Allowing Boys and Girls to Become More Fully Human: An Interview with Judy Logan

Last year Doubleday published School Girls, a book by Peggy Orenstein which supported and fleshed out the findings of a 1991 survey conducted by the American Association of University Women. The survey had concluded that “there is a crisis in this country in the way we educate our daughters.” Orenstein, however, did find one hopeful setting amidst the gloom: the classroom of Judy Logan, a teacher at Everett Middle School in San Francisco, CA. Orenstein salutes Logan as a teacher who puts equity at the center of her classroom time. I wanted to find out how a teacher particularly knowledgeable about gender issues would respond to Susan Hunt’s research (see p. 7), so I sought Logan out. She is the author of Teaching Stories (Minnesota Inclusiveness Program, 1993) and has been for many years a valued participant in Bay Area Writing Project-sponsored activities.

—AP

AP: In her research on student topic choice, Susan Hunt finds that, given free choice, boys and girls tend to make different choices of writing topics. As you are a teacher who has given a lot of attention to gender issues, I thought I’d ask you about this.

JL: That’s fine, but for the record, I want to say that specific gender assignments don’t dominate my curriculum. In the course of a year, I do two units that are specifically focused on women. If I have a reputation for bringing up these issues, it’s at least partly because so little of this is going on in secondary schools, particularly in middle schools. On the other hand, I am always asking myself, “Who is being left out of the curriculum?” I want students to be aware of whose point of view is being presented.

AP: O.K. With that caveat recorded, how would you respond to Hunt’s tentative conclusion: That girls may be more likely than boys to write about personal issues; that boys may be more likely than girls to write about philosophical and global concerns and to strive for objectivity.

JL: This doesn’t surprise me, though I think the geographical and class specific context of her study (a private school in Puerto Rico) may have made these differences even more pronounced than one would expect. But it doesn’t surprise me. Girls and boys are socialized very differently in our country, and not only in our country. The phrase that Peggy Orenstein uses is, “Boys are socialized to get ahead; girls are socialized to get along.” So boys would be expected to choose topics which are more “objective” and girls would choose topics that were more “subjective.”

There’s a really good book called Women’s Ways of Knowing by four female psychologists. They point out that the way women and men perceive knowledge is very different. Schools tend to value the way men see things. What these researchers came up with is “connected knowing.” The idea is that women need to feel connected to ideas. In writing, girls start with a connection, something personal.

Also, I’m not really sure it’s true that girls are less likely to write about moral and philosophical questions. Boys and girls may just be approaching these
concerns through different doorways. Girls may start by writing about relationships and personal knowledge, but that doesn't mean they aren't connecting their writing to larger issues.

A part of Carol Gilligan's book In a Different Voice that really love is the section in which she summarizes some interviews conducted by researchers investigating Kohlberg's concept of moral and ethical hierarchy. Here's a problem one of these researchers poses to a boy and then a girl: A man without money needs a drug to save the life of his desperately ill wife. Should he steal this drug?

The boy answers unequivocally: Of course the man should steal the drug. His first responsibility is to aid his wife, and if stealing is the only way to get the drug then this is what he must do. The girl isn't so sure. There may be other alternatives. Maybe the man could borrow the money, for example. She thinks about the relationship between the man and his wife. Suppose the man is found out and arrested. Suppose he goes to jail. What then will happen to his wife?

The girl is as concerned as the boy about this moral question. But she is less willing to make unqualified judgments. Sadly, the interviewer keeps objecting to the girl's answers until the girl pretty much shuts up.

AP: If a teacher notices the kind of gender difference in topic selection that Hunt documents here what, if anything, should he or she do next?

JL: With gender issues, as with other emotionally charged issues, it's important to open up and talk about them. I'll give you an example from my experience. One technique I've often used in my class is the pairing of trusted friends to share a piece of writing. In my sixth grade core class, I saw that boys always paired with boys and girls always paired with girls. I wanted to do something about this, so I told the students that for the upcoming sharing I wanted boys to pick a girl partner and girls to pick a boy. Well, pandemonium broke out. They just refused to do it. I was surprised, I had expected they would just go along. I knew we needed to talk about this.

I asked, "What's the issue here? Why don't you want to do this? They said, "Well, at lunch and in the halls everyone will be talking. They'll be saying 'Jason loves Monica,' that kind of stuff." I said, "O.K., suppose we agree that we won't say this kind of thing out in the yard." They were reluctant, but they agreed to try it. And once the students got into this mixed sex pairing, it went fine. They didn't even seem to notice. In fact, in journal writing some girls reported that the boy partner turned out to be nicer than they expected, and boys actually said the girls had some good suggestions.

The key element in this little success story was my willingness to talk about the issue.

AP: What would you say to the claim that boys and girls may choose different writing topics, but "so what?" This is just the way the sexes are acculturated and there's not a lot teachers and schools can or should do about it?

JL: Well, I'm really not out to change boys and girls. I just want to create an environment where both the sexes are allowed to be more fully human. Something that works for me is to change, in my mind, the topic from sexism to racism. What if these were racial differences? Would we work on them? I don't think boys are born with a gene that predisposes them to write a certain way. Somewhere along the line they've
learned they are not supposed to write about personal topics and girls have learned they are supposed to.

But writing topics are only a small part of this. I think we can affect attitudes in a way that will make boys and girls freer to choose writing topics and everything else. Part of that goal can be accomplished by bringing our gender attitudes, experiences and assumptions into focus. In my class I have an activity in which I take students back to the time of their birth through guided imagery, then I bring them forward again, asking the girls to imagine their lives as a boy and the boys to imagine their lives as a girl. Next, I have them list the ways they perceive their lives as different. The mental trip back and forward again seems to get students focused, and it is always very quiet while they are composing these lists. I put up two pieces of butcher paper, one headed “males” the other headed “females.” I then ask volunteers to recount experiences from their journey as the other sex, but I caution both boys and girls that they should not challenge what they believe are misconceptions about their sex. Otherwise this could deteriorate into a verbal battle between the sexes. They’ll have a chance later to set things right.

As students begin to share, the first round is usually slow. A boy will say something like “I wouldn’t be able to be on the football team.” Later the examples get more dramatic and specific: “I’d have to have a pink bedroom, pink everything. I hate pink.” The girls say things like, “If I were a boy, I could stay out later.”

Then I ask them to take another look at their lists. “Let’s talk about the way girls must have pink bedrooms. How many of you girls do not have pink bedrooms?” Of course, most of the hands go up. “So John,” I say, “the good news is, if you were a girl you would not need to have a pink bedroom.”

In order to add another dimension to this exploration, the class and I read Carol Tavris’s study, done in Colorado, “How Would My Life Be Different?” which looks at the same question we have been examining. The statements which Tavris collects are much more disturbing than those my students usually generate. Children say, “If I were a boy, maybe my father would like me,” or “If I were a girl, I would kill myself.” Because we’ve begun with our own experience, students are less able to dismiss the information presented in this article. Later, when they write in their journals they say things like, “I never realized before that a lot of what I thought girls had to do isn’t true,” or “I feel mad that my brother gets to do so much that I can’t do, and I have so many more responsibilities that he doesn’t have.” One girl wrote, “This assignment is sexist. There are no differences between the sexes.”

Gender focused activities like this are meant to benefit everybody, not just the members of one sex.

AP: So you’re suggesting that activities like the one you describe here may help free students of both sexes, so perhaps someday the girls in Hunt’s class may be as likely as the boys to choose to write about, “The Future of NATO,” and the boys may write without embarrassment about “spring rain.”

JL: Right. And, even more, students will expand their awareness so they will be able to appreciate each other’s choices, even though it may not have been their choice.

References


Logan currently teaches sixth graders all subjects at San Francisco Community School, a K-8 school.