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Girls in Public School: The American Association of University Women Reports

Priscilla Little

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Since 1990 the American Association of University of Women (AAUW) Educational Foundation has been committed to conducting research on the status of girls in public schools. The objectives were threefold:

- To eliminate the barriers to girls' and women's education by promoting a hospitable educational environment;
- To promote cross-cultural understanding, and an education that taps into the rich diversity of America today and recognition that children and adults live not only in national but a global society; and
- To foster an accurate understanding of the development of women and girls and to explorehow women and girls think, learn, work, and play.

Report of the First Five Years

In 1991 the AAUW Educational Foundation, in partnership with the AAUW Association, published a nationwide poll entitled Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America (Greenberg-Lake: The Analysis Group, 1991) that assessed the self-esteem, educational experiences, math and science interests, and career aspirations of nearly 3,000 girls and boys from ages 9 to 15. The findings showed a drop-off in girls' self-esteem from elementary school (when 60% reported high self-esteem) to high school (when 29% reported high self-esteem). Boys' self-esteem also dropped from elementary school to high school, but not as far (60% to 46%). Additionally the poll found differing levels of self-esteem among girls; African American girls (58%), Hispanic girls (30%) and Anglo girls (22%). Researchers speculate that "there is high self-esteem among black girls because black culture emphasizes independence and assertiveness. But academic self-esteem is low."

Following the release of Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America (Greenberg-Lake: The Analysis Group, 1991), the AAUW Educational Foundation commissioned The AAUW Report: How Schools Shortchange Girls (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1992), a thematic overview of the status of girls in public schools. This report synthesized findings and major concerns that affect girls' education from early childhood through high school from more than 1, 311 reports, books, data runs, research documents, and interviews with administrators and teachers. The AAUW Report challenged myths about the education of girls and uncovered disturbing evidence of new and, not so new, barriers to their learning. Preferential teacher behavior, bias in textbooks, and bias in testing were three major findings; the report also uncovered other issues that impact upon girls' learning such as sexual harassment, which appeared to be on the rise in middle schools. Examining the issue further, the Foundation found that very little data existed about sexual harassment in the nation's public schools. To help correct for this lack of data, the Foundation commissioned the Louis Harris and Associates, Inc. to conduct a national poll of student opinion about sexual harassment in school.

Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools (Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., 1993) examined 1,632 8th to 11th grade students in 79 schools across the country. The poll confirmed the high incidence of sexual harassment in the schools, with four out of five students reporting that they had been subjected to such harassment, defined as "unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with your life." Although the survey found that boys experienced sexual harassment at many levels, girls reported greater problems. A higher percentage of African American girls reported problems compared with Anglo and Hispanic girls.

At the international level, the AAUW Foundation sponsored two separate research projects for the U.N. Fourth World Conference in China, held in 1995. Supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, a team of language experts translated The AAUW Report into three languages - Chinese, Spanish, and French--and distributed to the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum participants and to the Ford Foundation's field offices in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Additionally AAUW Educational Foundation released a small report about efforts to stem school dropout by girls in Hubei Province. Keeping Chinese Girls in School (Tan and Tan, 1995), published in Chinese and English, was also presented and disseminated at the NGO Forum in China.

Positive School Climate For Girls

In its most recent research initiative, the AAUW Educational Foundation commissioned three reports addressing what was working for girls in school under a series title, "Positive School Climate for Girls." The first study, Growing Smart: What's Working for Girls in School (Hanson, Walker, and Flom, 1995), is a comprehensive review of more than 500 studies and reports from grass-roots organizations; it identifies approaches that promote girls' achievement and healthy development. A major finding of this report is that girls' achievement must be examined in the context of their race, culture, and socioeconomic background. Among the new approaches highlighted in this research are: mentoring programs for Native American girls, nontraditional reading groups for Asian American girls, as well as experimental all-girls' math and science classes, and student career portfolios.

To supplement the literature review, the Foundation commissioned a report entitled "The Influence of School Climate on Gender Differences in the Achievement and Engagement of Young Adolescents," a quantitative analysis of 8th grade data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Longitudinal Studies (USDOE, 1988). The report found small gender gaps favoring boys in science, social studies, and math, and small gender gaps favoring girls in reading and engagement. The small margin of differences suggest further study is needed in the 10th and 12th grade data to confirm these patterns and to explore what happened to girls in the same cohort as they progressed to 10th and 12th grades.

Girls in the Middle: Working to Succeed in School

The final report in the "Positive School Climate" series, <u>Girls in the Middle: Working to Succeed in School</u> (Research for Action, 1996) reveals strategies girls from diverse backgrounds use in their school lives. This field study, which took place in six urban, rural, and suburban middle schools, found that girls across all races and locales had common strategies of "doing school," "speaking out," and "crossing borders." Additionally the report documents educational reforms that are encouraging girls to achieve and participate in educational endeavors, such as peer mediation, mentoring, and leadership teams. An accompanying video captures diverse girls' experiences in three of the sites and offers an insider view of their strategies for success.

<u>Girls in the Middle</u> (Research for Action, 1996) utilizes innovative qualitative research methods to develop fresh insights into what "works" for girls in a variety of middle school settings. Through intensive field study of six regionally diverse American middle schools in rural, suburban, and urban contexts, researchers composed richly detailed insider's portraits of girls' school experiences and environments. Their narrative accounts of girls' everyday experiences and perspectives animate gender equity issues elsewhere obscured.

"Researchers began this study by looking for a relatively linear connection between what schools are doing and how their successful girls are faring." They found, instead, that successful girls and their schools are engaged in a complex, dynamic relationship that is neither linear nor necessarily cumulative.... What 'works' for girls, in other words, "involves a repertoire of possibilities."

This repertoire, researchers discovered, includes at least three distinct behavior strategies that girls adopt. Some girls, for example, "speak out"--asserting themselves and insisting on being heard in both friendly and hostile circumstances. Other girls may embrace the "doing school" strategy--employing a traditional "good girl" approach to completing assignments on time and complying with adults' expectations. Finally, some girls move easily between different cultures or sets of expectations, thereby excelling at "crossing borders" or "translating" between divergent communities and social codes.

Schools might traditionally fear girls who "speak out" or stigmatize them as disruptive. However, <u>Girls in the Middle</u> (Research for Action, 1996) researchers challenge school communities to reevaluate what counts as success and achievement for middle school girls, and persuasively re-frame each of the three strategies they describe as indicative of certain skills and potential. The girl who "speaks out," for example, might emerge either as a "maverick leader"-- one who makes herself highly visible as a powerful figure--or as a "troublemaker." Similarly, the "cool girl" or "translator" who crosses borders, researchers observe, has proficiency in mediating between groups, and may also emerge as a school leader.

The development of girls' identity, researchers summarize, has a lot to do with how the school community recognizes their distinct strategies: Are these strategies viewed as "disruptive" or potentially valuable? Are they treated as pathologies or as attempts by girls to experiment with a variety of social roles as they struggle to forge an identity? <u>Girls in the Middle</u> (Research for Action, 1996) underscores that school environments themselves conform to typologies in how they handle the issue of gender equity. Suburban schools, they argue, tend to rely on policies to redress gender-related problems such as sexual harassment, while urban school environments stimulate strong individual mentoring efforts for girls by already overburdened, committed educators. Rural schools, researchers note, typically handle gender equity indirectly--they may encourage leadership, for example, through girls' sports programs, but they might not explicitly identify these programs as designed to encourage or foster equity.

Researchers compiled their intimate portraits of the alchemy between school environment and girls' strategies to identify several general conclusions on how best to promote girls' development. Most importantly, researchers observe, schools need to recognize girls' strategies and expand their notion of accepted behaviors. Without this understanding, they note, adults may fail to tap girls' potential for leadership. For example, encouraging outspoken girls to be peer mediators can raise esteem and give them a stake in a system they might otherwise attack. Similarly, encouraging quiet, almost invisible "doing school" girls to tutor younger children can

help them articulate their values more aggressively, and develop dormant leadership skills. Recognizing that effective mentoring is perhaps the single most important factor to develop girls' sense of self, the report recommends that funding, programs, and resources be made available to alleviate the burdens on educators in urban settings, especially, committed to the mentoring

process. Another set of recommendations concerns making the issue of gender equity visible and integral to public debate, particularly in rural settings where it is often handled indirectly. Creating public forums in which all segments of the school community can meet to address gender equity not only lends legitimacy to the issue itself, but would also contribute to the success of those girls who "cross borders" and mediate between groups. Finally, Girls in the Middle (Research for Action, 1996) reports that the research process itself is an often-overlooked vehicle to stimulate a dialogue on gender equity, as well to buoy the esteem of girls who contribute to and participate in the field studies.

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