Talking Tough Topics In the Classroom

Introduction

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TALKING TOUGH TOPICS IN THE CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

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JONATHAN G. SILIN has been a member of the Bank Street Graduate Faculty since 1992. He is the author of Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS, *co-producer of* Children Talk About AIDS, *and co-editor of* Putting the Children First: The Changing Face of Newark's Public Schools.

Communities, schools, and individual teachers differ widely in their understanding of whether the classroom should be a place for helping children make sense of tough topics. Recently, I encountered two very different answers to this quandary. In a classroom of eight- and nine-year-olds at the Bank Street School for Children, I saw prominently displayed on a half-dozen charts taped to a long bank of windows children's questions about human sexuality: Do you have to kiss when having sex? Do women have to have sex with men? Do people like their old friends after puberty? Here was the beginning of a curriculum that was clearly designed to respond to the concerns of pre-adolescents.

Just weeks before, in an ex-urban community close to my own, a bitter controversy had erupted when an experienced nurse/health teacher invited a county health educator to talk about HIV/AIDS to sixth graders as part of the school's acknowledgement of World AIDS Day. In a contentious school board meeting, parents complained that the county health educator, who had been working at the school for many years with seventh and eighth graders, had introduced topics for which the children were ill prepared, and of which they were frightened. Some parents, speaking with tears in their eyes, claimed that the school had "stolen our children's innocence."

In this *Occasional Paper*, four educators describe their approaches to tough topics in the classroom—gender, sexual identity, death, and diversity. Despite differing subject matter, the essays have much in common from which we can learn.

All the topics, for example, involve at least three kinds of learning—cognitive, emotional, and social. As young children struggle to understand the finality of death, they also grapple with the impact of a real or imagined loss, the significance of the rituals surrounding death, and the changed status of those who remain. When third graders discuss gender, there are biological questions as well as questions of individual affect and social equity. Despite the assumptions embedded in many fragmented and narrowly conceived contemporary curriculums, children's minds are not compartmentalized. And surely within any group of twenty-five eight- and nine-years-olds, what isn't in the thoughts of one child will be in the thoughts of another.

As evidenced in these essays, addressing tough topics is a critical component of building community in the classroom. Real community is based on the full acknowledgement of difference, as well as the establishment of common purposes. When children are comfortable sharing their unique histories, there is the potential to uncover shared experiences and to identify themes for investigation. What are the pros and cons of gay marriage? How does membership in diverse racial and ethnic communities affect values and political commitments?

The authors in this volume understand the exquisite tension between voice and silence that must be respected in the classroom if community is to flourish. Each attends closely to individual differences. One recently bereaved child needs and wants to talk about his loss in the classroom. Another prefers to remain silent. One ten-year-old is comfortable expressing curiosity about her own sexual identity and another isn't. A teacher, too, balances her desire to address stereotypical gender remarks with third graders and her recognition that an unrelenting focus on the topic can cause children to shut down. A teacher of color wants to promote dialogue in her school about racism at the same time as she believes that the responsibility for changing the social landscape belongs to everyone, not just minority group members.

As teachers nurture voice and respect appropriate silences among their students, they also reflect on their own motivation for talking about tough issues in the classroom. The authors here model how personal passions can be successfully transformed into vibrant curriculum. Muslin brings her own experiences growing up in Puerto Rico and coming to work in New York City to her discussions about diversity. Nelson describes how developing friendships with gay and lesbian contemporaries helped her grasp the importance of addressing sexual identity in the classroom. Sexton-Reade is prompted

by the early loss of her husband to explore death with young children. Each must grapple with how much of her own experience to share directly with children and how much to simply allow that experience to inform her work.

Finally there is this: At its core education is about uncertainty, about not knowing what our students have learned. Despite our best efforts to inculcate a particular set of values, students make of their lives in our classrooms what they will. Boldt and Nelson are especially insightful about the ways in which children quickly learn to provide expected, politically correct answers in the morning, and then later during the same day can be seen at lunch or on the playground displaying the very behaviors about which they strongly objected just minutes before. The only solace is knowing that we have acted authentically in addressing tough topics, that we can always return to the chalkboard to revise our work, and that if we have fostered a community in which dialogue is continuous, then there will be many opportunities to ask new questions and prompt further conversations about the things that really matter to us.

Among the things that matter to our editorial board is that the majority of the authors presented in *Talking Tough Topics in the Classroom* are teachers who are appearing in print for the first time. Half are Bank Street School for Children faculty, and half are not. All are committed to making school a more meaningful place in which the lived experiences of students and the critical social issues facing our society are part of the everyday landscape. Thus, all are contemporary exemplars of the long progressive tradition that seeks to promote social change through curricular innovation.

PERFORMING GENDER IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

gail masuchika boldt

GAIL MASUCHIKA BOLDT was an elementary school teacher in Honolulu, Hawaii, from 1990 to 1997, and a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM) from 1993 to 1999. She left elementary teaching in 1997 to spend more time with her newborn, and from 1997 to 2001, supervised student teachers for UHM. Gail began at the University of Iowa as an assistant professor in elementary education in 1999. The narrative materials in this and previous publications come from her years of classroom teaching and teacher education.

I was observing in a kindergarten class. The children were sitting on a rug in a group and the teacher was querying them with a single question and recording their responses on large chart paper. Her question was, "If you could choose to eat 100 of something, what would it be?"

The responses started off well enough. The children had just spent part of the morning sorting Cheerios, pretzels, M&M's, and other small foods into piles of 100. The answers initially referenced this work:

"I could eat 100 raisins," said one child. The teacher wrote, "Jill—100 raisins."

"No! I don't like raisins. I would like to eat 100 Goldfish crackers," came a response. The teacher wrote, "Chantel—100 Goldfish."

"Yeah," tossed in another. "Or I would like 100 Nerd candies." Onto the chart: "Ben—100 Nerds."

A boy sitting in the back row called out, "Well, I would eat 100 hot dogs!" I looked at him. He was grinning and looking from his teacher to the other children and back to his teacher again.

"What?" called out classmates. "100 hot dogs? You can't eat 100 hot dogs!"

The teacher weighed in. "Do you really think you could eat 100 hot dogs?"

"Yes," the boy responded. "I know I can."

The teacher then added the words to chart: "Tommy—100 hot dogs," and Tommy smiled triumphantly.

Now the floodgate was open. Boys' hands shot up across the group:

Jose— "100 hot dogs."
Ben— "I want to change my answer—100 hot dogs!"
Tony— "100 hot dogs."
Wesley— "100 hot dogs."

The laughter of many of the boys and a few of the girls grew with each hot dog response. Several children were becoming visibly excited in their movements and posture.

The teacher was accepting the responses without comment, but some of the children, mostly girls, appeared to be increasingly uneasy or frustrated with the rising energy level, and a few of the girls attempted to bring things back in line.

"I would eat 100 Fruit Loops. They're little and a person could really eat them," Julie said, shooting a glare at a cluster of boys. Several girls nodded or spoke their agreement.

One of the girls, however, attempted to join in the fun. She called out, "I could eat 100 hot dogs, too." She looked around to the boys, presumably seeking smiling approval, only to find herself being thoroughly ignored. The teacher, however, smiled at her and recorded, "Chelsea—100 hot dogs." The teacher then quickly took a few more responses from the children, and brought the activity to a close by announcing, "It was very interesting to hear what you might like to eat 100 of. While I don't have 100 hot dogs to offer any of you, you know that we have many of the other foods you mentioned, and after recess we will come back in to make a snack. You can choose or ignore foods from each of our bowls of ingredients, as long as in the end your snack has 100 pieces in it." With that, she sent the children off to line up for recess. In my fieldnotes book, I closed the observation with the following comment: "There is nothing that can't be turned into a performance of gender!!!"

My goal in this paper is to raise questions about teachers' interventions into children's exchanges around gender in elementary classrooms. I use the previous vignette to argue that gender is ever-present in the classroom, that even in exchanges and activities that seem to have nothing to do with gender, children in our classrooms are constantly making assertions about the meaning of gender and the authenticity of their own and others' gender performances.

I will speak to the question, "If a teacher does interpret this exchange as being at least in part about gender, what, if any, response is called for?" To address this, I return to my own years of elementary classroom teaching and child rearing. My observations as a teacher and a parent lead me to believe that

children are often able to talk about difficult gender issues in the abstract, in response to a book or an item on the news, in ways that are fair and non-stereotyped. However, when conflicts and concerns arise over gender-related conflicts in the classroom itself, children (like adults) rarely see their own investments in gender in such neutral terms. Understanding children's behavior, beliefs, interests, and words in relation to gender through the lens of "identity performance" (Butler, 1990, 1993; Boldt,1996) can help classroom teachers understand the significance of gender performance to children. This is an important prerequisite to initiating discussions about gender in the classroom. I question the idea that the children's beliefs about gender and enactments of gender are less mature and more problematic than those of adults, and further argue that gender is an important category of being for both children and their adult teachers. I will raise questions about when to intervene, what form intervention might take, and what we can hope for from our intervention.

Performing Gender

Perhaps the most important perspective in gender studies in the past decades has been the move to understand gender—femininity or masculinity—as a performance, rather than an attribute. The work of Judith Butler, a leading feminist theorist, informs us that while what many of us experience what it means to be a boy or a girl, or a man or a woman, as natural, we are, in fact, performing an idea of gender that has been made to seem natural to us since the day we were born. Children and adults signal their understanding of the rules of gender by performing gender norms in behavior, desires, gestures, talents, interests and physical stylization such as gait, vocal styles, and postures. We play games, speak, move, and express emotions in ways that feel like and appear to be our own, and that also identify us as having an ethnic, class, gender, and sexual identity. Butler argues, however, that these behaviors are not natural, but only appear natural because we repeat them so incessantly. This repetition creates the appearance of stable and taken-for-granted ways of being in relation to standard identity markers.

If gender is a performance of norms rather than an expression of who we naturally are, what is it that compels us to perform gender so incessantly? The answer to this is complex. They are, for one thing, socially compulsory performances. These performances—acting like a boy/acting like a girl—are not chosen, but are rather enforced from birth. From the time we are born, gender is used to explain to us who we are, and why we are as we are. As young

children, we learn to use meanings of gender—what we learn it means to be a boy and what we learn it means to be a girl—to understand ourselves and what is expected of us, and to gain social approval and pleasure. When, for example, my son and my niece were both babies, I noticed that while their behavior was very often the same—rolling over, spitting up, laughing, cooing—the things that others noticed and praised, and how they were described, were gender specific. My son's actions—pulling himself to standing, for example—were often interpreted as proof that he was a "strong boy" or a "typical active boy," while my niece, performing the same action, was more often praised for having a good disposition or for looking cute.

I am not alone in these observations. There is a whole body of work that points to substantive and predictable differences in the way infants' and toddlers' behaviors are interpreted and explained through reference to gender (Mondschein, et al., 2000; Connor-Green, 1988; Burnham and Harris, 1992). From the time he was born, my son's gender-meaningless behavior was understood as a marker of "proper" gender; he was told that being a boy meant being strong and active and he was praised for it. Social approval was framed around reading his development as gendered, and this approval was a source of pleasure and meaning for him (and perhaps for his parents, as well). My niece, likewise, learned to experience being a girl as a primary source of meaning, pleasure, and approval. Gender functions in our society to tell us what sorts of behaviors, beliefs, and interests are "normal" within our identity groups; and in sharing those things with others, we get the rewarding satisfaction of that community's approval.

At the same time, however, we can never forget that along with the pleasure of identity there is always a threat. Butler reminds us of what we all know: that those who do not perform in gender-specific ways within an acceptable range are punished. The force of social sanction enacted through peers, family, friends, strangers, professionals (teachers, counselors, lawyers, doctors) threatens to fall squarely on the heads of those who do not conform to the norms. Butler suggests that identifying and punishing "gender offenders" bestows the social privilege that comes with being perceived as "normal" to those who toe the line, and it also communicates what happens to those who step over the line. The driving threat behind demanding narrow gender performance comes from the punishing nature of homophobia. Boys who behave in ways that are not deemed masculine enough find themselves punished by the worried intervention of adults and by the social ostracizing by other children who find them weird or accuse them of being "fags." For girls, the worry and

accusation tend to be somewhat different: they fear (or others fear for them) that in not being feminine enough they will be unattractive to boys and to the other girls who judge them by their perceived desirability to boys. It is important to note that all of us, regardless of how we experience and perform gender, have the potential to gain pleasure and even approval for "who we are." I would not contribute to the difficulties of being a gender bender by suggesting that it is a life of unrelieved misery. But it is clear that some identities carry more of a burdensome threat of social reprisal than others.[1]

We perform identity, then, with both fear and pleasure. Insofar as any of us believe that gendered identity—doing it right as a male or a female—comes naturally to others, our own doubts and uncertainties can cause us tremendous anxiety. We can end up wondering what is wrong with us; we can end up fearing that others will notice our lapses and accuse us of not being proper females or males; we can fear the withdrawal of social approval, love, and protection. I have noted many times the look of confusion and worry on the face of this or that boy in my elementary class when he talks about liking something, only to have other boys say, "Oooooh. That's for girls!" The boy in most cases quickly backpedals from the position, stating something like, "I didn't mean that thing. I meant something else." Even when the child defends his or her position, it is fairly unlikely s/he will mention it again. Both boys and girls end up having things they like at home, privately, but rarely discuss publicly, or with only one or two trusted friends, or they abandon those likes altogether, claiming that they never really did like them or only liked them when they were "babies."[2] When, however, our performances of gender are taken up approvingly by those around us—a girl proclaiming, "I love *My Little Pony*!" and the girls around her responding with enthusiasm, "I do too!"—we can experience relief and pleasures of all kinds. We can explore our interests in a community; the interests can create and solidify social bonds that give us feelings of warmth, belonging, and satisfaction.

It is with these ideas in mind that I return to the kindergarten scene.

Hot Dogs and Masculinity

In my fieldnotes journal, I characterized the opening vignette as a "performance of gender." Tommy's proclamation of the obviously unlikely statement, "I could eat 100 hot dogs," can be read as making an assertion of his masculine gender in at least two ways. Both hot dogs, themselves, and the ability to eat many hot dogs are easily understood as masculine claims. Its not

that girls don't eat hot dogs; it is rather that as a cultural reference, eating hot dogs conjures a train of association both to phallic imagery and to activities that have been accepted as masculine—sports events and camping come immediately to mind. Even given that hot dogs are more often a children's food, eaten by both girls and boys, than an adult food, part of the absurdity of Tommy's statement is the size of hot dogs in comparison with the other foods named—Cheerios, raisins, etc. Tommy asserts a hearty, even macho appetite that leads to a Herculean feat of eating that is far from a feminine ideal. It is, after all, adolescent girls and not adolescent boys who are supposed to learn to curb their appetites, to only pick at their food on their first dates.

More importantly, perhaps, is that I read Tommy's statement—"Well, I would eat 100 hot dogs!"—as a claim about what it means to be a boy in kindergarten. The claim I hear is this: "I am exactly what little boys are supposed to be—the little "bad good boy." Ferguson (2001) argues that for boys in elementary school, there is pressure to be good, but not too good; to be naughty, but not too naughty. She argues that we do not want schoolboys to be out of control, but those boys who are too submissive and well behaved are also not quite the ideal. They are somehow seen as too feminine or too prissy or weak. After all, go the discourses of American boyhood, the boys we like best are just a little unruly, a little tousle-headed, slightly naughty and rambunctious in a charming, good-at-heart way. They are little rogues.

This is exactly what I am suggesting that Tommy signals to his classmates and teacher. He is not out of control. He answers the teacher's question and the answer he gives, while clearly silly and impossible, is not rude or disgusting. It is not truly naughty. He signals to his teacher that he has heard the question and is complying, but only to a certain degree. He is not, after all, one of the goody-goody boys who comply completely with the demands of the female teacher (and here Ben signals that he understands this implied accusation by quickly changing his response). Neither, however, is he a boy who would go too far.

That this becomes a communal session of affirming "boy-ness" is clear in the responses of many of the other boys, as well as of some of the girls. Many of the boys turn their attention away from the teacher and begin looking and grinning at Tommy and each other. One after another requests and demands that his own answer is registered as, or even changed to, "hot dogs." It is not the answer on its own that threatens to disrupt the class order; the child did not, after all, say "100 boogers!" It is the momentum that is building

in the response of the other children. The boys are creating a community around the assertion of themselves as people who could and would eat 100 hot dogs, who could and would threaten to disrupt the class order by offering a slightly naughty response. As each boy adds his name to that "club," he receives the smiles and nods of approval of many of his male peers. The girl who attempts to join the club threatens to break the unity of this gendered pleasure and she is rebuffed by being glared at or completely ignored. Meanwhile the gendered nature of the exchange is consolidated even further by the prim attempts of some of the girls to rally around the schoolgirl role of "little teacher" (Tobin, 2000; Thorne, 1993), answering in a way that carries a clear reprimand to the boys and that attempts to restore order. The teacher, probably wisely, carries on, placidly writing down "100 hot dogs" and bringing things back into order through the recess break and the instructions for the next activity.

My decision to spend this much time discussing one event was driven by the determination to assert that gender is, in fact, far more present in our classrooms than we usually notice. The teacher in this particular scenario did not consider that she was participating in a gendered event until we talked afterwards. Even then, recognizing it as gendered, she didn't see it as especially significant. The question I want to explore next is was this a significant gendered event? If not, what would be a significant event? How should we talk to our students about gender and what do we hope to achieve?

My argument is that because we are performing gender all the time, everything that happens in our classrooms can be understood to have a gendered connotation, even if that connotation is not foregrounded, even if it is not the most important thing that is going on. In the hot dog conversation, gender was at the foreground of what was happening. A group of boys stole a few moments of pleasure and a sense of belonging, an exercise that in many ways is, in fact, a good thing. With this good-natured kindergarten teacher with many years of experience, the expression of high spirits was greeted with tolerance, even with a bit of enjoyment. There is one difficulty, however: to make it work, the boys seemed to feel that it had to be an experience that was exclusive to themselves. The girl who wanted to join in had to be excluded. This brings us to the great dilemma of gender identity.

Gender as Exclusion

In many cultures including dominant western cultures, the meaning of gender has been established through exclusion. How do we know what it means to be "girl" or to be "boy"? If we attempt to define these things, there seems to be no escape from defining them through reference to what they are not. To be "girl" is to be "not boy." Even more doggedly and exclusively, to be "boy" is to be "not girl." Men and boys, whether primarily gender-bending or gender-conforming, have suffered from this exclusion. For gender-bending males, there are, as I've discussed, the social sanctions of being too "girly." For gender-conforming boys and men, "proper" masculinity carries the cost of anxious self-monitoring and self-exclusion from many potentially enjoyable ways of relating and being (Pollock, 1999). The suffering of women and girls has been in many ways more thorough because it has been more systematized in unequal status under the law. That is, in the equation of boy/not girl vs. girl/not boy, the girl/not boy side has been devalued, denied equal protection, access, and privilege.

As a feminist in the 1980's and 1990's, I believed with many others in a two-pronged approach to dealing with the inequalities brought about by gendered exclusions. One prong was to work for change at the level of law and public policy. The second prong was to argue that difference was the result of socialization, and that children could be raised to be gender-neutral. As a parent and an elementary school teacher, I made this goal a particular concern (Boldt, 2002).

It is, of course, important to understand that desires, interests, and styles are not inherently masculine or feminine. Both as a parent and as a teacher, I was insistent with children and adults that "anybody can like anything" and that "there are no such things as boys' things and no such things as girls' things." My intention was to de-stigmatize interests and behaviors that get stigmatized as gender bending. I wanted to open up the possibility that any of us might be able to enjoy and desire things we previously did not allow ourselves to consider.

My perspective was not without problems. No matter how often I proclaimed that dolls are not girl things and *Yu-Gi-Oh* is not a boy thing, there are, in fact, few interests, behaviors, and desires that don't carry some gender connotation, that aren't likely to be more often done or desired by men or by women, by girls or by boys.[3] As a teacher, I considered it a triumph if I was able to get girls interested in computers, math, or science. I rarely considered

that I did so by devaluing the pursuits that the girls often preferred in the place of these. I did not often question the value of computer use, or interest in math or science. Nor did I have nearly as much concern about or success in getting boys interested in the sorts of things that girls called their own in school. For the girls to pursue the interests and skills that were dominated by the boys seemed to promise a step toward privilege, or at least the approval of the teacher. There has long been a more-or-less accepted role of "tomboy" for girls. There is no broadly accepted parallel identity for boys, however; and for boys to associate themselves with things that are usually the province of the girls is often experienced by both children and adults as threatening, and as a step away from power and possibility.

What was missing from my perspective was an understanding of the meaning and pleasure that both children and adults gain from their gender performances. While I continue to believe that "gender differences" are social constructs, I also now understand that gender is marked precisely by the creation of patterned differences. I no longer think it is valuable to try to convince children to deny the powers of "girlness" or "boyness" in their own lives and the lives of others. I also believe, however, it is the teachers' responsibility to challenge the narratives that confirm that gender means exclusion and to provide alternatives both in action and in story in our classrooms.

Talking (and Doing) Gender in the Classroom

I cannot propose a "solution" that will allow us to talk about gender in our classrooms in a way that solves the problems of sexism. Rather, I believe that what we can do as teachers is to create environments in which we learn to negotiate gender. With this in mind, I am going make to two suggestions for thinking about gender in the elementary classroom.

The first suggestion is to look at ourselves as teachers with as much honesty as we can muster. There is a common perception and bias in research and writing that suggests that children are less perceptive and "mature" in their understandings of gender than adults. If we take a hard look at our own teaching practices, then we will find that as teachers, we are as likely to perpetuate gender stereotyping as are the children. There is a wealth of research that demonstrates that teachers treat students differently based on gender, and that these differences perpetuate exactly the problems many of us hope to address. Sadker and Sadker (1995), for example, find that boys are six times more likely to be called on than girls in group situations in school. They are far more likely

to be asked high-quality questions and to be praised and critiqued for the quality of their work. Girls, who receive far less of the teachers' attention, are more likely to be credited for good behavior and following the rules. While the Sadkers took note of the effect of socializing girls to low expectations, they didn't observe that this excess of attention paid to boys also means that they are much more likely to be noticed not complying and to be disciplined. Boys are far more likely to be sent to special education for behavioral nonconformity. Walkerdine (1989) found that teachers are more likely to attribute rationality and true understanding to boys' mathematical work—a subject area that is typically understood as "a boys' thing"—than to girls'. Newkirk (2002), meanwhile, suggests that teachers are more likely to praise and support girls as readers and writers. My own third- and fourth-grade students had no difficulty when I asked them to identify ways that various teachers treated boys and girls differently. They suggested that boys got in more trouble in my class than girls did, and that I did not tend to notice when the girls were "messing around."

I read the Sadker and Sadker (1995) book when I was a teacher. One of the most striking things about their research is that it was often done in the classroom of teachers who were very conscious of gender issues, who identified themselves as practicing gender equity. Their point was that our expectations about gender differences are so engrained in us that they have become invisible. I took this as a challenge and decided to conduct a bit of research in my own class. My first step was to black out all the names and pronouns from the narrative reports I had written for the children at the end of the quarter. I then gave these to another teacher and asked him to predict whether each report was about a girl or a boy. Much to my horror, he had no trouble doing this with 100 percent accuracy. I was talking about the children differently. Just as the Sadker and Sadker research would have predicted, I was assigning the boys active descriptions about their accomplishments, while I predominantly wrote about the girls' personalities. I began to realize that tough talk about gender began, then, with me, with my own practices as a teacher.

I began to talk with the children about the informal research I was conducting. I talked with them about what the Sadkers found, what I was finding, and about how difficult it was to recognize my own complicity in gender stereotyping. I talked about what it was like when I was a child. I talked about efforts I was making to do better. And, I invited them to talk. I asked them to tell me what they noticed about gender in the classroom and at home. I asked them to participate in helping me think about it. I tried to make this a

conversation in which it wasn't about "getting it right" so much as it was about trying to understand how complex it is. One girl talked about how her father treated her and her brother differently. She talked both about how much it bothered her and about the kind of pleasures it gave her. This gave us an opportunity to talk about the rewards and penalties associated with "acting like a girl and acting like a boy." We talked about how that happened at school. We tried to figure out when it was and was not a big problem. It opened up important discussions.

This does not mean that the children in my class were suddenly transformed into perfect, gender-equitable beings. But it does mean that the first of my two suggestions—that we research our own gender biases in the classroom and include the children in the discussion—led to the second of my suggestions. This second suggestion is that we offer and invite as many narratives as possible into the classroom, to give children a way to legitimize their own gender-bending and that of others. I came to understand that although the social constructions of gender strongly influence what we are like, this cannot and should not be used to explain who we are. When adults or children in the classroom offered gender as an explanation, I was quick to counter it with other stories. A child says, "Girls like cute animal stories," and I invariably reply, "Anyone has the right to like stories about cute animals. Loving and caring for all animals, cute or otherwise, is wonderful human way to be. I happen to know many boys and men who love animals. I'll bet you can come up with your own examples. Or we could look on the internet at animal protection groups to see."

In all honesty, the kids rarely wanted to follow through with the "let's see" part of my speech. They knew I was going to be right and they conceded the point. They didn't want to go to the effort of proving themselves wrong. I also knew that many of the kids continued to feel that they were right in spirit, that cute animal stories were a girls' thing, and that boys' ought not to read or write animal stories unless they involved dragons or dogs. But an important part of my goal had become not so much to change the mind of every person, but to legitimatize competing narratives and to create a structure wherein kids could successfully challenge the exclusions of gender.

As an example, I recall the day a small group of my third- and fourth-grade girls came in after recess very upset, and reported to me that a group of boys in our class 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."

In making this argument, these 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 narrative. 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 as well as 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. This argument was of some help. That is, the increasing popularity of women's athletics gives girls a plausible narrative to validate their interests in sports, and it did force the boys to concede that one of their own female classmates was an outstanding athlete; but it wasn't enough. 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 were 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 made by male athletes in comparison with female athletes, the greater popularity of men's sports, and the number of professional men's sports and teams in comparison with women's sports and teams. 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 tack the girls took was to argue that at school, things are supposed to be fair. This was a much more successful strategy, because it appealed to discourses about schooling and morality that often came up in their

daily lives in our ongoing discussions about gender in the classroom—that school is a place where we were working hard for everyone to have fair chances if they wanted them. 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 losses, 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.'"

Conclusion

As an elementary school teacher, I turned to Judith Butler's writing to try to make sense of my own questions about what children were saying and doing about gender in my classroom. I had two questions. The first was how do I understand and respond to the experiences of children in my class whose enactments of gender were not gender normative—for example, a boy whose behavior was stereotypically understood as "effeminate" or a girl who was seen to have the role of "tomboy." This is a question that had I addressed elsewhere (Boldt, 1996), examining the reactions of classmates and myself to gender bending children in my classroom. The second question, the question I focused on here has been this: Why, in spite of my insistence that there were no such things as boys' things and no such things as girls' things, in spite of my efforts to create equal opportunities in the classroom, in spite of my critical attention to stereotypes in literature and daily life, did the children in my class continue to express preferences, attitudes, and behaviors that seemed so clearly delineated by gender? Why did most of the girls continue to refuse to use the classroom computers when offered? Why did so many of them so persistently play "cheerleader" during recess and populate their creative writing with bunnies, ponies, and fairy princesses? Why did so many of the boys write stories full of explosions, car crashes and death? Why did they feel the need to express such vocal disdain for "girls' things"? Why did even the non-athletic boys so often refuse to take up the criticism of the role of sports prowess in establishing their popularity ranking in the class and school? And, what could I do? What was my responsibility?

I came to understand, then, that most of us, gender-bending and gender-conforming alike, experience the confines of gender identity as both positive and negative. It is the deal we make, whether that promises a sense

of "being true to ourselves" or the possibility of meaning, community, and pleasure. The children in my classes, like the adults around them, were compelled to, and at the same time often wanted to, enact gendered roles.

As a teacher, I came to believe that an important first step to talking about gender and equity in my classroom was to be honest about all the pleasure I get from my own gendered identity and all the ways I understand the world through the organizational tool of gender. I needed to examine all the ways I "did gender" (Moss, 1989) to and with the kids in my class. This felt intellectually honest. In using my own struggles, discoveries, and mistakes as the material of class research, I hoped to demonstrate that everyone—not just children—struggles with these issues. I hoped to show that sometimes it was hard to admit that my pleasure involved excluding others because part of the pleasure was in the sharing of a sense of community, and I hoped that we could at least at times expand what counted as community. Most realistically, perhaps, I believed that gender would always be used in ways that were troubling, but that we were developing a bank of stories and images that would allow any of us to contest exclusions and to experience our own gender performances as legitimate.

What should the teacher in the kindergarten scenario that opened this paper have done? I think she did what could be done. She allowed the children's fun. She accepted and recorded the girl's assertion that she, too, could join in this fun—she, too, could eat 100 hot dogs. She accepted and recorded the other girl's assertion that 100 Fruit Loops was an appropriate response. I was an occasional visitor to her classroom and thus was not privy to other things she may have said or done in the larger class context that supported or challenged the implied gender exclusivity of the event.

In my own classroom, I believe the exchange would have taken place in an environment in which those kinds of exchanges were sometimes noticed and commented upon, where perhaps another child could have acknowledged the assertion that it was okay for a girl to eat 100 hot dogs or for a boy to prefer 100 Nerds, even if the other boys did not choose Nerds. I know that neither the children nor I would challenge this all the time. I didn't want to risk eradicating pleasure from the classroom by constantly critiquing and correcting, by insisting that everything has to apply equally to everyone all the time. I hoped that the children would come to have enough experience with these conversations that, if it mattered to them, they could stand up for themselves or for each other, or they could retort silently, to themselves or with significant

looks to others. I think often this would be enough—to know that exclusions could be challenged if it was important to do so at that moment. It is enough if we are able to help the children feel supported by us and by some of their classmates, to experience an authentic and safe sense of gendered self in the classroom.

These goals—that together we (teachers and children) explore the workings of gender in the classroom and in the world beyond, that we admit our struggles and foibles, that we tell many kinds of stories—are modest goals; they are not about grand gender revolutions. They are things that we all can do and they allow change to proceed in an environment that is, I hope, characterized by a sense of intellectual curiosity, active inquiry, and interpersonal care.

Endnotes

[1] An important issue in naming gender as "femininity" or "masculinity" that I do not address in this essay is that it fails to account for the increasing visibility of intersexed (hermaphroditic) adults and children who pose new challenges to traditional notions of gender. For a discussion of these issues, see Dreger, 1999 & 2000; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Kessler, 1998; Preves, 2003.

[2] There are, of course, exceptions to any of these descriptions. Individual boys took nontraditional positions and escaped serious social sanction. Classes varied in the rigidity of the norms they upheld and the intensity of the policing they practiced. In the final section of this paper, I offer two suggestions for how to make it more likely that kids will take nontraditional positions.

[3] Of course, all this is more complex when other identity factors are brought into the analysis. Children are not simple "girl" and "boy." Rather, their tastes, desires, interests, and behaviors are determined in a complicated mix of gender, race, sexuality, social class, and personal experience. In my class, for example, there were activities that were embraced by girls (e.g., hula) or boys (e.g., pig hunting) that marked not just gender, but ethnicity, in this case, Hawaiian-ness.

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WOULDN'T IT BE COOL IF EVERYONE TURNED OUT TO BE BLUE? BUILDING A CURRICULUM ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION FOR NINE- AND TEN-YEAR-OLDS

stephanie nelson

STEPHANIE NELSON grew up in western Europe and found her way "home" to New York City after moving around the northeastern United States. She holds a B.A. in communication from the University of Hartford, and worked in the business world before pursuing an M.S. in education from Bank Street College (1996). She has taught nine- and ten-year-olds at the Bank Street School for Children for five years. Stephanie wrote this essay during the 2003-04 school year while on leave on the island of Maui, where she spent her days writing, working with flowers and animals, hiking, surfing, and savoring island life.

The first time that I addressed the meaning of the word "gay" with nine- and ten-year-old students was in my initial year at Bank Street School for Children, my third year of teaching. We had just finished a community discussion on how to deal with anger and to avoid giving "put-downs." It had been a productive talk, or so I thought, filled with the students' heartfelt pledges to accept each other, take deep breaths in moments of frustration, and negotiate conflict rather than to verbally or physically fight back. Suddenly, from across the room, I heard Lana yell in anger at Danny, her good male friend, "Well, you're gay!" A few minutes later, Lana admitted that she had made the comment to get back at Danny. She was angry with him for divulging to his friends that she had a crush on a boy in class.

On a personal level, I felt deflated and disappointed. After all, I had just finished what I assumed was a successful meeting, only to have my feelings of success shattered. I run what I think is a safe, open-minded classroom where diversity and individuality are respected. The outburst reminded me of how much more complicated creating a safe environment is in practice than in theory. As I was standing in the middle of the room, feeling unsure of what to do next, Sid became very upset with the two involved in the conflict. He yelled that there is nothing wrong with being gay and that it isn't a put-down. I knew right away that we all needed to deal with this.

First, I talked to the two arguing friends, who were clearly in distress, frustrated, and teary. Lana was upset with both Danny's indiscretion and her own behavior. I then called a class meeting. We talked about the meaning(s) of "gay," including its use as a derogatory term. Most students knew that "gay" means homosexual, and many were adamant that there was nothing wrong with being gay. Of course, this was also Lana's position, the girl who had used "gay" in retaliation.

At the end of the day, I was pleased that I had dealt with the incident in a straightforward manner. I also knew that my actions were reactive, not proactive. In addition to questioning my effectiveness in making the classroom safe, I asked myself how I was dealing/not dealing with lesbian and gay issues. Later, pursuing research on safe classrooms, I understood that I shared with many others the uncertainty about creating real safety for all students and changing the curriculum accordingly. T. Prince (1996) comments:

> When well-meaning teachers begin to address discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation, their first impulse usually is to declare that they no longer tolerate such words as 'faggot' and 'dyke' in the classrooms…These teachers are not creating 'hate-free' zones; they are creating 'speech restriction' zones…. Unless students have been genuinely educated with solid information about homosexuality and bisexuality and the real people who are and were what they are calling 'fags' and "dykes," these students will have no reason not to want to name-call and almost certainly will engage in such behavior as soon as the teacher is not around to prevent it. (p. 29)

At the School for Children, a conscious effort is made to address difficult issues across the age levels. Several teachers regularly include questions about sexual identity in their curriculum. During my student teaching placement with the 9s/10s, for example, my cooperating teacher read out loud *Am I Blue?*, the story of a young teenage boy who struggles with the possibility that he might be gay. I did not know the context for this reading and I realize now that I did not even know enough to ask. I had never been exposed to such literature before, and the story had a profound effect on me.

Growing up, I don't remember homosexuality being discussed in school, and do not believe that I knew any lesbians or gay men. It was not a topic with which I was comfortable. In recent years, however, I have developed close friendships with both women and men who are gay. We have talked about

their experiences growing up and going through schools in which homosexuality was rarely acknowledged, let alone addressed in the curriculum. As my own comfort level discussing sexual orientation has increased, so has my interest in making it a topic that children can talk about in school.

The Evolution of a Curriculum

Until three years ago, I did not discuss sexual identity in a systematic way. Discussion of gay and lesbian issues was limited to meetings about AIDS. Research confirms this to be a common practice. Lipkin (1996) comments:

> Mention of homosexuality, if there is any, is most often done in the context of health and HIV curricula. Although it is perfectly appropriate to discuss some aspects of homosexuality in these venues, there is a strong possibility that students' views will be distorted in the process. We run the risk of having them think that homosexuality is inevitably linked with deviance and illness. Even if the teacher is gay-friendly and the curriculum is accurate, placing the matter under the subject of "health" or "disease prevention" carries its own message. (p. 57)

Lipkin gave me pause to consider how often, and in what contexts, the questions of sexual identity are addressed in my classroom. For example, homosexuality is broached during our Boy/Girl Talks. These talks were part of the curriculum when I began teaching the 9s/10s. The girls and boys are split up in gender groups and have a forty-five-minute meeting once a week with a teacher of the same gender. The talks are informal, relaxed, and based on the children's questions. The children anonymously write their gender and sexuality questions on index cards and hand them to me. As the students become more comfortable with the talks, they often request to take a new direction in our meetings. I give a mid-curriculum questionnaire asking about their comfort levels with the topic and what they want to discuss.

The boys often ask directly about homosexuality, and their questions are usually focused on sexual intercourse. In the five years I have led the Girl Talks, I don't ever remember a girl asking about gay sex. I don't assume they don't wonder. But out in the open, the girls express interest in their bodily changes and social relationships. In that first year of leading the Girl Talks, I was aware that I wasn't dealing with sexual identity because I did not know what to say. The girls did not bring up the topic and so I was silent. I was frustrated with my own uncertainty and failure to act.

Then, during one of my talks with the girls (we were discussing crushes—What is a crush? How do you know if you have a crush? How do you act when you have a crush? How do crushes affect friendships with both boys and with girls?)—something changed for me. Crushes are a common and confusing phenomenon for my students. They express excitement as well as fear of peer pressure about the need to have a crush, even when they don't feel ready. It suddenly hit me that if the children at this age have crushes on the opposite sex, it is very likely that some children have crushes on someone of the same sex. I knew from my discussions with gay friends that they had felt different for as long as they could remember, and certainly at nine and ten. So I asked the girls, "Do only boys have crushes on girls and girls on boys?" Right away someone answered that boys could have crushes on boys and girls on girls. The girls did not volunteer more information and there was some giggling. I simply allowed the question and answer to hang in the air.

Two other experiences relating to the Girl Talks helped me understand the types of questions my girls were having about sexual identity. First, Jena wrote in her Writer's Notebook about feeling gay. I talked to her parents, who were very supportive and reported that Jena had spoken with them about her questions. I wanted to be sure that Jena's sense of self was affirmed in school and that her concerns were included in our Girl Talks, because I knew she might not be the only student with these questions. Around the same time, Susan's parents told me that she wondered whether having crushes on other girls and female teachers meant that someone is gay. A shy child, Susan didn't want to ask me these questions and didn't know her parents were telling me, so I needed to weave this into my talks carefully.

With this in mind, I started discussions on crushes and on different kinds of love in the Girl Talks. I made sure to emphasize that sexual identity is not something that is clear as soon as adolescence starts, and that many people don't figure out "who they are" and "who they like" until they are adults. I pointed out that crushes and sexual feelings are not always indicative of sexual orientation. I reassured the students that adolescence can be a confusing time and that it's okay to be confused, but I encouraged them to find a "safe" adult with whom to talk openly about their feelings. I was keenly aware of how difficult it can be to reassure some students that they probably are not gay, while also validating others who might be.

Gay Talks

Eventually, with the help of the middle school coordinator, I decided to follow the Boy/Girl Talks with Gay Talks, which would begin with anonymous questions from the children. I wondered if I needed to make a special announcement to the parents. I didn't do that when an extension was added to the social studies curriculum or when we had a classroom meeting on recess disagreements. And yet, this had the potential to be controversial. We decided not to make a separate announcement to the families, but rather to include it in my general report at Spring Curriculum Night. Afterwards, I received feedback from one parent. He was very supportive about what I was doing. No parent disapproved of the Talks. I do not interpret the silence to mean that everyone is on board. But over time I have become more explicit in discussing both Boy/Girl and Gay Talks with parents.

Each year, I make changes to the curriculum that reflect new materials and activities, current events, and the students' interests.[1] Unfortunately, much of the literature I have found is addressed either to adolescents and young adults or to young children. Little is appropriate for the upper elementary grades. My students are still children, yet they are on the cusp of adolescence. Their anonymous questions reveal that they have many thoughts about sexual orientation and that they often don't understand the information that they have acquired via television, movies, and older siblings. Their questions have included:

Why do people want to be gay?
Why do people become gay?
How do people become gay?
Why do people think gays are disgusting?
Why do homosexual people have different rights from heterosexual people?
Do gay people feel uncomfortable letting other people know they're gay?
Do gays have big weddings?
Are there lots of gay people?
Do gays have sex?
Are lesbians discriminated against as well?
What does gay and lesbian mean?
How do you know if someone is gay?
Why do other people make fun of people that are gay?
How should you react if a person who is gay approaches you?

What do you do if you hear others make fun of gays or say "put-downs"?
Can a man be gay and still like a woman?
Can a woman like a man and be married to him and still be a lesbian?

I always begin the first official Gay Talks meeting by asking the children what comes to mind when they hear the word gay. During this first brainstorming session, stereotypes and pop culture references usually cover the chart paper. The comments vary from stereotypes such as, "Gay men have earrings," to noting gay-friendly prime-time shows such as *Will and Grace*. The children, themselves, recognize some of the comments as stereotypical, but all ideas are honored without debate in a brainstorming session. Later in the Talks, we address the possible origins and implications of these stereotypes.

Read Aloud: *Am I Blue?*

What began as a series of discussions about gay issues, has evolved into a mini-curriculum. For example, at the end of the Talks I have begun to read *Am I Blue?* to the children. The story tells of a sixteen-year-old boy who is confused about his sexual identity. He is beaten up by a bully because he appears to be gay. The boy is granted three wishes by his fairy godfather, Melvin, who is himself a gay man. The turning point occurs when Melvin changes anyone who is gay into the color blue. Many people now appear to be different shades of blue, some are clearly blue, while others who might have inclinations towards, or questions about being gay are a lighter shade. At the end of the story, the bully is bright blue.

The language of the book is geared towards adolescents. When reading aloud, I have made a decision to change some phrases, such as "jumping his bones." That has been my judgement call because I know I'm reading a story meant for older students and I feel responsible for the language content. On the other hand, I question this decision and wonder if it would be more helpful to explain phrases like "jumping his bones" and talk about the language with my students. I do not, however, change derogatory words such as "faggot," because this is language the kids have already heard or will likely hear.

We also discuss the ways in which the fairy godfather personifies gay male stereotypes that my students have inevitably mentioned earlier in our talks. In the post-story notes, B. Coville, the author, describes why he depicted the character this way, as well as his apprehension in doing so. I read this to the children before I read the story so that they might listen more critically and thoughtfully. The students are always engrossed. The first time I read the story,

the whole class applauded at the end. Another time, a student wondered out loud what color people around her might be. Before anyone could respond, I intervened. I said it was fine to share personal feelings, but it was important not to put others on the spot that way. In retrospect, I think I might have been less didactic. I could have asked the students why that question might make others feel unsafe. On the other hand, I hope that my quick reaction let the students know that their safety is of utmost importance to me.

I often overhear students' informal conversations following the reading of *Am I Blue?* This year, as I was walking into the auditorium, I heard one boy say to his friend, "Wouldn't it be cool if almost everyone in the world turned out to be blue?" By making it acceptable to talk about homosexuality in the classroom, it seems likely that more discussions will now take place without me. My hope is that our classroom discussions will help prepare my students to handle the topic on their own.

Debate: Pros and Cons of Gay Marriage

One year, gay marriage came up early in the talks and the children kept coming back to it. The students were confused about whether or not gays could marry; and while most were clear that gays were discriminated against (e.g., name calling), they were surprised that gays might not have the same rights as others. At the next meeting, I confirmed for the students that homosexual couples were not allowed to legally marry.[2] The students did not understand why. We struggled with this conversation for a half-hour, and I asked the students why people might not want to legalize gay marriage. With each response, I tried to get them to dig deeper.

Stephanie: Why would people not want everyone to have the same rights?
Noni: Because gays are different.
Stephanie: What makes them different?
Justine: Men want to be with men, and women want to be with women.
Stephanie: So why would that change whether or not they can marry?
Erik: It shouldn't.
Stephanie: But it does make a difference. They cannot marry. Why is this?

We started going around in circles because we did not have enough information. In discussing this meeting with the middle school coordinator, and in brainstorming a way to "hook" the students with an activity, we decided to have the students research the pros and cons of gay marriage. A culminating debate would allow the children to use their new knowledge. In the 9s/10s, we

teach the students to write a persuasive essay, and a debate is a good link between skill development and curricular content.

Finding appropriate web sites, however, was not an easy feat. The material we found was written for adults, so I took time to teach the children how to scan the articles for key pieces of information and how to take notes. The students were excited about the research and worked in pairs. In the end, almost everyone wanted to argue pro-gay marriage, which speaks to both the student and parent body of the school. I had to ask for volunteers to switch to the anti-gay marriage team, and made it clear that their debate perspective did not necessarily reflect their personal opinions.

The debate project was a positive, if flawed, experience. On the positive side, by researching and hearing about the opposing views, the students came away with a better understanding of the complexities of gay rights and different kinds of discrimination. A number of students were frustrated by the lack of an answer to this situation. I would argue that frustration and struggle to comprehend is powerful and might eventually lead to action and social change. The project was flawed to the extent that the available material was too challenging. The tricky vocabulary and subject matter challenged many students, although their interest in the topic did not wane. This was not an activity they could do independent of adult support.

Civil Rights: Gays and Boy Scouts

At the same time that I was working on the Gay Issues curriculum, the entire Middle School was reworking its civil rights curriculum that coincides with the Martin Luther King, Jr., day of remembrance. Each grade level decides to talk about discrimination and equality with a different focus. The 9s/10s teachers agreed to introduce a four-week curriculum on the history of the civil rights movement with a series of meetings and activities revolving around the following questions:

What does it mean to "stand up for" something?
What kinds of things would you (the students) stand up for?
How do you stand up for something? What are the different ways?

Two years ago, I learned of a documentary titled *Scout's Honor*. This film tells the story of Stephen Cozza, an active Boy Scout in California, who learns about the organization's discriminatory policy against gays and is part of a grass-roots movement to combat it. As soon as I previewed the film, I knew that I would incorporate it into this curriculum because it is focused on a young

adolescent with whom my students could identify. *Scout's Honor* could also enable me to link our discussions of gay issues to broader conversations about civil rights. The story shows a young person standing up for what he believes. It exemplifies how a student approximately my students' age, can make a difference.

Early in the film viewers are told that Steven is not gay. I have struggled with whether or not this is helpful to the students. I imagine that it is a comfort to some and makes Steve Cozza more accessible. Ian Barnard (1996) suggests that straight teachers should avoid proclaiming their sexuality because it can have the effect of making the classroom more comfortable for straight students, as in "she's one of us," at the expense of gay and lesbian students. I have wondered if Steven's heterosexuality takes away from the power of the film for students watching who might be gay. At the next showing, it is a question I will pose directly to them.

Scout's Honor is a challenge for nine- and ten-year-olds because it actually follows three stories and jumps back and forth among them. It is also filled with flashbacks and inserts of newsreels and interviews relating to the stories of Tim Curran and James Dale, who both fought in court for their right to be openly gay in the Boy Scouts. I need to be present and active during the showing of the film. I tell the students before we even start watching that they might get confused, and that I will be stopping the tape regularly to answer questions. Despite the challenge, the topic is engaging enough that they want to persevere through the tricky bits and get back to Steven Cozza's story. Every year, at least one student has been interested enough to visit the related website, www.ScoutingforAll.org.

Many of my students have voiced indignation that people have lost their opportunity to be scouts because of their sexual orientation. They are also stunned to find out that the Supreme Court has ruled in favor of the Boy Scouts. It is hard for fourth graders to understand the government system and lawsuits, so I do not belabor the point. What the students do come away with is the knowledge that ordinary people can fight for what they believe in, and that it can be a long and hard process.

Successes, Setbacks, and Moving Forward

The year after the class debated the pros and cons of gay marriage, *The New York Times* began to include same-sex couples in the Weddings section. That year, Erik, a former student, brought the article about the decision to include same-sex unions into his current affairs meeting. Erik told his teachers

that he didn't completely understand the article, "but last year we talked a lot about gays with Stephanie and I think this is important." Then last fall I learned that two of my former students made homophobic comments in their new class. When I heard this, I was disappointed, especially considering that the students who made the remarks had been very vocal in their pro-gay rights comments the preceding spring. When I asked their teacher what she had said to them, she responded, "I didn't have to say anything. Their classmates called them on it!"

It is anecdotes like these that have helped me to re-examine my overall goal. When I began the Gay Talks, I had an idealistic vision of ridding the world of homophobia and making it a safer, more inclusive place. Truth be told, this is still my hope. But now I set my sights more modestly on raising the children's awareness of, and comfort talking about, sexual orientation.

There have been numerous times, especially when I was just starting to teach this curriculum, when I felt I was making no difference whatsoever. One of my earliest meetings on the topic, for example, led to a link between homosexuals and child abuse:

> *Stephanie: Why do you think some people put down gays?*
> *Juliann: Maybe people are scared.*
> *Stephanie: What are they scared of? What makes them scared?*
> *Juliann: There has been a rapist in New York and I saw his picture in the subway and I heard that maybe he was gay.*

From there the discussion moved quickly. Timo commented that some people feared that gays would hurt children. I was dumbfounded and unsure what to say next. I was certainly not prepared to deal with this, and yet, there it was. My thoughts jumped to my gay and lesbian friends who spend their lives teaching children. The idea that a student in my class would link child abuse to homosexuals upset me. I fear my reaction was a bit knee-jerk, as I quickly explained (from my own knowledge and research) that there was no link between homosexuality and child abuse. Later that day as I discussed these events with a colleague, I was saddened to think what children may believe and fear in today's world.

In the beginning, it was hard for me to take a step back and let the discussions progress as I would with many other topics. I have learned that my goal cannot be to change everyone's attitude. It can be my ideal, but not my goal. My goal is to educate and to expect respect in and outside of my classroom. At times, this has been hard. As a supporter of legalizing gay mar-

riage, I had to take a deep breath and allow for meaningful arguments against it. I knew that most of the arguments are based in religion, and with students from different faiths and with varying degrees of orthodoxy, I needed to respect all points of view. This was my personal challenge.

My students know how to respond to questions about sexual identity in a sensitive and politically correct manner. However, at other times, it is difficult to hold them accountable for their words and actions. For even though they speak eloquently about equal rights and including each other, there are many examples each year of how hard it is to make change happen. Every year, certain children are not included at the inevitable "cool table"; girls protest that the boys don't let them play on the football or basketball teams; and homophobic comments can be overheard in classrooms and hallways.

This past year, well into the curriculum, we reviewed the statistics on the numbers of gays and lesbians in America. After discussing the inadvisability of making assumptions about people's sexuality, one child interjected, "…but there are no gay teachers here [at school], right?"

Although sexual identity is initially a difficult subject for many of my students in post-talk discussions, they frequently note their increased ease with the topic. My own experience motivates me. While I never heard homosexuality discussed in a negative manner, the fact that it was rarely discussed at all was a loud message in and of itself. As a society, we do not give voice to that which we feel is unimportant, or that with which we are not comfortable. I am working to change this. In part, I am committed to discussing sexual identity because I want the gay children in my class to know that they are not alone. More broadly, I am committed to this topic because I want to educate children to "the fullest and most thorough understanding of the world" (Counts, 1932, p.290) and this must include issues of diversity and equality. So forward I will strive, one discussion, one activity, and one curriculum at a time.

Endnotes

[1] Gay and lesbian lives continue to receive exposure in both the news and pop culture. Television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* are becoming mainstream, and same-sex couples appear in the *The New York Times* "Sunday Styles—Weddings" section. In 2003, the New Hampshire Episcopal Church consecrated its first openly gay bishop.

[2] Since my first Gay Talks in 2001, there have been rapid changes regarding same-sex marriage and civil unions. Currently, only two European

nations, Netherlands and Belgium, legally perform same-sex marriages. Two provinces in Canada have also legalized same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriages also exist in the state of Vermont under the title of civil unions, where gay couples are granted the benefits of marriage (http://en.wikipedia.org/wike.Gay_marriage). In November 2003, the Massachusetts high court ruled that gay couples have a constitutional right to marry, and gave the state legislature six months to change laws to make this happen. Same-sex marriage and gay rights are controversial, but hot topics in the current 2004 presidential campaign. The social and political changes currently taking place mean that the curriculum needs constant re-examination, and that it continues to unfold and change with current events.

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Shepard, T. (2001). *Scout's Honor* (a documentary). Institutional orders; New Day Films (1.888.367.9154): Personal orders, *Scout's Honor* Production office (1.415.255.1044) or tomshep@comcast.net.

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Organizations:

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN)
122 West 26th Street, Suite 1100
New York, NY 10001
Phone: 212.727.0135
Email: glstn@glstn.org
Website: www.glstn.org

Publications:

Eisen, V. & Hall, I.(Eds.) (1996). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and education. *Harvard Educational Review*, Special Issue 66 (2). Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

molly sexton-reade

MOLLY SEXTON-READE currently teaches three- and-four-year-old children in a parent-cooperative nursery school. She began her teaching career in 1980 at The Dillon Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. A Bank Street graduate, Molly spent two years in Australia working with children as a volunteer in schools and hospitals. She moved to Connecticut in 1988, and returned to the classroom in 1993.

Twenty years ago, as a young kindergarten teacher, I overheard a conversation between Tim and William, two five-year-old boys in my class, about what happens when someone dies. They went back and forth about what actually occurs to the body. I was struck by the thoughtfulness of their exchange and wanted to open the topic up for a class discussion. Later that day I gathered a tape recorder and a blank cassette and set about having the first of what would become many conversations with young children about death. Over the years, death has continued to find a way into the curriculum, from the dead bird we found on the playground, through the sudden loss of a beloved custodian, as well as the demise of several class pets. Each of these events has provided an opportunity for learning and exploration.

In a discussion of the ways in which the pre-operational child is influenced by "magical" thinking, G. Koocher (1973) suggests that such "misunderstandings" take on particular importance for the bereaved child. The connection between a child's understanding of death and his/her grief is at the heart of the matter for me, as a mother and a teacher. When my sons were ages four and one, my husband—their father—died of leukemia. We have worked hard to meet the challenge of this loss. My own efforts at helping them when they were young were enriched by my knowledge of a young child's understanding of death. Watching one of my son's preschool teachers struggle with how to speak with him, with me, and with the other families (often choosing simply not to speak of the loss at all), I saw a real need for conversations around death in the classroom.

A Developmental Rationale

Play is an important arena in which children strive to gain competence. In the dramatic play of young children and later in their representational play, aspects of everyday life are rehearsed in an attempt to gain understanding and mastery. As educators, we know that the classroom curriculum must reflect the real experiences and interests of the children. We use their play as a starting point, and then extend it when we include the study of community workers in the social studies program and the study of familiar animals in the science program.

Death is a central theme in children's play. It is the coming and going, the leaving and returning, that is enacted over and over again in the play of young children. John Bowlby's (1973) seminal work on attachment and separation identifies the child's desire for secure attachment to important individuals as basic to human development. Attachment also involves learning to separate from these same individuals. Young children can be seen trying to master this process of attachment and separation and the tensions that it creates in their dramatic play. Death may be viewed as a part of the attachment-separation continuum, and as such, deserves the same level of explanation and concern as the smaller, daily experiences that frame their lives.

The growth in a child's understanding of death, particularly its universality and finality, can also be understood within the context of cognitive development. Piaget's work provides a basis for examining the progression from egocentric thought to the use of other's experiences to create a broader grasp of what death means (Childers and Wimmer,1971; Piaget, 1963). Children who have reached the concrete-operational and formal-operational levels have a more accurate understanding that death will happen to all living things. When children have experiences with death and the opportunity to express their ideas, they can begin to refine their understanding of its meaning.

As teachers, we also need to be cognizant of the environment in which our students live. Today's children are exposed to information about death through a wide variety of media. They see it on television, hear about it on the radio, and overhear the conversations of adults. We have a responsibility to provide opportunities for children to process this information in ways that are developmentally appropriate. The concerns about the "magical" thinking of bereaved children are relevant in dealing with all children.

Death in the Classroom

Including death in the early childhood classroom involves seizing teachable moments as much, if not more than, planning specific activities. Many classrooms, for example, contain a pet. Part of the rationale for having these animals are the moments they may afford for managing a potential loss. It can be tempting to remove that floating fish quickly before the children arrive in the morning, but when you do so, an important learning opportunity has been lost. We have had several fish die over the years in my class. Often, one of the children first notices that a fish is behaving oddly. I take the time then to alert the other children that something may be wrong. On the day when it can be seen floating, we look closely—to wonder what is going on. I ask the children to observe carefully and to articulate what it is they can see that leads them to believe that the fish is dead. This gives us an opportunity to talk more generally about what death means.

The next step is to determine what to do with the body. While the children are often quick to suggest flushing the fish down the toilet, there is usually one child who wants to bury it. I support the idea of burial as it provides an opportunity to learn about a funeral in a relatively calm setting without the distress that is often part of a family event. Each time I have organized a burial with children they have approached it with solemnity and sincerity. There are always spontaneous expressions of sadness—missing the pet and loving it. The children often return to the grave to show parents, and sometimes to create special markers. All of these experiences illustrate the children's interest in this part of the life cycle and their ability to recognize its importance.

While one cannot set up a timetable to explore death, teachers need to take advantage of serendipitous events. Bugs are sometimes found dead or alive in the classroom or on the playground, and plants or flowers can be found in classrooms in various stages of the life cycle. It would be possible to orchestrate situations which would result in a death, but that is not necessary. My present classroom has become a haven for ladybugs. While these are usually found alive by the children and released outdoors, in mid-January the bugs often die shortly after they have been discovered. These deaths are relatively innocuous, and so provide a chance to talk about what happened without much emotional involvement. We are also able to compare and contrast the dead ones with the newly discovered live ones. In addition, those flowers that are sometimes brought to school by teachers or children eventually will fade and again can be fodder for such a discussion.

Death in the Lives of Children

I believe that including talk about death and its meaning offers three main benefits for all children, especially the bereaved child. First, these discussions offer an opportunity for the child to tell her story without being the focus of the conversation. To be able to share family history can be an important part of feeling that people know who you are, that you belong. Second, as the whole class has the chance to share their stories, the bereaved child may also gain the benefit of learning that she is not as alone as she may have felt before. Third, the child is helped to tease out her own ideas and perceptions about death. With adult guidance, these ideas may be refined and become more accurate. My own boys have very different ways of dealing with their loss. One is more private than the other. I believe even the more private of the two would have gained some comfort from classrooms where death was not a taboo topic.

Classroom teachers must be aware of any loss that has been experienced by the children. This knowledge is crucial to conducting productive and safe discussions about death. I believe it is also important to inform parents about upcoming classroom conversations. For the last ten years, I have been the head teacher at a parent-cooperative preschool in a small town in northwestern Connecticut. Two years ago the mother of Alex, a three-year-old child in my class, died suddenly only two weeks into the year. I knew that I needed to be prepared to support this family in an intimate way. I also knew I needed to offer support to the other families of this class. I wanted them to know that while I wasn't going to make an announcement to the group about this loss, if Alex initiated a conversation, he was going to be free to share his news. My reason for not making a formal announcement to the children was two-fold. I felt that because they had only just begun to know each other, this information might be confusing; also, they did not know Alex's mother. In addition, I felt that the support we could most offer Alex was to provide a safe and friendly place that remained constant in his life. To single Alex out by sharing the information would be counter to that goal. I am not sure it was the correct way to handle it, but it felt right, and that is sometimes all we can rely on.

I did, of course, inform all the parents about this loss. I offered them the opportunity to meet with me one evening to discuss how to talk with children about death and dying. Families have a variety of beliefs, and it is crucial to treat them all with respect. I made it clear that I wanted to know if they had any questions or reservations about the way I was handling the situation. Only a few parents came to the meeting, but we had a good conversation. None of

the parents ever expressed concern about how things were being handled at school. In fact, some parents made special efforts to include Alex in their plans.

Life is unpredictable. Including death as a topic for discovery in the classroom may well ease the handling of future traumatic losses. Several months after the class conversation that I described at the beginning of this paper, Jimmy, a beloved school custodian, died suddenly. It was a loss felt intimately by the staff and the children. In a small way, having had that class conversation gave me a base from which I could help the children process this loss. I was so glad I had taken that "teachable" moment when it presented itself. We did a lot of grief work that year, including dedicating one of our monthly newsletters to Jimmy, and including in it the children's memories of him. We ended that school year by creating and planting a memorial garden for Jimmy right outside our classroom door. This was a project that involved staff and children and families. For many years after, the garden remained a tribute to Jimmy and to the love the children had for him.

Death is a multi-leveled subject. It evokes strong feelings and big questions for all of us. By deciding to include it in an early childhood curriculum, I believe a teacher is making a brave choice. Conversations, no matter how well intentioned or designed, may have unforeseen and difficult results. When my younger son, Sam, was four, I was his preschool teacher. We were having a class discussion about fathers. The children were sharing things that were special about their fathers, such as, he goes to work, he plays with me. Sam matter-of-factly volunteered, as I knew he would, that his father was dead. One of the other children began to cry following this revelation. She seemed simply very sad. I comforted her for quite a while. She recovered and I made sure I told her mother about the conversation when she picked up her daughter. I knew how critical it was for my son to be able to share his loss with his classmates, but I should have done a better job anticipating the reactions of the children and informing their parents about the possibility of this revelation beforehand.

If my twenty-plus years of teaching have shown me anything, it is that the topic of death more often than not will find a way to enter the classroom. Sometimes, it is the death of a family pet, sometimes a grandparent, and at times a more unexpected loss. We owe it to ourselves and to our students to be prepared. I believe that a central part of this preparation is allowing the children to have experience talking and learning about death. Work centered around this topic enriches the entire school community, as well. When my son was in second grade, the class's pet mouse, Lightning, died. I worked along

with the teacher to help the children create a memory quilt in honor of the mouse as a way of processing their grief. At the end of the year, the teacher, a remarkable and gifted woman, returned the quilt to me. She suggested that I use the quilt as a tool to create a safe place for other children to talk about death. Then, earlier this year, our local school suffered an enormous tragedy with the sudden death of a fourth-grade student. I was able to offer the quilt to his classroom teacher as she worked hard to comfort her students.

I have become comfortable including discussions of death in my classroom. The conversations I have had with children individually and in group settings have been windows into their minds and hearts. I cherish those moments, and believe that the children have been offered a chance to share something of themselves and to refine their understanding of the world. As I continue to do this work, I want to be able to be more complete in my endeavors. This year I have Susan, Alex's younger sister, in my class. As I get to know this little girl, I wonder how to create the best environment for her as she continues to deal with the loss of her mother. She often volunteers that her mother is dead. I am left feeling that my next assignment is to find ways for her to express her thoughts and feelings more completely. As a classroom teacher, I am not equipped to work intensively with a grieving child. That work is the task of her family and mental health professionals. The opportunity I am seeking to provide for Susan is more akin to the chances we provide for children to share family news such as the birth of a sibling.

My boys are now well on their way to becoming young men. Their bereavement no longer falls within the realm of early childhood education. But as a nursery school teacher, I remain committed to offering children the chance to share their thoughts and most precious feelings about death and dying. It can be difficult work, but like most challenging experiences, can also be enormously rewarding.

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THE NEED TO BE APART IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTING

zenaida muslin

ZENAIDA MUSLIN holds a B.A. in education from the University of Puerto Rico, where she was born, and an M.A. in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University. She has taught and worked on curriculum and textbooks in the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Europe. Zeny, as she is affectionately known, has been at Bank Street for thirteen years, as a Spanish teacher and as Diversity Coordinator. This is the first year she has devoted her full time and energy to the important work of the Diversity Coordinator.

I arrived in Manhattan an experienced educator. Several years as a public school teacher and teacher trainer in Puerto Rico gave me a solid foundation in the field of education. I was confident about teaching in any school, public or independent. My work at an international school in Rome provided a rich ground in which I developed sensitivity about culture and class issues. This awareness was sharpened further during my tenure at an independent American school in Puerto Rico, where I was head of the Spanish department. Living abroad had heightened my appreciation for my Puerto Rican roots. I ached for what has been lost from this culture and feared for what we were still in danger of losing because so many Puerto Ricans so fully embraced American culture.

Two years after I moved to New York City with my family, I began working at an independent school as a Spanish teacher. As years went by, my understanding of the diversity issues at this school grew. I became more involved with those most affected by issues of race and class, the kids of color and their families. We—teachers and administrators—noticed that after a year in the school, the academic work and social behavior of these children suffered.

The majority of the kids of color arrived at this school in the seventh grade. Most of them entered through the efforts of Prep for Prep, an organization that scouts the public school system for academically talented students and gives them a strong academic foundation before placing them in independent schools. Most of these children came from less affluent neighborhoods in the city, and the cultural shock they felt when they came to our school was painful for us to observe. For example, the long list of belongings necessary for the yearly outdoor sleepaway trips, overwhelmed them, especially since they had

little use for these expensive items upon returning to the city. For some, sleeping away from home was something they had never done, even at their relatives' homes. Parents often called to report that their children were sick and could not go on these trips. The school, in turn, assumed these parents did not understand the importance of these trips in the socialization of their children.

At times, kids of color were unprepared to confront their classmates' insensitive remarks regarding race. Moreover, they felt unsupported by their teachers, who ignored racial incidents happening right in front of them. In one eighth-grade classroom, for example, students were talking about the high schools to which they were applying. This conversation naturally led to a discussion about the colleges they hoped to attend. One of the white students remarked to a student of color, "You're going to go to an all black college, aren't you?" The cumulative impact of these comments and other incidents like this seem to have gradually caused the deterioration of the attitude of the kids of color towards their work. In order to protect their self-esteem, fooling around in order to fit in became more important to them than being a responsible student.

I asked the administration for permission to meet alone with the kids of color in order to explore what was troubling them. This launched me into a new position, that of Multicultural Coordinator, and gave birth to the first middle school Kids of Color (KOC) group in a New York City independent school. I held this position for two years, along with my other teaching responsibilities. I also started meeting with these children's parents and helped to organize a Parents of Children of Color (POCOC) group. The kids of color began to feel better about themselves and to take more initiative in the school. In turn, the school seemed to understand their needs more clearly. Then, without warning, everything changed. The school decided to eliminate my Spanish position, and as a result, they eliminated me, the only teacher of color among three other teachers of color who listened to and advised the KOC and their parents.

I review those painful events fifteen years later without truly understanding what happened. It took me several years to believe what my husband immediately identified as racism: racism towards the families of color who were beginning to make their voices heard, and towards me, who helped them to organize. Because I lacked an understanding of the racial differences in this country, I did not recognize that I had knocked on and opened forbidden doors. This was the beginning of my own racial identity development.

Previously, I did not see myself as a black Puerto Rican, nor did I see myself as a white Puerto Rican. I saw myself as a Puerto Rican, and that was it. I was unaware that others saw me differently.

Many persons of color who come to the United States from countries not officially divided racially or religiously have difficulty accepting the term "person of color." I was no different. As a member of the majority culture in Puerto Rico, my identity and self-esteem were intact. While racial issues exist, they do not define life in Puerto Rico. The ever-present examples of mixed-race families and the equal access to goods, support an identity based on the national culture, not race. My initiative to help families of color, which I presume the school interpreted as political activism, came out of my natural concern for the children with whom I worked every day.

Bank Street School for Children

I arrived at the Bank Street School for Children still sore from my wounds, but ready to move forward as a Spanish teacher. I had no plans to renew my work on diversity. I had no indication that there was a need for such a program.

However, I was in for a surprise. On opening day, at the first faculty meeting, a teacher of color deliberately crossed the room, approached me, and after introducing herself said, "I want you to know that anything you need, I am here to listen." Instinctively I knew she was not talking about materials. Gradually I became acquainted with the other faculty of color. All of them were student teachers, assistant teachers, and specialists like myself. Although the school had put in place a teaching fellows program with the goal of increasing the pool of qualified teachers of color, there were no head teachers of color.

Even with these good intentions, the staff of color experienced difficulties. They felt a certain lack of professional respect. They wanted their opinions valued at meetings, and their observations, particularly about children of color, listened to. Many came from similar backgrounds as the children. When the school prepared to hold its annual retreat that year, I approached the interim director and proposed that the voices of the teachers of color be integrated into the schedule for that day. The agenda for the retreat was multiculturalism. The response was quick and we were encouraged to meet as a group and organize a presentation.

That retreat gave birth to the Teachers of Color (TOC) group, and the rest is history. While there was no time for an official presentation at the

retreat, the experience of this organizational meeting was so powerful that we kept meeting. Each Friday, without fail, we came together and reviewed the events of the week. There were many tearful and angry sessions, but at the end, we all felt better. With regard to families of color, some of us felt, for example, that the school did not consider our perspectives, often based upon life experience, as a sufficiently professional basis for making educational decisions. Another frequent complaint was the feeling of transparency: white colleagues often ignored our greetings in the halls and at meetings. If we, as professionals of color, experienced difficulties fitting in, we wondered how kids of color and their parents were faring.

It was disturbing, for example, to routinely see teachers holding the hands of children of color while walking in the halls or outside of the school, as if to prevent their misbehavior. Were all these children having difficulty adjusting to a majority white school? Was the school failing to understand that? Why were children of color the first students expected not to behave properly? Or, why did they? I was especially concerned about the way that the poor academic performance of the kids of color was being characterized as a developmental issue. I agree with Jonathan Silin's (1993) critique of the developmentalist perspective. In his opinion, the "exclusive use of psychological theories devalues alternative ways of knowing children—aesthetic, symbolic, imaginative" (Silin, p. 226). The narrow developmental perspective made the parents of the children of color distrustful of the school's philosophy. There were many agitated discussions about this and other topics at the TOC meeting.

The following year we learned, much to our surprise and dismay, that some members of the community considered our meetings exclusionary and racist. In response, the interim director, who happened to be black, respectfully invited us to make a presentation at the monthly faculty meeting in order to clear the air. My first reaction to this invitation was anger. I did not believe we owed anybody an explanation. In the end, however, the TOC group felt we had more to gain than to lose. Here was our opportunity to tell our colleagues about our experiences as persons of color in this school.

The day of the faculty meeting arrived, and the moment was dramatic and unforgettable. As the teachers of color recounted their many painful experiences since coming to Bank Street, emotions in the room ran high. Everyone listened in stunned silence as a particular teacher tearfully recounted her anguish in negotiating, maintaining, and eventually losing, the trust of her family now that she worked for a "white" institution. When her nephew, who

attended a local public school, was struggling with his homework, she enthusiastically offered to help. Her sister, the boy's mother, refused because she didn't trust the "white/progressive" approach this teacher would use. She went on to accuse her of acting "white" ever since she began to study and work at Bank Street.

What were the possible implications of this story for the kids of color at Bank Street? How much were they resisting being "the best that they could be" for fear of becoming "white" back in their neighborhoods among friends and relatives. The fear of acting white among children of color is a well-documented phenomenon, but often it is presented as a high school, rather than an elementary school, phenomenon. While we had prepared for this presentation for weeks, anticipating complicated questions, the actual response surprised us. Our colleagues were speechless, and to this day, more than twelve years later, staff members who were at that meeting have not forgotten its impact. We accomplished our goals beyond expectations. Through our group's testimonies, our colleagues began to understand our experiences. Perhaps they were neither as liberal, nor as accepting of minorities, nor as inclusive as they had once believed. No one questioned our meetings anymore, and community members listened to the voices of TOC with new interest and respect.

The following year the parents of children of color formed their own group, and the same questions about the need to meet separately arose again. The teachers of color had reached out to the parents of children of color. We knew their children. We knew them as parents in the school. We knew their uncertainties, fears and concerns, expressed in confidence in brief encounters and at more formal conferences. They only needed an invitation to come together to share their concerns and to find solutions. With the full support of the new white female director, the parents held what later became known as the famous potluck dinner meeting. In a room full from wall to wall, they gave voice to their unhappiness. Their experiences paralleled our own. They wanted the larger community to give more attention and respect to their opinions. They felt other parents often minimized their concerns, telling them they had misunderstood the situation at hand. They worried about their children's emotional and social wellbeing, as well as their academic progress.

The president of the college came to this meeting. He was clearly impressed with the attendance and the seriousness of the issues raised by Parents of Children of Color. In the end, however, he did not support either this parents group or the school director who organized the meeting. I can only

imagine that he experienced extreme pressure from powerful members of the white parent body, and even some parents of color, who did not understand the need for affinity groups to be apart in order to feel and become integral members of the community.

The repercussions of the Parents of Children of Color's separate meeting at the School for Children were devastating. While some families and staff members spoke out in favor of these meetings, most did not. Many parents and educators alike voiced feelings of anger and hurt. They protested loudly against what they called an exclusionary event. In their opinion, for an inclusive, liberal community to allow a meeting of a separate race-based group was exclusionary and racist. They were partially right. It was exclusionary, but certainly not racist. The need to be apart in order to become integrated was a new concept, which the community continues to struggle to understand and accept.

In response to the meeting, the administration sent out letters of explanation almost every day, hoping to answer questions and clear up misunderstandings. The explanations were never enough. Even today I hear angry voices of protest against that legendary meeting. I still fail to understand why some faculty members, after having gone through the experience of seeing Teachers of Color become a separate group, reacted so strongly against the Parents of Children of Color meeting. In the end, the school director who supported the families and teachers of color was not rehired. She later recounted this episode from her own perspective and gave race-based explanations for the actions of all the actors in the story (Chalmers, 1997). The sad thing about this chapter of our history is that Chalmers was a white woman who truly believed in integration and enabling the voiceless to speak out. She thought that our school, with its long history as a liberal institution, would be fertile ground for this kind of social justice initiative.

The Parents of Children of Color or POCOC, as it was eventually known, has had its ups and downs through the years. While the subsequent administration supported its goals, many in the larger parent community continued to question why this group of parents needed to meet separately. In response to this question, POCOC issued a mission statement to clarify its purpose:

> Parents of Children of Color is a coalition of parents at the Bank Street School for Children. The mission of POCOC is to contribute to the positive educational and social experience of children of color at Bank Street. As a group, parents of children of

color seek to identify our common concerns, and share solutions that enable our children and their families to deal more effectively with the diversity issues we face.

POCOC continues to meet and share with the school their observations about how we at the school can best meet their own and their children's needs. The group also suggests ways in which it can contribute to the enhancement of the school's multicultural tapestry.

Several years after the Teachers of Color meetings were launched, I initiated the Open Door TOC meetings. With their non-threatening atmosphere, these meetings have served to develop a new awareness about issues of diversity among the faculty and administration. They also provide an opportunity for white colleagues to develop their own leadership skills as active agents of change. The Open Door TOC meetings are my brainchild, and I am proud of its powerful contributions.

While many teachers of color have come and gone in the school over the past thirteen years, they have all made their mark. They have helped to change the way we view curriculum and kids of color in the classroom. They have changed the way we listen to the parental concerns of children of color. In turn, the experience of being a teacher of color in a mostly white institution has left its mark on them as well.

In 1997, seven years after my arrival at Bank Street School for Children, we founded the Kids of Color group. The Upper School faculty and administration were concerned with this group's social behavior among themselves and in the school corridors and public places. They were playfully calling each other racist names. The results of this first meeting were so positive, that the students requested to continue meeting. By the end of the year, they requested bimonthly sessions in order to develop continuity in their dialogue and to have sufficient time to share their experiences. The Upper School faculty and administration supported this effort, and we all gradually developed a deeper understanding of the emotional and practical needs of children of color in a mostly white institution.

Needless to say, white children also needed to learn why the kids of color wanted time apart. To that end, three years ago, we introduced the first Open Door KOC meetings using the same principles behind the Open Door TOC meetings. The Kids of Color organize the meetings and invite the entire Upper School student body and faculty. They choose the topic, organize the discussion, select leadership responsibilities, and conduct necessary background

research. The topics have included “Stereotyping and Its Effect on Us All,” “The 'N' Word in the Media and Entertainment Circles and Who Has the Right to Use It,” and “Affirmative Action, Why Is It Important?” Although attendance is voluntary, a significant number of students come and actively participate. An important goal for the faculty is to help all students to become leaders in the dialogue about diversity at Bank Street and after graduation.

The Teachers of Color group also sees a strong need to educate the larger community about the importance of affinity groups and their contribution to a healthy community. Research demonstrates that children of color are aware of their racial identity early on in their lives (Tatum,1999). This was confirmed at one of the KOC meetings this year with the topic: “When did you discover that you were a child of color?” Almost all of the twenty children attending answered, between three and four years old. Parents want to instill their children with a sense of pride and knowledge about their ethnic background before they confront life's realities. Children of color need to see more kids like themselves during the school day. By fostering the KOC group, we are providing an opportunity for those children to learn from each other and to feel each other's presence.

As children enter preadolescence, racial clustering occurs naturally. Even in the lower grades, small voluntary groups of kids of color are evident throughout the school. Because the majority of the kids of color must leave home communities to attend Bank Street or any other independent school in New York City, their ties to their cultural bases are gradually eroded. Their friends and even relatives may make sarcastic remarks about attending a white school. In the end, they often find themselves to be members of neither community, unless their parents work extraordinarily hard to maintain some home-based connections. By organizing a Kids of Color group, independent schools can provide a structure in which these children can see themselves at least for a few hours a month as members of a majority. Positive racial identity supports healthy self-esteem, which, it is hoped, leads to stronger academic performance.

Bank Street prides itself on inclusiveness, so it is especially difficult for some community members to appreciate the needs of a group that wants and needs to be exclusive. Peggy McIntosh (1989) helps us to understand this phenomenon: She explains how “invisible systems conferring dominance to white people” act as a screen or blindfold against understanding the empowerment enjoyed by those at the receiving end of those systems, including liberal, open-minded people.

Because race relations in this country demand national attention, my work will continue for some time to come. However, I have also started other initiatives. As Diversity Coordinator I have reached out to other affinity groups within the school, including adoptive parents, gay and lesbian families, and alumni of color. Learning from their experience, meeting their needs, and reflecting their presence in the curriculum should contribute to a more inclusive and understanding community. It is my goal to continue working to make the Bank Street School for Children a model of diversity for the independent school community at large. The invaluable support I am now receiving from the administration, faculty, and staff will contribute to my achieving this goal.

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