men often successfully demand all that they define as "the best" for themselves. The reality of the feminization of poverty, of violence against women, of unequal protection under the law and in the workplace means that something is, indeed, wrong. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by networks of power that do the gate-keeping for male privilege and to begin to feel that men and boys possess the power. However, re-envisioning the gendered exchanges between my students helped me to understand that conceptualizing power as a doing rather than a possession holds promise for both girls and boys in the classroom community.

**Rethinking Gender, Power, and Agency**

One day a small group of girls came in after recess very upset, and reported to me that the boys would not allow them to play basketball. In the class argument that ensued, a girl suggested as an alternative that there be a rotation drawn up that allowed all the kids to take turns being in charge of different sports equipment and different areas of the playground. Several boys howled in protest. Three of the boys in particular responded with comments like, "But the girls just waste the sports equipment because they're no good at it. They don't use it right. We have the right to that stuff because we're stronger and better at sports. We're bigger and faster than the girls. We play better. It's wasted on the girls."

If power is something that is possessed--either you have it or you don't--and if speech functions as accurately representing that power, then this scene would be very disturbing to me in a way that seems relatively hopeless. If the boys were representing what they really believed about the girls and about themselves and their rights as males, then it seems indeed that the future is not likely to show much improvement in gendered relations.

An alternative view, however, is that categories of identity that substantiate claims of inherent power, categories of gender, sexuality, race and class, do not have inherent meaning but are "performative" and that therefore power is also performative. Butler (1990) describes the performativity of gender as "a doing rather than a being" (p. 25). Gender is a phantasm. Masculinity and femininity do not exist in any body but are ideas that we more or less approximate in our performances of gender. Butler argues that it is not possible to talk about true or natural gender but only to describe the acts that constitute the illusion of natural gender. The illusion is a powerful one; it simultaneously is produced by and is productive of the norms of gender. Performing successfully within norms of gender gives children and adults access not only to the immense power of social sanction, but also to the power of sanctioning those who do not perform gender successfully. However, because these norms are not real or natural, they are susceptible to contestation and change. Power, therefore is likewise a phantasm, not

preexisting its production but produced in the assertion of its reality, its representation of itself as the way things should be or must be. These assertions of power are not of course, equal, but occur in fields of discourse in which they carry more or less weight, more or less plausibility.

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

In the ensuing discussion, the girls ended up responding with two lines of argument. First, they asserted that there are many great women athletes, including a girl in the class who was faster and a better soccer player than any of the boys. The second tact they took was to argue that, at school, things are supposed to be fair.

Their first argument, about good women athletes, was not particularly successful. The boys maintained the ability to define what counted in sports by simply asserting that most male athletes could beat most female athletes any day. Thus, sports was defined as those things that were contests of size and strength. To support the argument that these were the sports that counted, they appealed to professional sports, pointing out the greater amount of money men made in comparison to women, the greater popularity of men's sports, and the number of male athletes in comparison to female athletes. As for the girl in the class who was a good soccer player, they noted that they were not talking about soccer but about basketball.

The second argument the girls made was much more successful, however, because it appealed to discourses about schooling and morality that often came up in their daily lives in our classroom--that school is a place where everyone is supposed to have fair chances. In fact, after the girls shifted to fairness, most of the boys seemed to recognize that they weren't going to carry the argument and turned to another tactic. When one of the boys continued to argue that it was fair for the boys to get the equipment and not the girls, one of his male classmates, who seemed to want to cut their loses, said to him in an urgent tone, "No, no, don't say that. Say something else, like, 'It's fair for the girls to get it some of the time.'" This seems to me to indicate that it is plausible to read the boys' use of gender as not fixed, but as tentative or as strategic.

I now see what the boys were doing as performative, as an attempt at "doing power" (Foucault, 1979, pp.26 - 27; Moss, 1989, p.123). What this suggests is that power be seen as a doing rather than a having, that sexism is a process seeking to attain something rather than being a fixed, predetermined fact. The children's assertions of who they were, who others were, and what must be, were always rather tentative and experimental in that they were put out to a social audience where they may or may not

have been supported. Power claims work when they are affiliated with a whole network of other claims, beliefs, and structures that support and confirm them, make them seem plausible, natural, compelling, or at least invulnerable. Girls and boys at school find themselves in environments shaped by the profession of education, their families, and their teachers, and by race, class, sexuality, and history, that support or invalidate the children's attempts to do power or to resist power claims. That children daily engage in efforts at staking out powerful, efficacious, or at least survivable identities in schools in ways that are sexist, heterosexist, racist, and classist, and in ways that are often ferocious, is something that I take as a given because of my eight years of teaching children. Children, like adults, jockey for position, creating over and over again the story that there are only so many pieces of the privilege pie. The language the children use for it may be, as Bahktin (1981) says, half their own and half someone else's (p.294). In other words, the children do not necessarily generate the categories they use to assert privilege, nor did the idea of identity as oppositional originate with them, but they use the categories in ways that are powerful, local, and personal.

What I newly appreciate is that children in my class are much more aware than I realized of many of the attempts to do power over one another based on claims of superior identity. Certain dominant, degrading stories about who some children have to be because of their group identities are no longer nearly so plausible today. I now think that something has changed after a generation of struggles for gender equity. I believe that all of the children in my class have access to the idea that "girls can do anything boys can do" or that, at the very least, girls should have the right to do anything that boys are given the right to do. Whether or not they always believe it, who is positioned by race, gender performance (Boldt, 1996), religion, or class to use the argument persuasively, the limitations of that claim (some of which I will take up later), and whether or not it always works are matters for further exploration. The point is that the assertions of equal ability or the right to equal access have the potential to be compelling when they have enough support in the broader school context as well as in the broader social context so that the children are able to use them, at least sometimes, successfully.

I now think that when my girls didn't respond to the boy who said that calling someone a girl is the same as calling them stupid or ugly, it wasn't because they believed it about themselves, that they weren't offended or couldn't defend themselves. It is at least plausible to argue that the girls defended themselves too many times already and knew how these arguments went. The boys would say "Girls are stupid." The girls say some version of, "Are not," and the boys say, "Are too," often over and over again. At other times, in other circumstances, the boys might have had much more thoughtful and respectful things to say about the girls. In this circumstance, the boys had no intention of taking reflective positions or of revealing the complexity of their feelings about girls because in that particular use of the statement, "You're such a girl," the boys were trying to achieve something. The girls' attempts to argue back allowed the boys to use the very occasion of the argument "Girls are stupid" to "do power." When the girls took the bait and engaged in the argument, they simply offered the boys another opportunity to assert loudly and repeatedly, for the pleasure and benefit of themselves and many of their peers, that girls are stupid.

The decision of when and to what anyone responds can be a strategic one. Stanley and

Wise (1987, cited in Moss 1989) outline strategies women use in fighting back against sexual harassment, grouping them under headings: reacting against; joining in; letting it pass; and avoiding it. They make the point that only the first is generally recognized as women challenging men, but that the others may be just as effective, and suggest that it is not possible to define what a successful strategy is outside the context of a particular encounter.

Stanley and Wise's argument has led me to look at my students' behaviors less as indicators of "who they are" and "who they will be in the future" and more as potentially powerful and smart strategic responses to a given situation. An example--One day a group of my third grade girls were playing with blocks during free time when suddenly a group of boys came over, knocked over the girls' creation, and took away the blocks they wanted. The girls yelled to me for help. My response was predictable: "Boys, give the blocks back right now. You can't play with blocks for the rest of free time." One interpretation of this sequence of events would be that the familiar patterns of aggression and passivity are being enacted before our eyes. The boys come and take what they want, spreading destruction in their path, and the girls do not directly defend themselves, but call on outside authority for help. However, we might also note that this response was effective and required virtually no effort on the part of the girls. The girls knew how to respond in ways that were deemed appropriate to the identities they were assigned as girls. They knew that if they aggressively leapt on the boys to retaliate they might get in trouble too. This method got the boys in trouble while maintaining their absolute innocence.

Does the use of this passive defense mean that the girls are characterized by passivity, thus rendering the girls powerless in situations when there isn't someone else around to help out? I have discovered that the girls have an entire arsenal of possible responses. A much offended boy reported to me that a group of girls, many of the same who cried out for my help with the pattern blocks, had a fight with him waiting for the bus after school. The boy had taken a pair of girls' underwear from a swim bag and was showing it around. When the small group of girls could not persuade him to stop through pleading, reasoning, insulting and threatening, they punched him until he returned the underwear and promised not to talk about it any more. My response (whether appropriate or not) was something like, "I guess you should have given her underwear back." Female on male violence is rarely taken seriously. The girls were able to manipulate the standard of female identity as mild and passive and use a behavior that would have gotten boys, had they used it, in a great deal of trouble with me.

Seeing the boys' assertions of dominance as attempts rather than actualities allows me to thinking of their versions of masculinitys as a kind of posturing. Their expressions of sexism are actions seeking to attain something and do not have a fixed, predetermined outcome. The boys demand things of the girls, but the girls do not necessarily have to accept their demands, and they often don't. When boys in my class proclaimed themselves to be the greatest, the smartest, the most everything, the girls often seemed unperturbed. Sometimes they said in tones of scorn, "The boys think they are the best at everything." One might begin to wonder whether the bragging of some of the boys doesn't partly reflect the necessity to proclaim loudly that which they think they need, but about which they are less than confident. If a group of boys refuse to allow girls to

play in games, claiming that the girls will ruin their games, I end up wondering whether it is not at least in part the boys' pretenses about who they are--the strongest, the fastest, the smartest--that come under threat when the girls play with them.

**New Boundaries**

Not all girls in every situation could successfully use the tactics I have described, nor were the girls in my school uniformly successful in identifying and defying all the ways that gender was used against them. Again, the students' actions can be thought of as tentative and experimental, working toward achieving a goal they desired. The girls had enough experience in the context of acceptable identities and action at this particular site to have a pretty good guess at how to act efficaciously. As is typical of Hawai'i schools, there was a great deal of ethnic diversity at the school; however, as is typical for private schools (which this was) the students were almost all from well educated middle and upper class families. Most of the children had mothers as well as fathers who were working professionals. The beliefs of parents of both girls and boys that girls should stand up for themselves, that girls should have equal rights, that girls should have a certain kind of toughness, and that boys should respect girls, were regularly expressed by both parents and teachers. Thus, the girls had access to liberal feminist discourses that were generally considered persuasive and desirable at the school and in their homes that allowed them to successfully recognize and refuse many of the boys' assertions of power. The boundaries of what constituted normal behaviors, beliefs, and desires for both boys and girls were different in that context than they would have been in other times and places, and were closely aligned with a feminist idealization of competing successfully in a man's world.

While I was pleased to newly perceive the girls as more powerful and more intelligent about what was going on than I previously expected, it would be a mistake to see this as now unproblematic. While gender boundaries for themselves may have been expanded, the liberal feminist discourse they drew from did not call the construct of gender itself into question in a sustained way. In other words, the children were not suggesting that gender is an illusion and therefore there is no set of behaviors that can be truly attributed to femininity or masculinity. Although at times it seemed that they were arguing this, as when someone would claim, "Boys or girls can do whatever they want," I believe that most often what they were suggesting was that boundaries of gender just needed to shift or to be wider. Both girls and boys routinely expressed opinions that there are things that are more natural to girls--art, music, reading, writing, dancing, certain kind of imaginary play, interest in animals, and being helpful and cooperative with the teachers--and things that are more natural to boys--sports, "being rascally," interested in gross things and violence, math and science. While at times both girls and boys would defend themselves or one another by appealing to the argument, "Boys or girls can do whatever they want," it was probably more often true that the children put pressure on themselves and on one another to perform within accepted gender boundaries.

I am not arguing that the results of power played out the same for girls and for boys. There were important differences. One difference was that girls' attempts to render the entire category of "boy" as abject through phrases such as, "All boys are dumb" didn't go far because of the obvious privilege and admiration boys received for being boys. The

boys had far more success in appealing to American culture in demeaning the entire category of girl. One of the boys, for example, used the argument that women were never the president of the United States to bolster his argument that boys were always better than girls and the girls found the argument cast in these terms difficult to rebut. The children were aware that maleness does continue to be privileged in highly public, powerful, and lucrative ways and this knowledge had an impact on the success of their arguments.

A second difference was that in some ways, the girls had more latitude for variation in behavior and interests. A girl could excel at sports, computers, or math, for example, and still escape taunting and criticism. For a girl to be interested in or achieve in what was typically seen as being "a boy's thing" had a logic to it, since to begin with the boys' realm was more highly valued and rewarded. It also had a name, "tomboy," that was at least sometimes viewed with admiration. However, given that any movement by a boy toward the feminine world was a move away from power and privilege, for a boy to assert interest in the pastimes, desires, or stylizations that marked femininity was incomprehensible. There are children's literature books available to the children that showed boys in gender bending roles. *William's Doll* (1972), in which a boy desires to play with a doll, is an example of this. As was the case for others who have attempted to use this book (Greever, Austin, & Welhousen, 2000), children in my class largely found the text to be unconvincing. It may certainly have been the case that some children found books such as *William's Doll* to be hopeful or inspiring. The book did not carry enough weight, however, to change dominant classroom discourse about what interests were acceptable for boys. While the children were able to say the things I wanted to hear in class, "Yes, its okay for a boy to play with a doll," in practice a child who appealed to that book was likely to hear a retort such as, "William was a big sissy and so are you!"

In fact, the only explanations that were offered for children and particularly boys who were too consistently gender bending, whether in a book or in the classroom, was that the child was "weird" or "gay" (a term the children mostly used for boys but used occasionally for girls). The performance of gender is restricted for both girls and boys by the requirements that their gender also must perform heterosexuality (Bulter, 1990, 1993). Both boys and girls do power by positioning themselves as having correct gender and thus correct sexual performances over and against those who don't--the "tomboy" girls and the "effeminate" boys. I have argued that there are discourses available that allow some girls wider latitude than existed a generation ago in acceptable gendered behavior and at the primary school level, I rarely heard a "tomboy" girl's sexuality called into question. I have seen little change in the boundaries of acceptable "maleness" and "effeminate" boys were consistently harassed. [3] There are no widespread or powerful discourses available to most kids in school that address the connections made between gender and heterosexuality or homosexuality. Therefore, there are few ways that a child whose interests are deemed abnormal for her/his physical sex can defend her/himself (Boldt, 1996).

Finally, criticizing some of the limits of gender norms did not necessarily cause the children to be critical about using identity categories to set off their own identities from those they saw as "outside." The gendered interests and stylizations that were seen as within the range of normal for the children were also those that were seen as normal

within their social class. When we came into contact with other schools, on field trips for example, the children sometimes expressed surprise, dismay, or disdain for the behavior and appearance of children who they identified as from lower class schools. This was especially the case when something was at stake. For example, when the school basketball team was defeated by a team from a neighboring public school, the children complained that the players were abnormally big because (unlike the private school boys) public school boys were dumb and had been flunked, that students who were only supposed to be eleven-years-old were really fourteen. Hawaiian and Samoan boys outside the school were seen as abnormally big, tough, and dangerous, while Hawaiian boys who were students at the school (and from middle/upper class families) were often seen as having desirably masculine but not "out of control" or "threatening" bodies (Boldt, 2001). Cheerleaders from competing schools were criticized as not small and refined enough. Both female and male public school bodies were thus criticized in highly stereotypic, gendered terms as unsightly, undesirable, and indicating "low class."

**Teaching and Learning**

I entered teaching with the perspective of a critical educator. That is, believing myself to have a better understanding of the perils of sexism, I was determined to fix sexism and inequity in and out of my classroom, in the present and in the future. When I worked to set up equitable systems in the classroom, making sure that everyone had equal access to all of the computer equipment, for example, and then I saw a girl declining to take advantage of this and choosing to play pet store owner with other girls instead, I was convinced that the girl had made the wrong decision, even when she declared herself to be happy and well occupied. I now believe that many of the concerns I have felt about the children in school were not in response to the context and contours of actual incidents, but largely because of the common adult perception of childhood as a dangerous, fragile time (Cannella, 1997; Burman, 1994). Contemporary discourses of "the child" positions children as "incomplete" and "immature", as progressing toward the goal of being an adult, but as being in need of adult help to navigate this treacherous and important time. If we adults don't figure out how to "do it right" today, then we have damaged the children's future and the future of our society. We indulge in the developmentalist fantasy that today is always about what might be tomorrow. One version of this is that if children, and particularly boys, are not taught the correct enactment of masculinity today, they will grow up to be gay. My own version of it was that even if the children experienced themselves as efficacious and happy today, they would surely fall into danger, meanness, and misery in the future if all traces of sexism were not immediately expunged. Both positions fail to acknowledge that they are themselves claims to authority that allow adults to discipline children, ignoring what the children think, feel, want, and experience today, by claiming that as adults we have a more highly developed understanding of "the big picture."

For me to look at children's understanding of gender and declare it "immature" or "still developing" only works if I believe that adults' systems of understanding are more true than children's. However, I believe all performances gain legitimacy not through a basis in truth but through a relationship to power. I certainly would not claim that most adults have a fairer and freer vision of gender relations than most children I know. In fact, my students have surprised me many times by how conscious and articulate they are about inequities. Heidi, a nine-year-old student, reported to me that it is unfair that

every Saturday, her father wakes her brother at 6 a.m. to take him outside and practice baseball and that afterwards they go to breakfast together. Both girls and boys recognized and were able to discuss gender stereotypes when used in literature and sometimes when they were used in class. On several occasions, girls in my class talked to me about teachers who blatantly favored boys. Sometimes they asked me to help them because they quite rightly feared the consequences if the adult became angry with them for raising the issue. At times, I was the adult who caused them trouble, by being blind and stubborn about my own limitations or by holding to a version of events that reflected my self interest rather than theirs.

Teachers can help children who are contesting gendered claims. When things were presented as options in the classroom, I learned to make an effort to understand why children made the decisions they did and to respect the decisions when the children expressed satisfaction with them. I learned to praise and admire the children, regardless of gender, who did what I required for community well being, and to hold the others all accountable. The question for me became not about the specific interests and stylizations through which children signaled and embodied gender, but whether the stories and ideas the children and I used to make gender a meaningful identity were respectful toward others and made space for the children's own agency.

I learned to take a more thoughtful view of what children (and adults) were doing when they made statements that invoked gender norms. Thinking of these as a doing of power led me to consider that just as the boys often knew they were being unfair when they asserted that girls were stupid or incompetent, that when children invoked race or class that these representations could also be examined, contested, and refused. It was effective for children to be able to repeat my words to each other or even to me, "It doesn't matter what happens elsewhere; in this classroom, we will always work to make things fair." While I might have worried about students taking positions that I found to be stereotyped or inequitable, I learned to focus my attention on the present, on insisting on fairness in the classroom. When the claims of privilege depended on creating a stereotyped "other"-- fantasies about what kids from neighboring schools or families from other parts of town -the children came to expect that either I or one of them would ask the question, "Do you think you'd say that if the person was in this class? What if that person was your friend? Can you imagine ways they might respond to you?" Even having those discussions, I knew that there was no way I could predict or control what actually happened when the children were outside our classroom.

Finally, I also had to question my idealization of myself as the heroic teacher and to question the intensity with which I scrutinized the children's relationships with one another. While the children tease one another and contest one another's right to behave in certain ways, the competition is on more even footing than is the relationship they have with the teacher. That is, teachers, in our taken-for-granted authority over students' lives, have great potential to enact truly damaging discrimination on children. As the teacher, I have the power both to make their daily lives at school fairly miserable and to issue the opinions and reports to the children, their parents, and other teachers and schools that construct children as successful or failing in the official business of school.[4]

**Conclusions**

Gender performed by the boys often positions them as possessors of the identity, interests, traits, and abilities that are to be understood as universally desired and superior. The identity of "girl", with the interests, traits, and abilities that are seen as accompanying "girlness", is thereby positioned as devalued. Masculine power is consolidated by its claims that it is unproblematically positive for those that hold it. What I have argued in this piece, however, is that gender identity is imposed with limitations, foreclosures, losses, and punishments for everyone. It also holds potential for everyone. My students and I enact this potential when we (constantly) use gender as a site for producing power. We experience our lives as pleasurable and intelligible in part because our sense of identity allows us to attribute meaning, order, and sense to our lives. Our constructions of gender bring us pleasure, desire, and belonging, but they also bring us experiences of exclusion, degradation, humiliation, and loss. We limit others and we are stymied by the limits of what we have created.

Those limits are not inevitably absolute. If power is indeed a tentative performance--a doing rather than a having--then it is also something that can, at times be turned back. If an act of power is predicated on placing me in a less advantageous or degraded position, the first kind of turning back is the refusal to believe that the degradation accurately represents me. Even if unspoken, this is the "am not" part of the "am not - are too" argument. The second turning back is the ability to effectively rebuff the action that was predicated on the degradation, what the other person was trying to achieve. This refusal depends largely upon whether one finds support in the larger social and institutional audience. Providing that support is one of the most important and legitimate ways I can use my authority in the classroom.

I went into teaching looking to cure sexism and injustice in my tiny piece of the world. In the experience of teaching, I came to question my utopian belief that everyone could agree on what fairness would look like and once they did, everyone would be happy. What I found in the real life of the classroom was that to the contrary, fairness wasn't always easy to define. I found that to be fair did not necessarily mean to be happy. I came to understand that for the children to accept that "Boys and girls are equal" meant that sometimes some children would have to give up claims to proprietary privilege. That interests aren't natural to gender also threatened the pleasure that the children felt in their expressions of normative gender. Finally, I discovered that I was as likely (whether unconsciously or consciously) to hold unjustifiable opinions about how gender functioned in the classroom as the children were.

Categories of identity are dependent upon defining what one is and therefore boundaries and exclusions, while contestable, are always reestablished. I discovered that for me, the greatest expression of teaching came not through the impossible task of defining the perfectly just identity position, but through a commitment to the daily well-being of my students that caused me to be constantly willing to explore and expand "the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world (Butler, 1993, p.22). This was carried out through attending with new respect to the children's opinions, needs, and understandings, through learning to listen to them and take their positions seriously, and through the deliberate struggle to help the children and myself to maintain a sense of shared community and humor amidst the conflicts.

Heidi, the girl who one day expressed her disappointment that her father never thought about playing baseball with her, said to me a few days later, "I'm usually glad that my dad doesn't get me up early to play ball. My brother hates it a lot of the time. While I'm sleeping in and watching cartoons in the air conditioning, my brother is out there sweating and getting yelled at." Heidi's comments struck me as important in many ways. Thinking more about her situation, she was able to identify for herself and for me the understanding that gender is imposed upon both her and her brother, and that it wasn't straightforward that it was only a good thing or a bad thing for either of them. Heidi may have felt badly about herself, her father, or their relationship, because her father didn't play with her as he did her brother, but in identifying it as unfair, Heidi seemed to be indicating that she didn't believe that she deserved, by virtue of being a girl, to be treated that way. It is plausible to read Heidi as refusing to accept the position she was in as accurately representing her identity. I don't know whether Heidi questioned her parents or tried to contest the issue, so I don't know if she would have been able to successfully contest her positioning in a way that would have changed the way she was treated if she could have made an argument that was convincing to her social audience, and neither was it clear that she wanted to be treated differently. I do think, however, that Heidi would have liked to have had the opportunity for that or other special treatment from her father (and maybe, indeed, had it, but didn't recognize it).

There was a time when I believed that because I was an adult who was able to judge children's experiences against adult realities, I had the responsibility to interpret and educate my students into the true meanings of their lives. It now seems at least as reasonable to believe that if the girls and boys in my class experience their own conceptualizations of gender as sometimes efficacious and sometimes limiting (of themselves and others), if they experience gender as a contested category of privilege, then the struggle is well engaged. The things about gender that are taken for granted and the things that are disputed are constantly changing as boundaries shift and new possibilities and limitations are found. In the end, it doesn't matter what we want, desire, or are interested in. It doesn't matter what our physical stylizations or even identified skills and talents are. It does matter if some people are interpreted or forced into accepting, desiring, embodying, or being especially good at roles that are morally, economically, spiritually, politically, or physically devalued. The struggle to recognize the potential, the limits, and the problems of our own or others' power therefore continues to be a vital one.

**Notes**

1 I am aware, via Butler's (1990) analysis, of Irigaray's (1985) argument in response to de Beauvoir that the female is not the male's "Other" because the terms of both the male and the other are defined via masculine prerogative within the phallogocentric economy. For Irigaray, the female simply does not and cannot exist in (and therefore cannot be contained by) phallogocentric language. As Butler so eloquently argues throughout *Gender Trouble* (1990), the continued use of binary categories by critical theorists runs the risks of sustaining exactly the exclusions and limitations we are hoping to overcome and Irigaray's critique of de Beauvoir is helpful in pointing out this concern. Nevertheless, I find de Beauvoir's identification of "female as lack" to be very useful as a description of a

dominant and powerful construction of gender. Understanding it as a description that clarifies a sustaining logic of masculine privilege is a useful tool, as I hope to show, in thinking about challenging this privilege.

2 The report of episodes and conversations with and among my students that appear throughout this article come from notes I wrote, usually on the same day, about things that happened in my elementary classroom that struck me as particularly interesting, puzzling, or troubling. The notes were taken for purposes of keeping records that I used as the classroom teacher primarily in communicating with students, their parents, and other school personnel about a child or an event or for writing the children's thrice-yearly narrative progress reports. I also used the notes in a reflective way, to think about my teaching and to plan for improved instruction or communication with the children. In other words, my purposes in note taking were the purposes of a teacher and not of a researcher. Although I was a doctoral student in education during many of the years I taught elementary school and I occasionally wrote about or discussed classroom events, I firmly rejected the idea that I was in my classroom as a researcher. My primary responsibility was as the teacher. While some of the questions I asked or activities I undertook as a teacher were also interesting to me as I theorized about my classroom, this consideration was purely coincidental to my teaching decisions. Because I had a full-time co-teacher in the classroom, I often consulted with him about events of the day prior to writing my notes. Nevertheless, what I found puzzling or interesting enough to write about, how I remembered things, and what I noticed or failed to notice in the end may tell more about me than about my students. However, as I hope becomes clear, this article ends up being more about changes to my interpretations of the students than about the students themselves.

3 For a more in-depth discussion of the sexuality and the role of "tomboy", see Boldt (1996).

4 Indeed, the questions about the teacher's role in the creation of school success and failure relative to expectations we enact about gender, classroom behavior, and curriculum, are not discussed here. These are critically important questions and are being widely explored within education. The focus of this paper is my changing perspectives on children's social negotiations of gender in the classroom and where that has taken me as a classroom teacher dealing constantly with this "unofficial" but central part of children's experiences of schooling.

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