BEING A GIRL AND BEING A BOY: THE VOICES OF MIDDLE SCHOOLERS © 2006

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A sixth grade girl feels pressure from her parents and teachers to excel in school. But when she does well, she has trouble finding a date to the school dance and her peers call her a "nerd." She starts to participate less often in class discussions and doesn't study as much as she used to study.

-6th grade Hispanic female, urban charter middle school

"Boys have more sports available and can play them better. It's fair to say that we are better athletes than girls."

-7th grade white male, suburban middle school

These words sound like all-too-familiar artifacts of an American society where gender stereotypes limited options. After more than 30 years of Title IX and gender equity research and training, today's educators may feel a sense of satisfaction that such gender restrictions are a vestige of the past. But celebration might be premature. The above vignette and quote are far from vintage; they come from pens of today's middle school students. This study explored the gender lives of students, and in their eyes, gender stereotypes continue to be a major part of their world.

Clearly, the picture is not totally bleak, and some real progress has been made. Before Title IX, schools typically sex-segregated classes: girls learned to cook in home economics, boys learned to build in shop; boys were encouraged to take math and science courses, while girls were dissuaded or even prevented from enrolling in such courses. Only one percent of school athletes were girls. It was not a pretty picture. Today, girls cannot legally be discouraged from taking science classes or prevented from joining the math club. On sports fields, more than 40% of athletes are girls (NCWGE, 2002). Gender equity work has indeed resulted in expanded opportunities and achievements. So it is not surprising that to many adult eyes, traditional sex

stereotypes and inequities are gone. In fact, a backlash movement has advanced the notions that not only are these stereotypes gone, but that girls now "rule" in school (Gurian & Stevens, 2005; Sommers, 2000). Even if educators do not believe in the backlash argument, they often do not see or understand how gender impacts the lives of their students (Bailey, Scantlebury, & Letts, 1997).

The first-person accounts of over 400 middle school students presented in this study bring a renewed energy to the need for gender equity efforts. Their words suggest that much of the gender equity movement has fallen far short of its goals, and that both girls and boys experience a world that is more similar than different to the one that existed a generation ago.

Spencer, Porche, and Tolman (2003) suggest that a crucial step toward gender equity is understanding gender as a set of ideologies into which girls and boys are socialized in myriad, unseen ways. So how do males and females perceive and experience gender roles in and beyond school? The voices of adolescent students themselves provide some illuminating answers.

Perspective/Theoretical Framework

Schema theory provides a lens for understanding gender roles and experiences. Deriving from social psychology research, gender schema refers to "non-conscious hypotheses about sex differences that guide people's perceptions and behaviors, leading men and women alike to overvalue males and undervalue females" (Valian, 1998, p.2). Scholars have delineated how gender schema serves to advantage whites, men, heterosexuals—and members of any groups that have historically been the recipients of conferred dominance in a given society (Arnoson, 2002; Johnson, 2001; McIntosh, 1988). Accordingly, gender schemas lead us to often unwittingly expect and provide greater advantages for males in schools and society and explain why many

gender inequities go unnoticed as taken-for-granted practices or embraced as “natural” gender role behaviors.

Why is it considered masculine to be aggressive and intelligent? What is it considered feminine to be to be nurturing and intuitive? Why are art, languages, and music considered feminine subjects in school, while math, science, and technology are thought of as male domains? Are there innate differences? Do females and males receive different treatment in schools? Why?

Research suggests that in most ways, especially biologically, boys and girls are more similar than different and that gender stereotypes and expectations have a developmental history that starts with learned notions of femininity and masculinity (Campbell & Storo, 1994; Harter, 1990; Hyde, Fennema, & Lamon, 1990). From the moment infants are identified as female or male, the development of a gendered identity begins as they experience familial, societal and cultural interactions. Girls are rewarded for being polite, behaving well, and looking pretty, while boys are reinforced for their accomplishments, assertiveness, and winning (Golombok & Fivush, 1994; Schau & Tittle, 1985; Vogel, Lake, Evans & Karraker, 1991). Interests also become gender-identified: it is assumed “natural” for girls to be interested in dance, art, reading, and writing and for boys to be interested in mathematics, science, technology, cars, and airplanes. In fact, these interests are learned (Steele, 1997; Winn & Sanna, 1996). It is society’s emphasis on gender difference that creates separate values, beliefs and assumptions for girls and for boys.

Methods

This study was designed to offer insights into how gender impacts identity development as well as life for females and girls in and out of schools. Although a great deal has been written about the impact of gender on the development of boys and girls, many of these accounts are derived from adult insights and perceptions (Campbell & Storo, 1994; Seavey, Katz & Zalk, 1975; Shau & Tittle, 1985; Steele, 1997; Winn & Sanna, 1996). There are some notable studies departing from that approach, asking children themselves to report their personal views and experiences of gender roles (see Brown, 2003; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Mee, 1995; Pollack, 1998; Spencer, Porche, and Tolman, 2003; Thompson & Grace, 2001).

Two relevant studies of student perceptions of gender reveal that both middle school boys and girls had more positive things to say about being a boy than being a girl (Mee, 1995; Michigan State Board of Education, 1991). When over a thousand Michigan elementary school students were asked to describe what life would be like if they were born a member of the opposite sex, over 40 percent of the girls saw positive advantages to being a boy, from better jobs to more respect. Ninety-five percent of the boys saw no advantage to being a female, and a number of boys in the study indicated they would consider suicide rather than living life as a female (Michigan State Board of Education, 1991). When researcher Cynthia Mee asked 1500 middle school students about gender role benefits and disadvantages, both genders had more positive things to say about being a boy than being a girl. This study followed and contributed to such an authentic methodological path by adapting the gender role questions asked in the Mee study to further probe issues that males and females experience during daily school life.

This study surveyed 440 students in five diverse middle schools about the advantages and drawbacks of each sex. Specifically, students were asked via a questionnaire to write a brief

description of the “best” and “worst” thing about being a boy and the “best” and “worst” thing being a girl. All students were asked all four questions, so that each student not only evaluated his or her own gender, but the other as well.

Recognizing that something important may be lost when beliefs and feelings are forced into a few fixed categories created by a researcher, these questions were open-ended items. The open-ended "statementaire" encouraged respondents to express their views honestly, in their own language and in their own voices. For this study, open-ended responses were thematically analyzed by two raters working independently. When differences arose, raters worked to reach a consensus, and an inter-rater reliability of .95 was achieved.

Because the sample was purposeful rather than random, results were first examined separately for each school, and then for the entire sample. Descriptive statistics and content analysis informed the data analysis. Frequencies, cross tabulation, and Pearson chi square were tabulated, as appropriate. Student data were reviewed for significant differences across sex, race, and school. A significance level of $p \leq .01$ was established. Throughout the analyses, quantitative findings were highlighted by relevant narrative data.

Student results demonstrated strong congruence, yielding few significant differences from sub-group comparisons. No significant differences were found by race, and only a few significant differences by gender or school emerged on several items. Such uniformity in responses across sub-groups suggests that students share similar beliefs and experiences related to gender roles. The few significant differences are noted in data figures with an asterisk and discussed, as appropriate, in the presentation of findings.

Data Sources

This study focused on middle schools for several reasons. First, middle school is a critical time for gender identity development. Furthermore, while the seeds of gender bias or equity may be planted in elementary school, they take root and can become evident in middle schools.

Students in five public middle schools in Maryland, Virginia, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia were recruited for participation. The participating schools vary in geographical location as well as in racial/ethnic and class diversity. All schools are coeducational, public institutions receiving federal assistance, including one charter school. Four hundred forty students in grades 6 through 9 completed the questionnaire items.

Table 1 **Sample Demographics**
Students (N=440)

Demographic Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent of Sample**
Gender		
Female	223	51%
Male	217	49%
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	179	41%
Black, non-Hispanic	157	36%
Hispanic	71	16%
Asian/Pacific Islander	27	6%
American Indian	6	1%

Sample Demographics by School

School A VA Suburban Middle School (grades 6-8)

Students (N=71)

Demographic Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent of School Sample**
Gender		
Female	33	46%
Male	38	54%
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	17	24%
Black, non-Hispanic	13	18%
Hispanic	29	41%
Asian/Pacific Islander	12	17%
American Indian	0	0%

School B MD Suburban Middle School (grades 6-8)

Students (N=78)

Demographic Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent of School Sample**
Gender		
Female	42	54%
Male	36	46%
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	60	77%
Black, non-Hispanic	6	8%
Hispanic	2	3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	9	12%
American Indian	0	0%

School C DC Urban Middle School (grades 6-8)

Students (N=110)

Demographic Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent of School Sample**
Gender		
Female	56	51%
Male	54	49%
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	0	0%
Black, non-Hispanic	100	91%
Hispanic	10	9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0%
American Indian	0	0%

School D DC Urban Middle Charter School (grades 7-9)

Students (N=72)

Demographic Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent of School Sample**
Gender		
Female	44	61%
Male	28	39%
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	4	6%
Black, non-Hispanic	38	53%
Hispanic	26	36%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	6%
American Indian	0	0%

School E WI Rural Middle School (grades 6-8)

Students (N=109)

Demographic Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent of School Sample**
Gender		
Female	47	43%
Male	62	57%
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	98	90%
Black, non-Hispanic	0	0%
Hispanic	3	3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	2%
American Indian	6	6%

Response Rates

Response rates are a concern in survey research. If a high proportion of participants do not respond, caution must be heeded in generalizing results (Heiman, 2001; Neuman, 2000). Survey researchers disagree on what constitutes an adequate response rate. *Adequate* is a judgment that depends on the population, practical limitations, the topic, and the response with which specific researchers feel comfortable (Babbie, 2001; Neuman, 2000). Since response rates for self-administered questionnaires (e.g., those distributed to a class, and the method adopted for this study) are typically higher than those of mail or telephone surveys (Babbie, 2001; Neuman, 2000), a response rate of at least 80 percent was desired for this study.

The initial research proposal called for inviting 20 percent of students from each school to complete the survey. However, school principals and cultures concerned with privacy and disruption of daily classroom activities limited access to students, and smaller samples were

obtained. Fortunately, these samples remained generally representative of the larger school demographics and represented a high response rate.

Table 2 **Sample Size and Response Rates**

	Surveys Given	Surveys Returned	Response Rate	Percent of School Population Surveyed
School A				
Students	74	71	96%	10%
School B				
Students	100	78	78%	9%
School C				
Students	118	110	93%	22%
School D				
Students	77	72	94%	13%
School E				
Students	109	109	100%	19%

Study Limitations

As with any research, this study has several limitations.

1. Students were selected for participation through a purposive sample from 5 coeducational middle schools. Lack of a random sample restricts the generalizability of findings.
2. Middle school students were surveyed. Findings must be generalized with caution to other educational levels, including elementary and high schools and higher education, as well as private and single-sex schools.
3. Findings and conclusions are based on responses from student questionnaires. Due to lack of school administrators' consents and researcher constraints, student interviews

and observations were not conducted. Interviews and observations would have allowed the researcher to follow-up on survey questions for clarifications or additional insights.

Results

Overview

Findings reveal that gender plays a significant role in the lives of middle school students, expanding some options, but more often limiting the academic and social development of females and males.

Both sexes had more positive things to say about being a boy than being a girl. Male advantages focused on physical and athletic prowess, career choices, intelligence, and the absence of things female. Students easily described male entitlements, the special privileges that come to boys just for being boys. Students wrote that boys were listened to more, allowed to do more, had the dominant role in marriage, received greater respect, and that male sports received greater funding and more attention. More than one in ten students wrote that one of the best things about being a boy was not being a female, and frequently cited perils of female biology, including periods and childbirth.

When students were asked to describe the worst thing about being a boy, they listed fighting, discipline, poor grades, fear of homophobia and difficulty with friendships and emotions. Yet, male privilege remained evident in one common response to what is the worst thing about being a male: “nothing.”

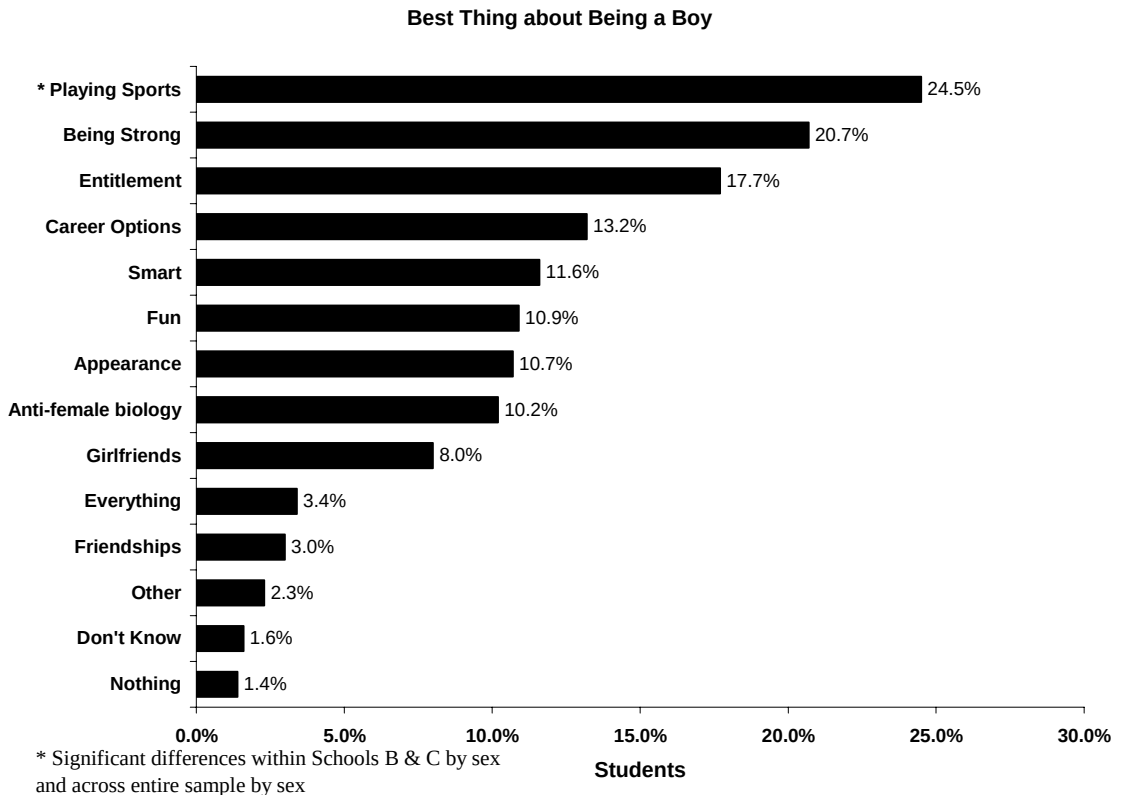
Students (male and female) consistently reported that girls get easier treatment in school, are the better students, and are less likely to get into trouble. Non-academic best things about being a girl included: appearance (clothes and makeup), emotional expressiveness, and shopping. Yet, nearly 1 in 5 students wrote “nothing” to describe the best thing about being a girl.

Students had little difficulty identifying negative aspects of being female. Relational aggression (gossip, spreading rumors, and unable to trust friends) was the most common problem. Girls also noted their deliberate efforts to take easier courses, perform poorly on tests and assignments, and "act dumb" to gain popularity or have a boyfriend. Girls further expressed frustration at being the "second class gender," describing limited career options, responsibility for domestic chores, and the fear of sexual harassment/rape.

The Best Thing about Being a Boy

Both boys and girls were asked to complete the open-ended sentence: "The best thing about being a boy is…." Figure 1 depicts the responses offered by students.

Figure 1



Sports topped the list of the best thing about being a boy, cited by almost one out of four students. More than one out of five students indicated being strong was an important male trait.

Students further indicated that boys naturally excelled at sports more than girls, and that their strength enabled them to handle tough situations better than girls. Taken together, these two responses—sports and being strong—indicate the central role physicality plays for boys.

Another response given quite frequently (17.7%) concerned entitlement, the special privileges that come to boys just for being boys. Students wrote that boys were listened to more, allowed to do more, had the dominant role in marriage, received greater respect, and that male sports received greater funding and more attention. A related male advantage was the future economic and prestigious career options available to males. Students described how men earn more money than women, are corporate leaders, and can become president of the United States.

Being smart, fun, and appearance were other male advantages. Students wrote that boys were brighter, had fewer things to worry about, had a better sense of humor, and did not have to worry about clothes to be considered attractive. More than one in ten students wrote that one of the best things about being a boy was not being a female, and how not having periods or going through child birth were real advantages. Almost one in ten indicated that having a girlfriend was a best, and described the positive feelings that were associated with being liked by girls. Other comments discussed friendships, and the fewer cliques and more natural friendships boys enjoyed. Some student indicated that simply everything about boys was better.

Several significant findings for "sports" emerged by sex. Both sexes recognized the central role of sports in the male role, but boys cited it significantly more often than girls. (See Table 3)

Table 3 Within Schools: Sex Differences in Students Identifying Playing Sports as the Best Thing about Being a Boy

School	Male Students Identifying Playing Sports	Female Students Identifying Playing Sports
School A	21.1%	18.2%
*School B	36.1%	7.1%
*School C	29.6%	8.9%
School D	51.9%	31.1%
School E	22.6%	31.%
**All Schools/Entire Sample	30.0%	19.3%

* Significant difference between student male and female responses within School B and within School C

** Significant difference between male and female responses across the entire sample

Across the entire sample, 30 percent of boys mentioned sports as the best thing about being a boy, but only 19.3 percent of girls cited it in their responses ($p = .009$, $X^2 = 6.76$). Within schools, boys and girls in schools B and C provided significantly different answers. In school B, an affluent suburban school, 36.1 percent of males, but only 7.1 percent of females included sports in their answers ($p = .002$, $X^2 = 9.98$). The boys in this school were more likely than the boys in the rest of the sample to include sports, while the girls in this school were less likely. For school C, a poor, urban school, the difference between males (29.6%) and females (8.9%) including sports in their responses was also significantly different ($p = .006$, $X^2 = 7.63$). The reason why such seemingly disparate schools should each have similarly wide differences is far from obvious.

Table 4 gives a representative sampling of themes describing the best things about being a boy in the students own words.

Table 4 **Student Comments: Best Thing about Being a Boy**

Playing Sports
"Boys have more sports available and can play them better. It's fair to say that we are better athletes than girls." -7th grade, white male, suburban middle school
"Sports is what it's all about." - 8th grade, Hispanic male, suburban middle school
Strong
"Muscles." - 7th grade, Hispanic male, suburban middle school
"Boys are strong and can handle tough things." - 8th grade, black female, urban middle school
Entitlement
"Boys are listened to much more than girls are. Boys' ideas matter." – 7th grade, black female, suburban middle school
"Boys' sports teams are funded more and get more attention." - 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school
"Boys are never told no because they are a girl." - 8th grade, black female, urban middle school

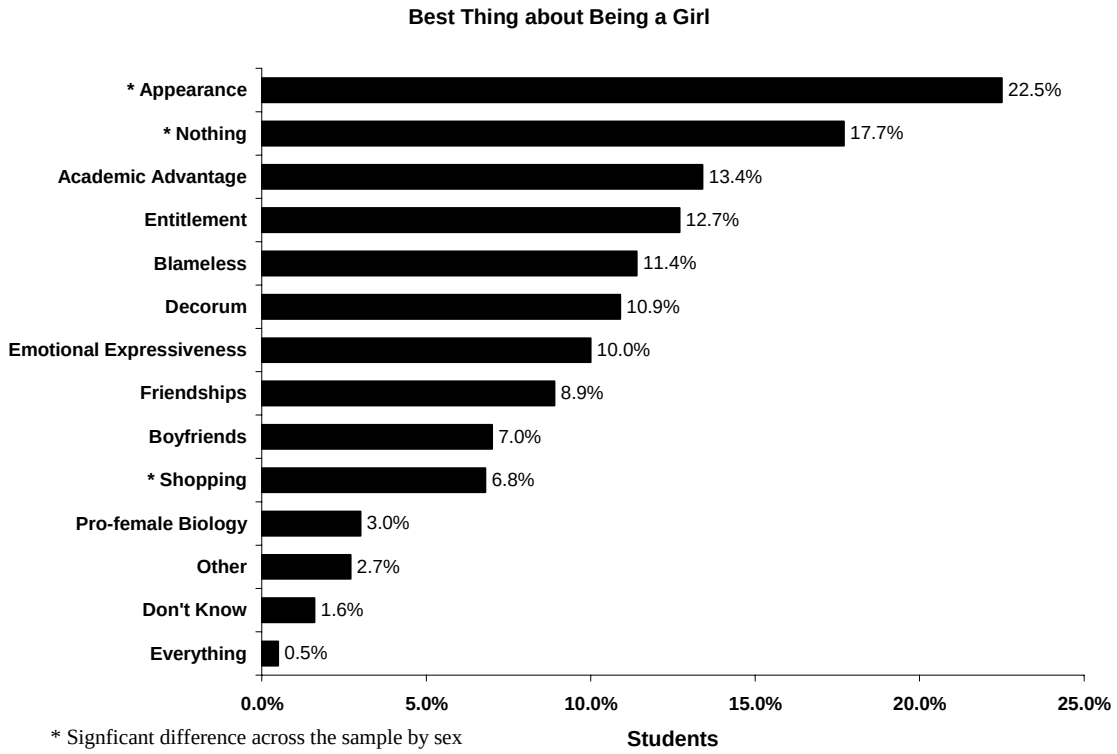
The Best Thing about Being a Girl

Both boys and girls were asked to complete the sentence: "The best thing about being a girl is…." Figure 2 depicts the responses provided by students.

Mentioned most often as the best reason for being a girl was appearance (22.5%). Appearance comments included choosing clothes, hair styles, and beauty treatments. The second most frequently cited (17.7%) best reason for being female was "nothing." Academic advantage was the third most often mentioned best reason for being a girl (13.4%) and included two opposing sets of comments, one that spoke to undue favoritism given girls—the "teacher's pet"

idea—while the other described the extra effort given by girls and the intellectual satisfaction derived from their higher grades.

Figure 2



* Signficant difference across the sample by sex

The entitlement category (12.7%) included several special advantages that accompanied being female, although not everyone might consider these advantages. These comments discussed girls not having to pay for things, not being expected to do much, and receiving special privileges, like being first in line. One interesting category was entitled “blameless,” and referred to girls who misbehave on purpose or by accident and avoid punishment. Comments described how negative consequences were avoided with a simple smile or simply because they were girls. Decorum comments indicated that girls were better behaved, neat, trustworthy and kind. Emotional expressiveness referred to the greater public acceptance of a girl’s wide range of emotions. Another best for girls was the importance and value of friendships. Having a boyfriend was cited, and these comments explained the positive factors associated with having a date or a

boy caring for a girl. Shopping comments addressed the joy of buying things, especially clothes and make-up. Finally, pro-female biology, although rare, addressed the delight of child birth.

Several significant differences emerged across the sample by sex for three descriptions of the best thing about being a girl: appearance, nothing, and shopping. Significantly more females (28.7 %) compared to males (16.1 %) included appearance in their comments ($p = .002$, $X^2 = 9.97$). Approximately one in ten girls (10.3%) submitted "nothing" as their reply, while more than one in four boys (25.3%) included this answer, a statically significant difference ($p = .004$, $X^2 = 17.04$). Finally, statistically significantly more females (10.3%) then males (3.2%) cited shopping as the best reason for being a girl ($p = .003$, $X^2 = 8.70$).

Table 5 provides several representative comments for the themes describing the "best thing about being a girl," in the students own words.

Table 5 Student Comments: Best Thing about Being a Girl

Appearance
"A better selection of clothes. THE perfect outfit can make you feel pretty and worth something." – 7th grade, Asian/Pacific Islander female, suburban middle school
"You can receive beauty treatments and feel better about yourself." – 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school
"Being pretty to get people's approval." – 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school
Academic Advantage
I feel motivated to study English because you have freedom in English—unlike subjects such as math and science—and your view isn't necessarily wrong. There is no definite right or wrong answer and you have the freedom to say what you feel is right without it being rejected as a wrong answer. – 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school
"Success is learning more and feeling good about it, having good letter grades and teachers who have positive attitudes to you. You are academically successful when you possess the desire to learn not for the grade, but for personal growth." – 8th grade, black female, urban middle school

"Girls apply themselves more in school." – 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school

"Can take easier courses because not expected to go to college." – 7th grade, black female, urban middle school

Entitlement

"People buy you lots of things." - 7th grade, Hispanic female, suburban middle school

"Don't have to pay for dates." – 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school

"Get presents. Are spoiled." – 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school

Discussion of Gendered "Bests"

A comparison of gender "bests" derived from student comments brings into sharp focus the parallel and unequal gender worlds in public middle schools. According to the student comments, both biology and social practice have given boys a significant advantage over girls. Put briefly, it is better to be a boy in these schools than to be a girl. Sports domination and physical strength lead the list of the advantages of being a boy, constructing the image of boys as forceful and powerful, endowed by nature to be stronger and quite able to get what they want. In the real world, survival of the fittest is still a factor, and the physically stronger boys are the fittest. The students pointed out that boys are more able to handle tough times, fight and defend themselves, and unlike girls, do not have to fear rape. As one student described it, being strong is "cool."

But there is more to the picture than the physical advantages; there are social advantages as well, advantages which seed a sense of male entitlement. Students report that boys' sports teams are held in higher esteem, and unlike girls, they can do whatever they please. Boys' ideas matter more than girls, they are respected more by teachers and their comments are given more attention in class. Students also wrote how these adolescent advantages are not ephemeral, but

continue into adulthood. In marriage, for example, students report that females will do most of the work. In careers, they describe how males will earn more money, make the important decisions, and direct not only corporations, but the nation as well. This entitlement also has a personal dimension. Boys do not have to worry about appearance issues or what clothes they wear to be considered attractive, for these superficial items take on greater significance for girls. Boys have fewer worries than girls in general, and can enjoy themselves, being "funny" and "goofy" yet still respected. And if all these advantages to boyness needed any further clarification, almost one in ten students indicated that the best thing about being a boy could be put quite simply: not being a girl.

The world of girls as described by students was radically different, providing glimpses of empowerment alongside pervasive gender stereotypes. Appearance issues were more frequently cited than any other item as the best thing about being female, with significantly more females compared to males included appearance in their comments. Most appearance remarks related to looking attractive and underscored females seeking approval and validation outside themselves. Yet, a few appearance comments voiced a contrary view. These comments emphasized greater female options in dress. For example, girls could wear their hair long, get made up, or dress like boys, if they so choose. A related category cited by students, shopping, reflected that one of the best things about being a girl was consumerism, the joy girls receive when buying "cute" clothes and visiting shopping malls. This category links females with not only external approval, but materialism as well.

The second most frequent response concerning the best thing about being a girl was stunning. Nearly one in five students (17.7%) wrote "nothing," that there was not a single best thing about being female--a stinging indictment about the gender role of girls in middle school.

In contrast, only one percent of students wrote a "nothing" response concerning the best thing about being a boy. While about one in ten girls (10.3%) submitted "nothing" as their reply, more than one in four boys (25.3%) did as well, a statistically significant gender difference. While it is sad to note that about ten percent of girls see nothing that is best about their gender, the misogyny emerging from one in four boys believing this is equally unfortunate. These findings underscore the importance of schools to challenge gender stereotypes—through gender equitable curriculum, interactions, opportunities, and policies—and to promote a culture that builds female self-empowerment as well as respect from both sexes for the contributions and inherent value of girls and women in society.

The belief that girls enjoy academic advantages was the third most mentioned topic, but students saw this advantage from varied perspectives. The positive take was that girls worked harder in school and that they were proud of their good grades and competence. Yet others saw this academic advantages quite differently, attributing academic accomplishments to teacher bias rather than to girls' own abilities. According to these students—both male and female—teachers simply liked girls more boys, treated them better, and gave them higher grades. According to more than one student, "girls are the teacher's pet."

As with boys, entitlement advantages were cited, but these entitlements were dramatically different in context. Students described female entitlements as related less to merit and more to gender stereotyping. An undertone of encouraging female dependency was often present in student comments. Students talked about people "buying things" for girls or girls not needing to pay for dates. Girls were expected to do very little, and when something needed to be done, girls could "sweet talk" people into getting what they wanted. Some of the student comments were more direct: girls "are spoiled." A separate but certainly related category was

entitled “blameless.” Mentioned by more than one in ten students, blameless comments underscored how girls’ misbehavior was typically ignored, how girls could push boys around without fear of retribution, and how teachers typically do not punish girls’ misbehavior. But for some, such preferred treatment was earned. In a category entitled “decorum,” 11 percent of students reported how girls behaved better, worked harder, were more trustworthy and even kinder than boys. Taken together these student-identified categories paint a picture of girls, especially those fitting traditional gender stereotypes, as doing well. Yet, these findings beg the questions: Do girls holistically benefit from the female stereotype and what about those girls who do not conform? Research reveals that early adolescent girls who adopt more conventional femininity ideologies, as described by the students in this study, are also more likely to have lower levels of self- esteem and higher levels of depression (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Tolman, 1998). Such findings suggest that what students deem the “best” about girls, may in fact pave a path of harmful emotional and academic development.

Three of the “best thing about being a girl” categories were related to emotional freedom and interpersonal relationships. “Emotional expressiveness” referred to the freedom that girls enjoyed in articulating their feelings, a freedom evidently not readily available to boys. Students wrote about the ability of girls to express love and caring, to cry, and to apologize for a mistake. Students cited friendships as one of the “bests” for both males and females, but the way those friendships were described emphasized very different aspects. For girls, students described the importance of female connections that could take them through difficult times and provide security, whereas boys spoke about casualness, the natural nature of their friendships. Girl friendships also spoke of mutual support and self-disclosure as the foundation of friendship, while engagement in mutual activities formed the building blocks of male relationships.

"Boyfriends" were yet another category cited for the best of being a girl, and in this case findings mirrored the "girlfriends" category cited for boys. Dating and being liked by a boy clearly created positive feelings, and these comments were really quite similar to the girlfriend comments described as a best for boys. But there was a difference. Some of these students wrote about an underlying dishonesty in these relationships. These students wrote how girls were "scheming" to get boys to like them, or were "playing" with boys' minds. All of these last three categories concerned relationships, and both clear positive and negative aspects emerged.

Another factor that was cited by students in terms of both boys and girls was related to physicality and biology. Physicality was a central advantage for boys, with one out of five students citing male strength as a best thing about being a boy (and almost one out of four citing the related "playing sports" factor). Only three percent of students saw advantage in a girl's physiology/biology, which typically cited the joy of having children. In fact, approximately three times as many students specifically identified a "best" for boys as not having the biology of a female, especially noting freedom from periods and childbirth pain.

For the students, embracing gender specific behaviors and beliefs gives them the chance to construct a gender identity. Whether conscious or not, this often leads to very different behaviors in and outside the classroom. Girls can construct their femininity by emphasizing appearance (their own and others), good and entitled behavior, and verbal expressiveness. Boys use physicality by dominating space or people and by showing off their heterosexuality and masculine interests. The resultant self-portrait or personal power allows each one to be *normal*—acceptable to classmates. This drive to fit in is sometimes generalized in girls as the *sensible* construction: taking a low profile in classroom discussions, turning power over to the males,

being feminine and mature. On the other hand, the boys' dominant behavior means acting competitively and exuding dominance, both physically and verbally.

Even with the "best" things about being a girl, students see females as limited by both biology and social practice, subservient and vulnerable to boys with limited future prospects, in marriage and in careers. It is also clear from the responses that there is a subset of students who do believe in girls, their capabilities and their future prospects. But the weight of responses speak to the limits of being a girl, and the second most voiced "best" factor of being a girl was "nothing." The gender world described by students as they identify the "bests" associated with girls and boys confirms the prevalence and persistence of sexism and sex role stereotypes in middle schools.

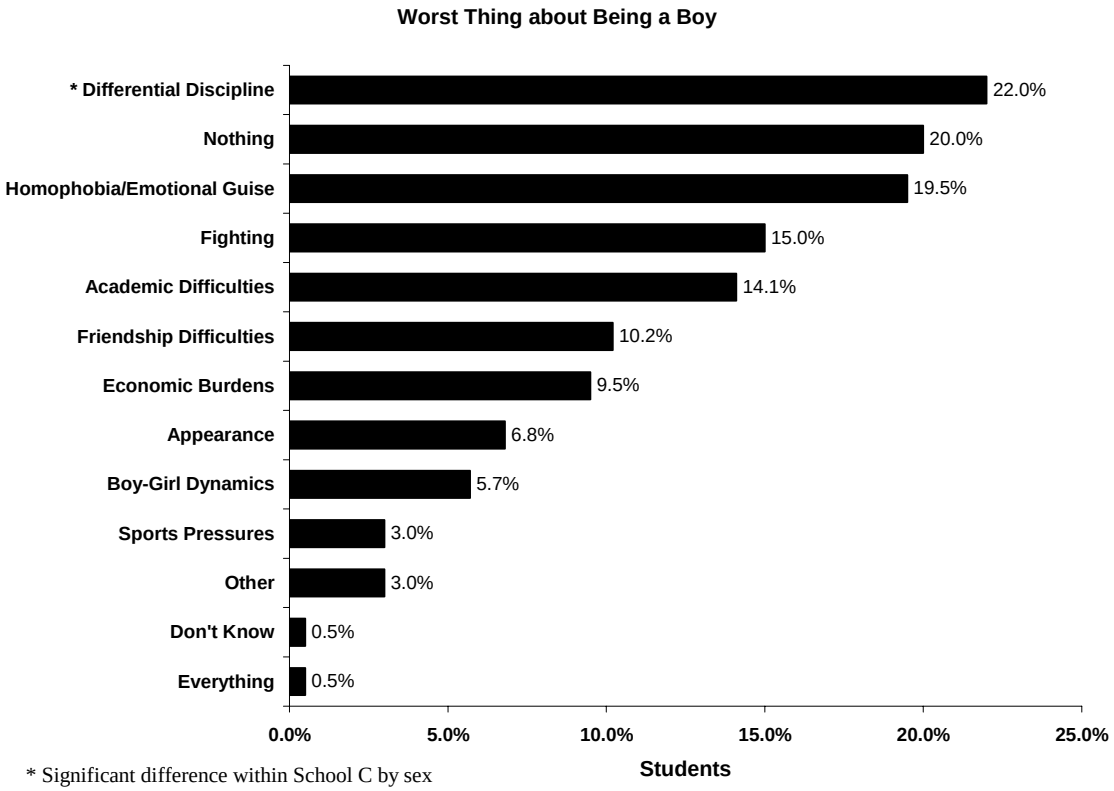
The Worst Thing about Being a Boy

Both boys and girls were asked to complete the sentence: "The worst thing about being a boy is…." Across the sample, students reported issues in very much the same way, and only one significant difference found—a difference by sex within School C—and is described below. Figure 3 reflects the themes that emerged from the responses offered by students across the sample.

The most frequent theme that emerged from the student comments concerned differential discipline (22.0%). More than one out of five students wrote about boys getting into trouble, receiving discipline, and being blamed more often than girls, even when they were not at fault. The second most mentioned worst thing about being a boy was "nothing" (20.0%). This was indeed an optimistic appraisal that being a boy was free of any negative factors. Following closely behind were responses that reflected homophobic and emotional restrictions (19.5%), comments students made about how boys are expected to project an outward appearance of

strength and hide their emotions, coupled with the threat of being called homosexual if they did not adhere to a narrow male code of acceptable behaviors and restricted emotions.

Figure 3



* Significant difference within School C by sex

Fighting was mentioned by 15 percent of students who described males as quick to anger and fight as their preferred method of resolving differences. Boys' academic and friendship difficulties were also cited. When academic difficulties were depicted, students discussed poor performance in specific courses, dropping out of school, teacher bias, and boys' need for special education services. Friendship difficulties included comments that portrayed challenges boys have in creating friendships, dealing with gang pressure, and forming cross-sex friendships. The economic burdens associated with the male role spanned the life cycle, ranging from paying for dates as adolescents to the economic responsibility of supporting a family. Appearance comments dealt with biological issues, such as hair growth and short stature, as well as peer

pressure regarding fashion. Boy/girl dynamics were also described as students wrote of difficulties in dating or tension that surfaced from gender interactions. The sports issues that were included concerned sports pressure and public humiliation when athletic standards were not met.

The "other" category included comments bemoaning the shorter life span of males, fatherhood, and military service, to name a few. Only a few students answered "everything" or "don't know."

One significant difference was found for responses identifying the worst thing about being a boy. For differential discipline, student responses significantly varied by sex in School C ($p = .003$, $X^2 = 8.74$). In this school, 31.5 percent of the boys, but only 8.9 percent of the girls described differential discipline as a worst thing about being a boy. (See Table 6)

Table 6 Within Schools: Sex Differences in Students Identifying Differential Discipline as the Worst Thing about Being a Boy

School	Male Students Identifying Differential Discipline	Female Students Identifying Differential Discipline
School A	15.8%	24.2%
School B	36.1%	16.7%
*School C	35.5%	8.9%
School D	25.9%	24.4%
School E	19.4%	23.4%
All Schools/Entire Sample	25.5%	18.8%

* Significant difference between student male and female responses within School C

Table 7 offers representative student comments describing the worst thing about being a boy.

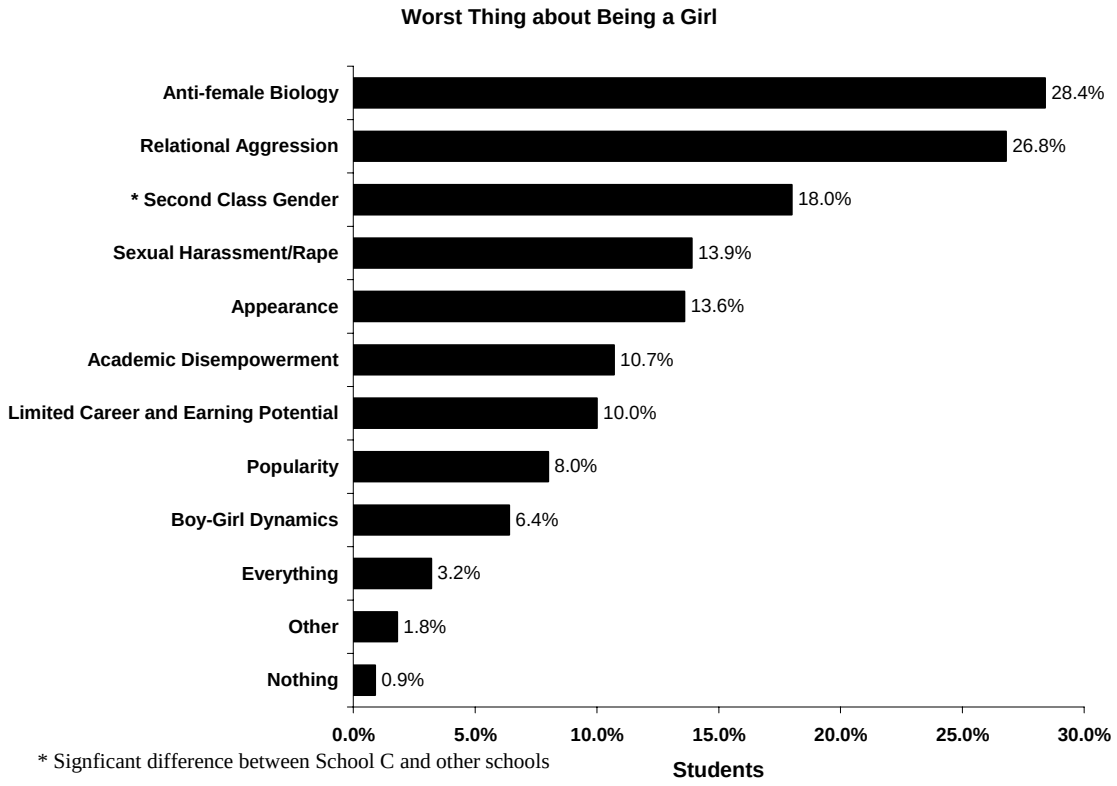
Table 7 Student Comments: Worst Thing about Being a Boy

Differential Discipline
"Boys get in trouble more often because teachers are always watching them." - 7th grade, Hispanic female, suburban middle school
"We are always at fault, even when we shouldn't be blamed."- 8th grade, black male, urban middle school
"The worst thing is when a girl is talking in class they don't get in trouble but the boys do." – 8th-grade, black male, urban middle school
Homophobia/Emotional Guise
"I don't feel safe from abuse at my school. I am relentlessly persecuted for being gay. A person has masturbated in front of me while I was in the school bathroom. I have had cigarettes thrown at me, students have driven their car within a foot of me to drive me off the road while I was walking, and people call me vulgar names almost daily. The words "fag," dyke," "queer," "lesbo," and others ring through our hallways, locker rooms, and classrooms. Neither teachers nor students have not been able to stop the control of a culture that continues to label, demean, and sort through who "belongs" and who is 'outside' the gender box." -8th grade, white male, rural middle school
"Being shy and not being able to cry." -7th grade, Hispanic male, suburban middle school
"People depend on you to always be strong." -8th grade white, male, suburban middle school

The Worst Thing about Being a Girl

Both boys and girls were asked to complete the sentence: "The worst thing about being a girl is…", and Figure 4 depicts their responses. Across the sample, students described issues in very much the same way. However, there was one significant difference between schools and this was related to the issue of "second class gender" status of females. This difference occurred between students in School C and students in the other schools, and is discussed below.

Figure 4



Female biology, which included issues such as child birth, PMS, periods and breast cancer, was described most frequently by students as the worse thing about being a girl 28.4%). The second most frequent theme identified by students concerned relational aggression (26.8), comments related to spreading rumors, interpersonal dishonesty, name calling, and even fighting.

The third theme surfacing from 18 percent of the students described problems endemic to the female role in this society, a society that sends the message that girls are not only different than, but inferior to boys. This theme was identified as "second class gender" and included statements describing how girls are not listened to, are the weaker sex, or need to clean and cook for males. Notably, when comparing student responses across schools, students (male and female) in School C were least likely to report the second class gender variable as the worst thing

about being a girl, a significant difference from student responses in other school ($p = .003$, $X^2 = 16.344$) (See Table 8)

Table 8 By School: Students Identifying Second Class Gender as the Worst Thing about Being a Girl

School	Students Identifying Second Class Gender
School A	25.4%
School B	21.8%
*School C	5.5%
School D	22.2%
School E	20.2%
All Schools/Entire Sample	18.0%

* Significant difference between School C and other schools

The fourth worst thing was sexual harassment/rape (13.9%) and included comments related to female physical vulnerability to violence, especially rape, a threat students described as extending from a young age into adulthood. Student remarks about appearance were made at almost the same rate (13.6%) as the sexual harassment/rape remarks. Appearance comments referred to issues dealing with pressures to achieve an ideal weight and physical look along with frustration at being judged by external measures rather than internal characteristics, such as intelligence. Academic disempowerment (10.7%) had two dimensions, with neither dimension particularly positive. Students reported that girls were not expected to be as smart as boys, or, if they did well academically, they were teased. The limited career and earning power of adult women was mentioned by one out of ten students (10.0%) and included fewer opportunities available to women as well as the need to balance work and family responsibilities. Popularity was a variable characterizing the need for peer acceptance and was mentioned by eight percent of students; while boy and girl dynamics, especially boyfriend problems, was next in frequency (6.4 %). The “other” category concerning the worst thing about being a girl included comments

that girls were not boys, did not play sports, or shopped too much. The "everything" category (3.2%) and the "nothing" category (0.9%) were the final variables mentioned. Table 9 provides representative themes on the worst things about being a girl in the students own words.

Table 9 Student Comments: Worst Thing about Being a Girl

Anti-female Biology
"If you want kids, you need to get pregnant and I think that hurts." – 7th grade, white male, suburban middle school
"PMS." – 7th grade, white male, suburban middle school
"Getting breast cancer." – 8th grade, black female, urban middle school
Relational Aggression
"Whispering, passing notes, spreading rumors, and gossiping about "who we like and who we don't really like." - 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school
"Gossip too much so can't trust friends." – 7th grade, black female, urban charter middle school
"Sometimes you get pushed by supposed friends not to like someone else because they don't fit in." - 7th grade, white female, rural middle school
Second Class Gender
"Our basketball coach told our parents that the girls' practice was shorter than the boys' team practice because girls did not have the "attention span" or the "interest" to focus on basketball for two hours at a time and were more interested in socializing than in the game. Our coach is wrong." – 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school
"Stereotypes: People think you aren't as good at 'a whole lot of things' if you are a girl." – 7th grade, white female, suburban middle school
"Girls have to cook." - 9th grade, Hispanic female, urban charter middle school

Discussion of Gendered "Worsts"

Student responses to the worst things about each sex can be classified as either the result of cultural or social causes, or the result of biological or genetic factors. If worst thing comments refer to social sources as the cause, then these gendered disadvantages can be eliminated with changes in the culture or social attitudes. If however, the worst thing comments have a biological basis, then they are viewed as a permanent component of that sex's construct. The vast majority of worst comments about males reflected a cultural source, a changeable root cause; while for girls, several worst comments referenced fixed, biological sources. The most often described worst thing about being a girl was also the least changeable: a girl's biology. Students wrote of periods, childbirth, breast cancer, and PMS as the most undesirable aspects of being female.

While biology was destiny for girls, students saw the world through very different eyes for boys. The second most cited worst thing about being a boy was nothing. Many students--boys and girls--could not think of a single negative comment about being a boy, even when though they were directly asked to list one or more undesirable traits. For them, being a boy was exclusive of experiencing worst things. This is a remarkable response underscoring male entitlement. The other side of this same coin described girls as a "second class gender." In fact, student remarks that identified girls as the second class gender were the third most frequent theme to surface. These students described a society that expects females to be servants to males in terms of cleaning and cooking, and described girls as the weaker sex. Students further reported that teachers and coaches listen to less and expect less from girls than boys. While adults disagree on whether boys or girls are the more advantaged sex in school (Gurian & Henley, 2002; Sommers, 2000), from the student point of view, there is little doubt that males are the preferred sex.

For the variable “second class gender,” a significant difference between School C and the rest of the schools in the sample was found. While 18 percent of the entire student sample described the second class status of girls, only 5.5 percent of the students in School C included this view in their comments. Here again we have School C, a poor, inner city school with an overwhelming population of students of color answering an item differently from the other schools. Are girls treated better in this school than others? Do the students not see the inequity? Or is there another reason at work? A more in depth assessment of this school at a later date might yield some answers.

The fourth most mentioned item for girls was related to their perceived inferior status and biological vulnerability. One in seven students spoke of girls being the victims of rape and harassment at all ages, raped by boyfriends in their youth and by husbands in later life. The comments described girls being touched and even raped on school grounds. This sense of physical vulnerability reinforces, and is a frightening product, of the second class status of girls.

Unfair discipline was mentioned most frequently as the worst thing about being a boy. These comments described boys as victims of biased teachers and unfair disciplinary routines, school norms that were not the fault of boys. And referring back to whether the comments reflected a cultural or biologic root cause, such unfair school practices are clearly cultural, not the fault of boys, and could be eliminated. This was the only “worst thing about being a boy” item in which a significant difference emerged: a within school difference by sex in School C, once again the urban school in a poor neighborhood. Boys in this school were significantly more likely than girls (31.5% versus 8.9%) to mention this as a problem for boys. It may be that girls in this school believe that the discipline is justified, or that they too are being subjected to unfair

discipline. With the exception of most of the girls in School C, all students generally agreed that boys are targeted for severer discipline than girls.

This sense that boys are receiving greater disciplinary attention is congruent with the "blameless" theme cited earlier under best things about being a girl. In answering that question, students wrote that even when girls misbehaved, they are held blameless. When male differential discipline and female blamelessness issues are taken together, students report a fundamental unfairness in how schools discipline the sexes, with boys being penalized more than they deserve, and girls less.

Stereotypic expectations about male relationships emerged in a number of the different themes reported, including emotional restrictions, homophobia, success at sports, fighting and friendship difficulties. The "tough guise" of what maleness means in our culture emerged repeatedly. Boys were not expected to show their emotions. Boys were not expected to enjoy subjects such as art or music. Failure to succeed at sports was seen as a very personal humiliation for boys. While males strove for more enduring friendships, restrictions on their emotions and the ever-present threat of anger and fighting made this more difficult. Even when friendships were formed, boys had to walk a narrow path for fear of being called a "fag." For gay boys, these homophobic fears must represent a threat to their very essence, a particularly heavy burden to bear at a young age.

Female relationships and friendships also emerged as problematic. The second most mentioned worst thing about being a girl was relational aggression, and while popularity was brought up less frequently, it too was a theme. Female relational aggression was described as girls turning on girls by spreading rumors, forming cliques, and even fighting, and was cited by more than 1 out of 4 students. Why would girls turn on other girls? Perhaps the frequency of this

theme between anti-female biology and second class gender offers a clue. It may be reasonable to hypothesize that relational aggression is a result of frustration with the cards that girls have been dealt, a biology that is seen as problematic and a cultural role that is second class. No matter what females do, their biology does not change. No matter what they hope to achieve, social norms underscore that less is expected from them now and less is awaiting them in the future. Unable to change their bodies or society's norms, they may take out their frustration on each other.

Sometimes the same general topic emerged from the student comments about the worst thing associated with each sex, but the gender divide created strikingly different perceptions of the same topic. For example, economic issues, and particularly future careers, surfaced in the comments about both boys and girls. Students wrote that girls have fewer career opportunities and will earn less money. Worse yet, they have to compete in the job market with a serious disadvantage: the responsibility for caring for children. While students might see boys as eventual fathers, absent from their comments was any connection between fatherhood and career success. But students saw economic problems for boys as well. It is boys and men who have to endure unfair economic hardships, which include paying for dates and supporting a family. For both genders, the future as a working adult was seen as a bumpy path.

Academic issues also materialized on the worst lists for both sexes, but once again, in very different ways. For boys, academic barriers generally described poor handwriting, clowning around, being distracted by girls, and teachers who did not like them. Girls were not expected to do well in school, but if they did succeed, they were expected to hide their achievements for fear of being called a nerd. In short, academic success was seen as unlikely, and if achieved, problematic for girls.

Student comments for both sexes discussed the difficulties in boy and girl friendships, dating dynamics, and appearance issues. Social status for both boys and girls was tied to dating activities. Students wrote about the pressures surrounding having a boy or girl friend as well as the pressure for sex. For both sexes, the dating scene led to social successes and failures. Another aspect of social success and peer approval was linked to appearance. For girls, physical beauty was a dominant issue, while for boys hair growth on the body was a concern. Students discussed height as an issue for boys and weight for girls. Fashionable clothes were discussed as important for both.

Relatively few students responded that "everything" was a problem for either gender, but it is interesting, and of some concern, to note that the percentage of comments discussing "everything" as a problem was more than six times higher for girls (3.2%) than it was for boys (0.5%). Discussed earlier in this section was the fact that for boys, one in five students (20%) said that nothing was the worst thing about being a male, a percentage that was 22 times higher than the same response for girls (0.9%). Student comments underscore that through their eyes, boys are the entitled gender.

Educational Importance

Despite the perceptions that gender equity has been achieved, or that girls now enjoy a special place in school at the cost of boys' well-being, this study demonstrated that gender stereotypes continue to be a major influence in urban, suburban and rural America, in wealthy and poor communities, in communities that are diverse as well as those that are homogeneous. In short, gender is a demographic that binds all our schools and challenges all educators. Yet, an ubiquitous and often unintentional, cultural shortsightedness, coined "gender blindness" (Bailey,

Scantlebury, & Letts, 1997), makes it difficult for educators to “see” sexism operating in today’s schools and in the gender roles adopted by many students.

Schools are not only about academics. They include goals that go beyond scholarly concerns, goals such as inculcating positive community values like respect and responsibility, creating a productive learning community, and the development of citizenship skills. These worthy goals are put at risk by students’ descriptions of their divided gender worlds. Relational aggression and fighting, appearance, entitlement, and homophobia can create pressures that detract from both the academic emphasis and social well-being of a school community. Schools that do not attend to these issues are placing a number of school goals at risk.

Educators, committed to helping students succeed, can start by understanding student needs as expressed by the young adolescents themselves. If teachers can read the middle schoolers’ quotes in this study, explore their own thoughts about these statements, listen to their own students' voices, and receive training in how they might respond, then they can create a plan of action to address gender issues. Avenues of communication and education need to be opened so that mutual understanding and respect can flourish.

There are several policies and practices that teachers and schools can implement to eliminate gender stereotypes and reduce gender barriers. Making Title IX a living part of school life is a first step, and addressing sexual harassment to make schools a safe environment for both girls and boys is another. Here are several suggested suggestions concerning policy and practice:

1. Policy: Title IX, Sexual Harassment, and Bullying. While there has been progress made over the last 30 years under Title IX, sex discrimination in education persists. A strong advocacy and enforcement of Title IX can eliminate some of these barriers. Schools need to create, communicate, and enforce a clear policy concerning Title IX, sexual

harassment and bullying. All members of the school community, teachers, parents, staff, and students, should know the law and who to contact if they have questions or complaints. For example, Title IX information, including the name of the school or district's Title IX coordinator, can be shared on school websites, in faculty and student newsletters, and at back-to-school night materials. Posters with Title IX information can be displayed throughout the building. Perhaps students can be encouraged to develop original Title IX posters that include this information. Schools can create a civil rights brochure that describes basic student and teacher rights, including Title IX, and ways for teachers and students to ensure these protections. Learning communities do not flourish where ignorance is the norm, intimidation thrives, and inequities are tolerated.

2. Uncover the school's gender issues. School personnel would be well advised to invest resources in learning about gender role pressures their students feel through student-teacher dialogue or other techniques. If critical gender role problems persist and go unnoticed, there is little hope that they will be resolved.
3. Once gender problems are identified, follow-up action is required. This advice applies to many gender issues in school which seem to fester unnoticed, but none more pressing than sexual harassment. The notion that such harassment is "natural" and can be ignored, in effect tolerated, is a belief that must be confronted and changed. In addition to the damage such harassment inflicts between genders, school personnel need to focus on preventing harassing behaviors within genders. Often girls harass other girls, or resort to relational aggression. Boys can engage in the same behaviors, which can escalate to physical confrontation. The findings from this study suggest that when it comes to sexual

harassment, boys are not even on the radar screens of teachers. If harassment is not addressed immediately, it can become a damaging school norm.

4. Curricular revision, including media literacy, is needed to insure that students learn about the lives and experiences of both genders and can analyze and deflect the media's sexist messages. The mass media propagates misconceptions about gender, gender identification, body image, and sex role stereotypes. Adolescents, in the process of identity formation, are particularly vulnerable to such messages, and they are also heavy media consumers. Much of what they learn, value, and believe is acquired through TV, videos, music, or magazines. Students need to be able to distinguish myth from reality, healthy messages from exploitive ones, and see through the veiled techniques used by an increasingly sophisticated media to mold and shape public tastes and opinions. Schools would be well advised to add to their curriculum courses to help students understand the media's modus operandi, and construct strategies that shield them from the media's negative gender messages. In addition, the lives and experiences of women are given little attention in today's textbooks. Nor are men in nontraditional fields or parenting roles given much attention. Both would be good additions to expand the horizons of both boys and girls. Textbooks and the curriculum are central to what students learn, and reform in what students study can go a long way in creating critical skills and more respectful relationships.
5. Arrange mentors for middle school students to provide opportunities for working with women and men in professions nontraditional for their gender. Introducing male nurses, female doctors, male child care workers, female engineers, female mathematicians, homemaker dads, female architects, and others to students in a live dialogue can teach

volumes. Provide a rich array of mentoring opportunities, including in-person as well as online, so that both sexes can discover things they are interested in and good at.

Gendered Aggression

Beyond these policies and practices, educators also need to understand the gendered nature of aggression as well as ways to help students better channel such energy. It is no secret that teachers—new and seasoned—regularly cite classroom management as the most challenging aspect of their job. For many, it is the reason they leave teaching (Emmer, Evertson, & Worsham, 2006). Teacher-student discipline problems, steeped in gendered expectations, can lead to harsh punishments to males, especially males of color, too many of whom drop-out of school. So for both teachers and students, understanding aggressive behavior is central to effective teaching and learning. Yet, the gendered nature of student aggression is one of the least examined areas of classroom life.

Picture a disruptive classroom, and you are likely to envision a few boys as troublemakers. Why boys? Many link male aggression with the male stereotype, the role boys are expected to play in society. William Pollack (1998) calls it the "boy code" and the "mask of masculinity"—a kind of swaggering posture that boys embrace to hide their fears, suppress dependency and vulnerability, and present a stoic, impervious front. What is that "boy code"? Thirty years ago, psychologist Robert Brannon described the four basic rules of manhood (Brannon & David, 1976), characteristics echoed today by students:

1. *No sissy stuff*. Masculinity is the repudiation of the feminine.

2. *Be a big wheel.* Masculinity is measured by wealth, power, and status.

3. *Be a sturdy oak.* Masculinity requires emotional imperviousness.

4. *Give 'em hell.* Masculinity requires daring, aggression, and risk-taking in our society.

Boys' stereotypic expectations often lead to physical confrontations in the classroom, including harassment and bullying. Typically, boys targeted by such behaviors also respond physically, feeding the cycle of violence while underscoring a pervasive homophobia. Males adhering to traditional sex-role stereotypes are more likely to harass and be violent, more likely to see such acts as normal, and less likely to take responsibility for their actions (Perry, Schmidtke, & Kulik, 1998; Pollack, 1998).

Homophobia, an irrational fear of homosexuals, has been described as a universal experience for males, a "force stronger than gravity in the lives of adolescent boys" (Kindlon & Thompson, 1999, p. 89). Whether it's the fear of being called a "wuss," "fag" or "sissy" or the threat of being identified as feminine, boys of all ages are keenly aware of the strict behavioral boundaries set by the masculine ideal and the high price that is exacted from them for playing "out of bounds." Boys often project an outward appearance of strength, confidence, and security even when all are lacking. Homophobia encourages the disparity between outward appearance and inner self, further paving the way toward much of the disrespectful and violent behavior we are seeking to prevent in our schools.

Institutional indifference to homophobia frequently helps to maintain traditional notions of masculinity in school communities. Whether expressed by students or by adults, comments or practices reflecting homophobia often perpetuate a "boys will be boys" attitude that allows for little diversity of thought or behavior among boys. Although often passed off as harmless or even motivational in the sports environment, there is, sadly, nothing innocent about such views of masculinity.

For the teacher, the management lesson seems clear: control the boys and all problems will be resolved. Since boys are usually more physically aggressive than girls, and more difficult to control, the teacher is advised to closely monitor males in the classroom, to insure that things do not get out of control.

While male misbehavior captures teacher attention, girls' gendered behavioral problems typically fly below the radar screen of teachers. Relational aggression—spreading rumors, forming cliques, and even fighting— is harder to "see" than the physical male aggression, and can be delivered in a whisper. But such behavior is a form of aggression, readily seen and felt daily by students. Relational aggression harms healthy female relationships and distracts from academics. Research suggests that children find this form of aggression as painful as the more physical type (Brown, 2001; Merten, 1997). While teachers rarely react to relational aggression, they may over-react to even the potential of male misbehavior. Such disparities are readily detected by students who report that innocent boys are often targeted unfairly by teachers, and girls are able "to get away" with inappropriate and hurtful behavior. Such inequities detract from learning and a sense of security for all students.

Is relational aggression important? A review of the psychological literature concerning girls reveals that relationship issues are central for girls. First, girls depend on close, intimate friendships to get them through life. The trust and support of these relationships provide girls with emotional and psychological safety nets; with their friends behind them, girls will do and say things that are remarkably creative and brave and "out of character." Second, girls, particularly at early adolescence, are excruciatingly tough on other girls. They talk behind each others' backs, they tease and torture one another; they police each others' clothing and body size and fight over real or imagined relationships with boys. In so doing they participate in and help

to reproduce largely negative views of female relationships as untrustworthy, deceitful, manipulative, bitchy and catty (Brown, 2003; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; DeAngelis, 2003). Educators committed to creating fair and effect classrooms would be wise to listen to girls'—and boys'— voices, to address and correct damaging classroom aggression, both physical and relational.

Stepping back to gain a broader perspective, there is another point worth exploring. Why has relational aggression become a focus of the popular and professional media? Why after three decades of the modern feminist movement, at a time when girls and young women are struggling to translate their professional and personal hopes into reality, is there media frenzy about mean girls? As a result, there are stories that offer tips about how to tame girls, make them nicer, quieter, easier to deal with, to "demean" girls and make them sweeter and more pliable. Perhaps this response is more a reflection of our deep, lasting anxiety about female assertiveness and the fear some feel from changing gender roles than it is a statement about girls. A decade or two ago we were concerned about girls' loss of voice; now we fear that they have found it. Is this discussion about mean girls really a discussion about them – or a discussion about us?

Perhaps the issue here is not micromanaging "meanness," but listening to the fear and frustration that underlies it; not shutting down anger but helping girls hone and channel it in positive ways; not talking about the separations and betrayals, but creating avenues for connection and alliance among girls and between girls and women.

Educators committed to creating fair and effect classrooms would be wise to listen to girls'—and boys'— voices, to address and correct damaging classroom aggression, both physical and relational.

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