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## Delicate Moments: Kids Talk About Socially Complicated Issues

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**educate**

# **Delicate Moments: Kids Talk About Socially Complicated Issues**

amy bauman

introduction

gail boldt

MAY 2007

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## INTRODUCTION

**gail boldt**

When my son was three years old, he asked for and received a Barbie as a gift. I have a videotape of him on the day he received the Barbie, lovingly brushing her hair, and I remember feeling good, at that moment, about the success of my feminist child-rearing project. What I don't have on tape is the play that began with Barbie a few months later. If I did, the video would show him running around our apartment, holding Barbie with her body bent at the waist at about a ninety-degree angle. Barbie would be in his right hand, and, arm extended, he would be yelling "Bang! Bang!" as he jabbed her well-coifed and apparently fully-loaded and deadly hair at me, the fish tank, a chair, the television, or any number of other real or imaginary enemies. Barbie became the toy gun I refused to buy for him. Once Barbie took on this important role, my son discovered that many things could serve as a gun. Toast could be eaten into the "L" shape of a gun, or paper could be similarly crumpled and bent. Metal kitchen utensils made a particularly satisfying noise if he whacked them against a hard surface while yelling "Pow!" I can only imagine how he used blocks, Duplos, and sticks, and envision the fate of classmates, teachers, and small animals, when he was at daycare.

By the time I noticed my son a year later feeding Barbie's hands and feet to our dog, confidence in my project of feminist parenting, at least as I had conceptualized it until then, was thoroughly eroded. It's not that I suddenly took an "It's all biology" stance. Having spent the previous ten years working with colleagues in early childhood education to critique concepts of the "natural child" or of "natural gender or sexuality," I continued to find the appeal to "natural" gender development to be entirely inadequate. Rather, much as Amy Bauman describes in *Delicate Moments: Kids Talk About Socially Complicated Issues*, these experiences with my child set me on a trajectory that has defined my work since that time. Like Bauman, my work now reflects a desire to talk more effectively with children about identity and to understand the emotionally complicated ways that our iden-

tities as gendered and sexed people structure our experiences, our perceptions, our desires, and our dreams at the very core of our being.

At some point, then, my understanding of who I should be in relation to my son and to the children with whom I worked changed. I had spent years as an early childhood and elementary classroom teacher and researcher working to intervene in and correct children's behaviors and beliefs about gender. As I moved away from my own belief in the efficacy of intervention and correction, I began to talk and listen to children more carefully, as well as to explore my own gendered history. I began to see that children grasp things about how identity works in their own social worlds that I did not understand. I began to see that children's uses of gender are in many cases no different than adults'. Children and adults identify with and perform gender as part of pleasure and desire, shared meaning, and frames for making decisions. I realized that social acceptance often hinges on the ability to adapt certain gendered and sexed identities, and that children truly love and depend upon people and communities whose perspectives are different than my own. I also acknowledged how resentful I would feel if someone else were to look at my life, organizing my desires, experiences, and behaviors into opposing pairs pro- or anti-feminist, good or bad.

In *Delicate Moments*, Bauman offers a thoughtful analysis of the failures and insights she experienced as she worked with a group of primarily white and privileged adolescents at a progressive school. Bauman held discussions with students to explore how they understood and experienced race and identity—their own and that of others. While she encountered students who were willing to take her into their worlds, her efforts fell flat when her questions turned out to be about their experiences of race and class. In response to such questions, Bauman received, on the whole, confusion, a few stories that distanced the teller from the events, and queries about whether this was “what she wanted.”

It is at this point that Bauman started over again. This time she attempted to enter into the world that the children wanted her to experience. She invited them to spend the next three months creating multi-media self-portraits, and along with this work, to talk with her and with each other about their lives. It was only after building trusting relationships over a long period of time that the stu-

dents began to feel their way toward telling themselves, Bauman, and one another all the things that they already knew about race and privilege, about their doubts and discomforts, and about the things for which they hoped.

Bauman went into her project expecting to affirm what she already believed about progressive and critical pedagogy, the nature of privileged identities, and her own work as a teacher and a researcher. In this essay we see her instead having the wisdom and grace to allow herself to be educated. What she finds is that when we ask children to talk about race, gender, class, and sexuality, we are “asking them to unpack the most intimate of their stories” in an environment in which they are unable to control either who their audience is or the uses that will be made of their words. Further, she finds that the students in some ways understand more than many adults around them seem to recognize: that omissions, exclusions, slurs, and misrepresentations do not exist only outside the walls of their progressive school but rather are part of the integral structure of a white middle class culture that “equated community with niceness and comfort” and that encouraged the students to believe that silence about racial issues indicates a lack of bias.

Thinking back to my son and his bazooka Barbie, I am grateful that he persisted in asserting his right to interpret and narrate his own world. Sometimes feeling ethical—demanding that the children in our care conform to and perform our vision of progressive worlds and interests—is far easier than being ethical. I believe that being ethical means forging compassionate and respectful relationships that allow for an exchange of ideas that may cause one or both parties to change. Ultimately, we must grant the other the right to name identifications and attachments different than our own or those we would choose for them.

In the end, Bauman does not give up on the desire to work with children in a way that will lead to critical understandings of race and culture. She learns, however, that their revelations can be slow in coming and difficult to make. They require a relationship in which honesty and respect move among students and between students and teachers or researchers. Just as important, this work requires a deep understanding that politics do not lie somewhere outside ourselves. Politics lie within us and are expressed through the mundane, day-to-day stories we tell about our hopes, desires, and fears. To ask kids to narrate their lives is not necessar-

ily to fall into some sort of apolitical and individualistic feel-good curriculum. Rather, it has the potential to be the most critical step in helping us to understand how the pleasures and abuses of identity and privilege are the stuff of all of our lives.



## DELICATE MOMENTS: KIDS TALK ABOUT SOCIALLY COMPLICATED ISSUES

amy bauman

When I was pregnant with my first child, Matt, (now eleven) I was teaching seventh and eighth grade in New York City, at a school explicitly committed to multicultural education, pluralism, and social justice. As a recent Bank Street graduate, I had a burgeoning understanding of effective schooling that married a developmental sensitivity to curriculum planning with George Counts' insistence that schools be places where children learn to hone socially critical voices (Counts, 1932). As a white teacher awaiting the arrival of my own child, I hoped my educational training would guide my parenting choices. In essence, I crafted a grand fantasy about the kind of politically active parent I would be.

After Matt was born, one of the ways I enacted these politics was by amassing a collection of "politically sensitive" early childhood books and toys. I began to gather representational dolls or small plastic figures with skin tones noticeably different from Matt's, whose other toys and books also reflected the emphasis on diversity I had worked to enact as a teacher. The stories in his library came from all over the world, and featured characters with physical traits and cultural norms different from our family's. I intended to help Matt, from his earliest moments, see himself as part of a global social fabric. My family questioned my imposing political values in a young child's life. I dismissed these concerns as signs of their own undiscovered racism. I believed my parenting would be as politically minded as my teaching had been. Neither yielded the clear-cut results I anticipated. I soon discovered that the challenge, both in working with children and in being a parent, was not having strong political views perse, but tightly insisting on the shape that those ideas might take.

Before Matt was born, our family moved to the South. This move intensified my fear that Matt would absorb the dominant social message that being white and male entitled him to a position at the top of a social hierarchy. It also deepened my commitment to surrounding him, at every turn, with objects and

images that looked, sounded, tasted, and felt different from his communities of origin. What I came to discover, however, as Matt moved into his toddler years, was that I had fed him an ideological diet built on exclusion, a diet difficult to maintain over time.

One day, when Matt was about three, we were looking for a book to read before naptime. After gazing at the many options before him, Matt stood up and looked directly at me. “Mommy,” he said, with the incisiveness often found in young children, “can we read a book with people who look like me?” Shocked and humbled by the direct naming of my own parental omission, I awkwardly responded, “Yes, of course.”

“We don’t have any,” Matt continued.

“That’s true. After your nap we’ll go and find some.”

And so I sat, dumbfounded by the clarity of his insight and aware of the power of my less-than-well-thought-out good intentions. In my desire to keep Matt from feeling superior to any individual or group, I literally forgot to help him find ways to tell his own story. The absence of books that included pink-skinned characters forced me to rethink my own activism, both parental and educational.

Often fables provide lessons inclusive enough for readers to find them relevant to their own lives. My own “fable” featured the adult, white activist wanting desperately to be “part of the solution” rather than “part of the problem,” and the child trying to understand his social world. My choice to exclude books with white characters was based on a simplistic belief that raising socially critical white children required immersing them completely in stories other than their own. Matt’s request for books with “people who look like me” was a pointed reminder that when children build social understandings, they need to be able to place themselves in, as well as make sense of, the complex cultural lives of others. My fable is one of converging social agendas, the story of a child requesting that an adult listen carefully as he tries to make sense of the world around him.

As I reflected on this humbling parental moment, I remembered having the same impulses as a teacher, when I tried to help other white children make sense

of their race, class, and social positions. Initially, the good intentions of “the well-meaning white person” permeated my teaching (Wolf, 1995). But it was not until I entered a classroom as an educational researcher that I was forced to reassess my own political and educational impulses. As had been the case with Matt, my professional missteps involved children. This time, early adolescents showed me that developing a complex understanding of oneself in the world requires ample opportunities to publicly speak one’s own story in the presence of a mindful listener. The story that follows is as much about creating spaces for students to craft social understandings as it is about political conclusions. It is about the ways in which adults ask children questions, and the ways children answer. Finally, it is about the nature of silence and ambivalence about speaking.

## POLITICAL LIFE IN A PROGRESSIVE SCHOOL

In 1999, I spent the spring semester with a group of eighth-grade students at the Community School, a self-identified progressive school in a Southern university town. As an educational ethnographer, I sought to understand the ways in which white, upper-middle-class children understood and experienced their social and political world. This question first came up during my earliest days as a middle school teacher, continued through my training as a staff developer for multicultural education, and remained with me during my years as a parent and doctoral candidate. Mainstream scholarship paid little or no attention to white, school-age children. In my experience, multicultural education left white students with a lot of guilt and failed to provide enough assistance in exploring the complexities of their lives in an ever-diversifying country.

The understandings I gained, and the story I feel compelled to tell, challenge traditional ideas about race, politics, and schools. This group of eighth-grade students helped me understand that politics are not merely sets of ideas about the ways in which social structures work, that schools are not merely sites to transmit explicit worlds of knowledge, and that race is not merely a social construction which describes material gains or losses in American society. Rather than adhere to the widely accepted associations about the abstract nature of education and politics, I maintain that communities use political identities and social institutions in order to help build a sense of self and belonging for each member. That sense of belonging allows all of us to locate our place in a broad and complex social world. When we probe into areas of political identities—such as race and class—we request access to deeply personal worlds, an access not always easily granted.

This is a story about the nature of silence, the reasons for secrets, and the hesitation to speak. Silence does not necessarily arise from a lack of something to say. Instead, it can indicate an understanding of the liability in speaking. Secrets become a way of securing our most intimate relationships. Hesitation turns into a place of educational possibility where the impulse to speak becomes weighted down by fear of personal consequences. Sharing honest understandings of the world requires the trust born of relationships that develop over time. This is a

story of moving from silence to speech. It's also a story about giving up the position of the expert and taking on the responsibilities of a friend. At its heart is my belief that meaningful social change demands a foundation of compassion.

The Community School originated fifty years ago when a university's psychology department proudly embraced its status as a laboratory setting for young children. By the time I began a four-month ethnographic project there, however, the school had long since cut the ties with its parental organization. Originally a K-4 setting, it now included a middle school, sat on two campuses, and shepherded students from toddler-hood through early adolescence. Over the course of my time there, I learned that the Community School, like many progressive, independent schools, had quietly transformed itself from an institutional risk-taker to a place where parents' educational agendas and attachment to public reputation determined praxis.

## **EARLY CONVERSATIONS: A FAILED ATTEMPT AT SOCIAL REFLECTIONS**

I entered the eighth-grade classroom with confidence, priding myself on my legacy as a progressive teacher. I assumed my ability to use curriculum to facilitate socially complex conversations would provide the necessary foundation for asking reflective questions. By extension, I presumed that my position as researcher would allow me a non-authoritarian position with the students because I respected the privacy of early adolescents. When I found students breaking rules, I didn't hold them accountable in the ways their teachers did.

After I spent a number of weeks on the sidelines, I told the students I wanted to work with them as part of my research on "kids' lives in schools." In framing my request to speak directly with them, I consciously avoided any explicit political references. I explained my commitment to helping adults understand the experiences of eighth-grade students. I wanted them to help me help other adults who work in schools. They enthusiastically claimed the role of public expert: "Adults don't get what it means to be a kid," and asked, "Are you going to publish this? Because most grown-ups don't get kids at all." I believed the students saw the project as an opportunity to speak honestly.

This euphoric atmosphere continued as time passed. The students welcomed me each day, the girls with squeals and hugs, and the boys dropping a "Hey, Amy" as they passed. When I asked for volunteers for the first set of recorded interviews, over half of the group offered to participate. I took this as a sign of being accepted and confirmation of my abilities as a researcher. I began a series of semi-structured individual conversations, expecting the students to provide the early strands of a research story.

I quickly discovered that asking these adolescents to reflect on their lives at home and school yielded painfully stilted and uninformative responses. They were all good-natured, giving me time, humoring my more unimaginative questions, and tolerating my good intentions. They even continued to volunteer after it became clear that spending time with me was far less exciting than they had hoped. I was struck by their confusion when I asked, "Do you ever remember any-

one saying anything about race?” “Has race or class been talked about in school?” “How do you feel with someone of a different race?” The kids responded with puzzled faces and brief answers, espousing a vague liberal position that equated talking explicitly about race with being racist.

After an embarrassingly long time, I realized that the nature of the students’ responses resulted from my approach to the research. I was coming at them with a set of pre-determined questions, born of a pre-existing political debate about being white, rather than stepping toward their worlds. I hesitated and didn’t allow their narratives to take up much research space. As a result, I ended up tripping over my own academic agenda.

Deeply frustrated, I found myself returning to transcripts of interviews with other children from a project completed a year earlier. That project, significantly smaller in scope, explicitly focused on gaps in understanding between children and adults. Those eighth-graders tried to teach me how to approach their cultural and social worlds as an adult visitor. Adults, they asserted, tend to “see” kids, while kids desire not so much to be seen as to be known. The focus on knowing rather than seeing had guided my methodological and interpretive process in that earlier study.

“Knowing” a child is no different from “knowing” an adult. And yet, as a society, we cling to the idea that children can be “known” far more easily, viewing them as less complex (Waksler, 1991; Thorne, 1993). This set of biases finds a comfortable home in developmental theory, a discourse that permeates most talk about children (Mandell, 1991). Faced with children’s truncated syntax, repetitive speech, seemingly nonlinear sense-making, and impulsive behavior that defies explanation, adults struggle to find order in children’s lives. Most developmental theory reinforces the belief that children are less complex than adults, ratifies this distance, and then organizes the differences hierarchically. Specifically, it presents children as unfinished or raw. Adults turn to themselves as reference points when determining what constitutes a full and complex self.

Rethinking my work with the eighth-grade students in the Community School meant interrogating my own biases. Did my approaches and questions depend upon reference points that risked reifying a century of developmental the-

ory and the past decade of research on white people? How were my unexamined prejudices sabotaging my desire to understand those students who welcomed me into their lives? The confidence I began with quickly dissipated.

Over the next month, I rebuilt my relationships with the students. We began with a multimedia self-portraiture project, an enterprise requiring almost three months of work. At first, the students made identity maps, drawings with their names at the center and adjectives and categories that described them on the sides. This led them to create increasingly detailed, multi-dimensional representations of themselves, collages incorporating personal treasures and family memorabilia along with black and white photos of them that I had taken. As they worked on the constructions, we spent time talking about their choices; this was a different, more conversational exchange that slowly led us back to interviewing.

This time I invited the students to share the aspects of themselves they considered important: their social groups, their interests, their joys, their miseries. On the surface, few of these conversations contained what most researchers or educators would label political themes. I did not ask any questions about “race” or “class.” Instead, my questions were based on the students’ own stories. And in contrast with the stilted phrases and awkward silences characterizing the first interviews, their reflections now flowed. They spoke honestly about their home and school lives, and the differences and similarities between these two worlds, as well as about how adults saw only some aspects of them. They actively responded to all my “why” questions. We all knew that their conclusions were tentative, but nonetheless we delighted in the layers of human experiences revealed and considered. I trusted that political talk would eventually emerge. It did, but not in the ways I would have predicted at the start of the research.



## WADING INTO SOCIALLY COMPLICATED WATERS: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GENDER

Over the ensuing weeks, gender became one of the most trenchant issues to emerge. All of the students referenced gender in their self-portraiture projects. Many spoke of the social shifts in groupings of friends from single-sex to more mixed and then back again. In addition, I observed a variety of social dances or “play” with particular gendered qualities (Thorne, 1993). This led to an informal group setting in which I introduced the subject of gender, inquiring about their interpretations of the messages they received as they moved through the worlds of home, friends, and school (Davidson, 1996).

We met in half-groups of twelve. The students sat on the rug, their bodies draped over one another, projecting both comfort and intimacy. I knew they were uncomfortable talking about themselves in ways defined as “socially critical.” I gave them a concrete example of this kind of focused self-reflection, Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl,” a one-page, poetic weaving of voices about what it means to grow up female in the Caribbean. The students responded with warmth and a sense of unconditional openness. They were happy to talk. When I asked questions, hands went up.

The discussion quickly took us into the personal terrain of family life. It reinforced a deep appreciation that conversations concerning social messages are conversations about the most intimate parts of our worlds. Kara, a vivacious and usually confident white girl, responded to my question with striking and unusual caution. Taking similar risks, CJ, the only African-American boy in the group, followed suit.<sup>1</sup>

Kara: I don’t know if this is what you want.  
It probably isn’t...  
My Dad—

I have to know how to mow the lawn.

---

<sup>1</sup> All transcriptions employ ethnopoetics, a process that attempts to capture the dynamic nature of speech (Tedlock, 1991). Each line reflects the presentation of a new idea, while indentations capture the rhythms of pause and talk. Lines that end in ellipses signify thoughts that drift off rather than come to a clear end.

AB: That's a message. That's a gender message.

Kara: But that's not what you're looking for?  
Okay I was way off.

AB: No.  
I think you're totally on target.  
CJ's sister might not be asked to learn the same thing.

CJ: Yeah, I was just going to say,  
'Cause we usually take turns.  
And this weekend she's supposed to mow the grass,  
And she went somewhere with her friends.  
And my Dad started doing it for her.  
And he doesn't do that with me, easily.

Kara: Do you think that's a double standard?

CJ: I don't know,  
'Cause he does it with me, sometimes.  
But he doesn't usually do that with me that easily.

AB: He doesn't usually do it with you?

CJ: He nags me and stuff.

AB: If you were going to characterize it, would you say that your  
Dad has different standards, or different expectations?

CJ: Sometimes...  
In some situations.

Kara: I don't want to say that my parents have double standards, because I don't think they do.

But there are some things that they're a lot different about.

Like...

I can't think of any examples...

I don't know...

A lot of times they ask my brother to do more of the handiwork.

Like CJ.

'Cause he's a little computer guru and all that stuff.

But then they'll ask me to clean the house or make dinner one night.

I can't think of any examples.

I'm sorry.

AB: That's okay.

But you think they have different expectations for the two of you?

Kara: It's not like they mean to.

The expectation that I'm looking for a particular answer makes Kara's first response to my question one not of self-reflection, but of situational evaluation. She tries to figure out what I want. These eighth graders clearly see me as an adult in the classroom and themselves as the students, with all the attendant understandings of the social hierarchy in student-teacher interactions.

Only after CJ details the gender messages in his home does Kara try to do the same. She attempts to make sense of her parents' subtle and tacit embrace of gender stereotypes. They ask her brother to do more of the handiwork, while Kara's responsibilities rest in the domestic realms of cleaning the house or making dinner. Even in these brief responses, Kara's need to back-pedal from her own reactions becomes clear. She truncates her thought processes, explaining apologetically that she can't think of any examples. And then she back-pedals even further, protecting her parents' choices by asserting that "It's not like they mean to

[enforce gender stereotypes].” However uncomfortable or disturbing the gender roles may be for Kara, it’s important to her to see them as disembodied ideas, manifested without human intent.

Kara’s response is protective and indicates a fear of reducing her life to an easily analyzed story. Her hesitation to elaborate tells me that Kara has a deeper story than my question asks for, but one she can’t clearly articulate. She realizes her response may place her and her family at risk of being either misunderstood or reduced to a simple political formula. Thus she steps into the discussion, and then steps out.

These gender conversations covered a variety of topics, ranging from mass media to social dynamics in school. They became an opportunity for social sense-making. Several students responded directly to my questions, telling stories that explicitly placed them as either recipients or constructors of gendered messages. Similar to Kara’s, most of these stories cautiously circled around the students’ own experiences. Not wishing to misrepresent, or unnecessarily malign, they qualified their responses, thus distancing themselves from their own ideas.

While reading and re-reading my notes, listening for patterns in the taped discussion, I recognized two different classes of conversations: discursive-qualifying and discursive-claiming. In discursive-qualifying conversations, the participants distance themselves from their ideas, as opposed to engaging directly in the sense-making process. For example, Gillian, a ballet dancer whose blunt bangs seem to intensify the size of her eyes, asserts:

This is sort of different.

It’s a little less general.

But it seems like it’s the woman’s responsibility to  
keep track of everything.

And you know how guys—

It’s just a stereotype—

But guys are always forgetting the anniversary.

And we have to remember,

“Oh, it’s Sue’s birthday...”

Gillian's comment illustrates the complexities of being a fourteen-year-old girl trying to understand tacit gender messages. Even more compelling, though, is the way Gillian sets up her ideas and at the same time, linguistically steps out of them. "This is sort of different. / It's a little less general. / But it seems..." are all statements that deflect attention from the fact that Gillian is the person both noting and experiencing a series of socially expected behaviors (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Not until she completes her reflection with "And we have to remember..." does she insert herself. In selecting the word "we," Gillian indicates she is aware that these same ideas will frame her world in the future. This pattern of qualifying observations and comments characterized the entire gender conversation. Though virtually all the students spoke of complicated social arrangements reflecting both their age and their worlds, the listener (and the speaker?) saw the events as neither belonging to nor happening to anybody. This personal distancing transcended gender lines; boys as well as girls tacked on qualifying phrases when they told their stories.

If Gillian exemplified discursive-qualifying speech, then Ben, a lanky, skaloing boy with spiked red hair, embodied the possibilities of discursive-claiming conversation. Ben placed himself in direct relation to his ideas. Making no pretense of neutrality, his firm opinions and critical participation contrasted sharply with the distanced tone of his peers.

I see where people can think that people get angry...

I know that people get put into groups.

Personally, I think that's pretty ridiculous.

If you are, or you have been, placed in that group  
for whatever reason,

That isn't necessarily what you are.

From his opening words, Ben speaks with a kind of personal claiming. Using phrases like "I see / I know / Personally, I think..." he asserts the ideas presented as his. He begins by arguing that the tendency to group people inevitably challenges their understanding of themselves ("I see where people can think that

people get angry”). He is clear about having an opinion (“Personally, I think that’s pretty ridiculous.”). He ends by asserting that group identity often does not accurately capture the complexities of individual group members. Implied is a warning for researchers, adults, and peers not to assume understandings of individuals based primarily on their group memberships. As a foil to Gillian’s caution, Ben’s discursive-claiming speech was unusual within the class. His directness forced me to acknowledge my assumptions about the homogeneity of the group, and to consider that discursive-qualifying conversation was not the same as political neutrality.

The gender conversations left me cautious and puzzled. At one level, I recognized the group’s willingness to engage in a kind of reflection fundamentally new to them. These students did not see their experiences as the content of social understanding. With the exception of Ben, their voices were tentative. This led me to consider the nature of silence and speech.

I characterize the discussions in the weeks leading up to the gender conversations as an ongoing and willing set of conversations. The students rarely hesitated to speak openly. Yet in the structured set of reflections, when I brought up a topic initially welcomed with enthusiasm, the silence of the early interviews gently reemerged. Upon reflection, that silence appeared inherently defensive. I realized that children’s personal and political lives are not easily separated. The social complexity of their lives was embedded in their homes, schools, social groups, and family histories. In order to understand aspects of being white and privileged, I needed to start from a radically different place. Rather than move from an outer politic inward, I needed to start inside and see what emerged.

## LIVING IN A BUBBLE

I have found that change happens in subtle and fascinating ways. To map it afterwards risks faulty attributions of causation and a presumed linearity that may not actually exist. But sometimes it is worth trying to tell the story nonetheless, because it highlights our impulse to make sense of the way events occur. In the act of constructing an order, we search for a sense of possibility, a way of envisioning the world as other than it is.

Over the month and a half following the gender project, we became immersed in the portraiture collages. Each step of the process provided ample opportunities for conversations and time to discover more about each other. In the absence of recording devices and preconceived topics, we freely exchanged ideas under the umbrella of self-representation. Many conversations occurred while students cleaned paintbrushes or glued photographs to a piece of particle board. Others were private exchanges, as the students explained the images or words they included in their collages as ways of describing themselves.

Quietly, I entered their more personal worlds, hearing stories that spoke to both school and family life. The students complained about parents, divorces, and adult choices that were confusing or disorienting from the perspective of an eighth grader. Upon hearing their accounts, I invited the students to reflect on the ways they were the same or different at school and at home. Time and time again, they offered stories of deep sadness or discomfort, invoking an intensity well beyond that normally associated with the stresses of early adolescence. Again, we returned to taped conversations. Those recordings are riddled with qualifying or guarded comments, including “Nobody at school knows this. When I’m upset or angry, I can only tell my guinea pig.” Or, “My parents would be really mad if they knew I was talking about this.” Or, “I know that if I want to be able to dance, I won’t be able to eat.” Even longer stretches of tape pass with only the sound of a child weeping, often followed by my question, “Does anyone here know how hard this is for you?”

“No...”

Nobody knew.

In a school that proclaimed intimacy, openness, and ample personal support, the students were keeping many secrets. There was a lot of pain. But to a visitor, or a researcher coming a few days a week for four months, it was hidden. While I had suspected that difficult times were part of the students’ lives, my understanding remained vague until we began the portraiture project.

Clearly, these students succeeded in projecting a public image congruent with the school’s reputation. Their lived experiences, however, did not align with this public story. Although riddled with discomfort, the students felt pressed not to speak. Instead, they put their effort into disassociating from personal struggles so that their outward lives could fit a predetermined picture of social order.

I wondered how this disassociated understanding of their own struggles impacted the students’ abilities to understand larger political stories. During the last month of my stay, this question was answered and an unforeseen revelation surfaced. The students’ silence was not an indication of social ignorance. Instead, it pointed to a delicate, much less easily identifiable set of insights into the social worlds they inhabited. The portraiture project and the conversations it sparked deepened our relationship. I reassessed my assumptions about the nature of social criticism. I realized that social criticism, so long a part of my own educational training, required environments of personal safety. In the absence of such environments, meaningful socially critical thought would always be limited. The portraiture project became a safe space where students could hold, present, and explore their own stories.

The next group conversation grew out of this emergent foundation of trust. Sensing an increased desire to talk again, I began with a question from a passing remark made by Ben. He described life at the Community School as feeling like “a bubble.” By the time we gathered together, this idea had been confirmed any number of times by other students. It clearly merited further exploration.

Bubbles are beautiful and delicate objects. Floating and affected by the slightest breeze, they captivate adults and children alike, who stop mid-step to watch them float to the sky. Or they pop, seemingly without reason. Bubbles



reflect light while capturing waves of rainbows on their surface; yet they're also transparent, allowing light free passage through them. The viewer can look inside them. These students, on the other hand, helped me understand that the act of looking out held more significance. They also helped me recognize how incredibly fragile bubbles are, to be admired only from afar. The slightest touch jeopardizes their existence. The idea that these students would describe their world in these terms seemed telling indeed.

In contrast with the last time we had gathered to talk, now the students claimed ownership of the conversation. The discursive-qualifying mode, evident earlier in the use of third person pronouns and qualifying introductions, disappeared completely. Instead, the students spoke directly about what they thought, the questions they had, and how they noticed their own lives taking shape. Paul, a boy who had previously shunned a central role in our conversations, volunteered to begin. His comments now indicated why he had been reluctant to speak.

Paul: I think it is a bubble, but it's kind of one-way.  
It doesn't teach the full thing.  
To me, it doesn't seem to show some sides of issues.

Claire: I agree that it is sort of like a bubble.  
And like Paul says, it doesn't really show us a view of...  
Except for the...  
Well, more upper-class people.  
Because we're here; to get into this school costs a lot of money.  
And we don't see the views of people who are poor.  
You know, people who can't easily go on vacation and stuff.

CJ: I agree with Claire.  
Not only that, but you don't get to see what happens.  
I mean stuff that happens here goes along with upper-class people.  
There aren't as many fights as you would see in

public school.  
Or like, they're not experienced with drugs and how that happens.  
And seeing how people in schools do stuff like that.

AB: So the bubble is like...

CJ: Not seeing other stuff that would happen in that situation.

Peter: It's more than being bubble-like.  
It's control.  
People are able to control it.  
A lot because it's so small.

It's much easier to control it.  
People are kept track of better.  
That's why it feels that way.

AB: Does it feel like you're kept track of? The community is kept track of?

Peter: Yeah, I think so.

Peter's comments point to an unspoken set of tensions that permeates many independent schools, challenging the assumption that smaller schools are inherently safer spaces for children than larger ones. Independent schools—particularly self-proclaimed progressive ones—pride themselves on being relatively small. The prevailing logic is that small schools foster a unique intimacy, which in turn facilitates better learning experiences. Until Peter described his school experiences in terms of visibility, I had not thought about it as a menacing quality. Nor had I considered how visibility could be a method of control. I was surprised at how readily the students could name this tension. Perhaps the small size, as Peter implies, makes it easier to legislate which ideas can or can't be talked about, which

conflicts can and can't arise, and what territories are considered "dangerous" for the community, all culminating in a subtle and intangible way of maintaining public order.

Peter's critique challenges the mythology of small schools by hurling criticisms more often targeted at larger public schools. Infamous for their impersonal pedagogies, oversized classes, and heavy reliance on standardization, these are the institutions often described in terms of Foucault's panopticon, the nineteenth-century prison model that allows all inmates to be viewed at all times. After hearing Peter's challenge, I asked myself, "Is there something more insidious about visibility in these smaller settings than I had ever imagined?"

The students argued that the size of the school and the claim of a progressive legacy demanded a kind of silence around certain issues or questions. Paul's claim that the school "doesn't teach the full thing" implies that certain "things" (i.e., ideas, ideologies, approaches to sense-making) do not exist in the Community School. His concluding remark: "To me it doesn't seem to show some sides of issues," points to his awareness that teaching is a political act, an awareness that adolescents come to as they see what is and is not included in their daily learning.

Paul's engagement with his peers before this conversation made his comments particularly compelling. Unlike most of his classmates, he voiced opinions typically associated with the political right. That he felt uncomfortable in a liberal haven did not surprise me. Nor did the fact that he felt silenced or invisible, or even that the school seemed to consciously avoid ideas with which he might agree. What made his comments stand out was how they forced a reckoning with the role that teachers play when they are asked to consider ideas they find less appealing than their own. Paul clearly felt that his ideas did not fit and therefore were not discussed.

If Paul underlined how conversations with boundaries can erase students' understandings of themselves, then Claire and CJ pointed to the way that class homogeneity ("we don't see the views of people who are poor" and "stuff that happens here goes along with upper-class people") truncates their understanding of social and political complexity. Claire and CJ stepped firmly into a charged political domain when they invoked economic class. This was a departure from my

expectations and from a prevailing assumption that students in independent schools lack critical understanding about their own privilege, particularly as it applies to money.

Rather than feeling secure because of their position in an independent school, many of the students felt vulnerable and anxious. As they considered the long-term implications of their school lives, they began to describe feeling wholly unprepared to step into more diverse settings. Many of them were scared. Some were angry that their school and families protected them from broader social experiences. Others described longing for diversity, in the hope that engagement with different communities would provide a sense of place in the complex worlds outside of their bubble.

Kara, who had been hesitant to speak about gender-related issues, explicitly addressed the way in which her class position affected her life.

I was thinking about how we are all middle class.

I feel spoiled to be here.

And I feel guilty that everything I do is almost—

I don't know what the word is—

Everything I do I feel guilty about.

It's sort of like people come in these nice cars,

These big houses,

Nice clothes... and I'm not singling myself out.

I'm one of those people who do.

We all are.

I almost feel weird about that.

The reason I'm excited to go to high school is that there are going to be so many different people.

I just want to be friends with people who aren't exactly like me.

People who have fewer advantages than me,

And people who have more advantages than me.

It's very hard to say out loud...

In her critical reflection, Kara described her class standing in terms of material possessions. The fact that all her friends seem to possess the same big houses and fancy cars does not bring with it the sense of personal security commonly associated with economic privilege. Instead, these possessions make Kara feel guilty or weird. Her feelings, in turn, connect to a deeper understanding that others have far less than she does. For Kara, the school's economic homogeneity fosters a sense of social anxiety and dislocation. A diverse environment, she argues, might provide a more trustworthy sense of place.

Echoing Kara's indictment of class homogeneity at the Community School, Caleb, a tall white boy with a bold, public personality, described his reaction to a recent visit to a large public school. Rather than talking directly about class, Caleb recounted his surprise at recognizing racial differences.

I walked around and thought,  
    “Wow, this is pretty nice.”

And I didn't think I'd notice.  
    But I did.

There were lots of black people there.  
    And it really just surprised me.  
Once I didn't think I'd notice.  
    I was preparing myself—  
        “Oh yeah, it'll be very diverse.”

But then I was like,  
    “Oh my God.”  
It was kind of scary...  
    We have so little exposure to that here, too.  
It was kind of uncomfortable.  
I mean it isn't a totally separate culture;  
    There are little differences that we just don't see here.  
    Really,  
        Ever.

And I didn't think I'd be uncomfortable.

And I wasn't uncomfortable...

I just noticed.

Caleb recounts, in step-by-step fashion, the beginnings of a social and political awakening. He moves from shock at being a part of a diverse environment, to fear, to a sense that the differences that prompted his discomfort were something he shouldn't have noticed. Deviance, for Caleb, lies in the act of noticing differences at all. The implication, of course, is that if noticing difference makes him uncomfortable, and if his immediate community stresses the importance of comfort, then it's not the differences *themselves* that are bad; rather, it is the *noticing* and *articulation* of them that is problematic.

Caleb's and Kara's stories exemplify the profound shift that marked these last conversations. Explicitly naming race and class, both of them situate themselves within larger social groups, attempt to critically craft an understanding of their experiences, and then ground their analyses in their own social locations.

Jonathan Silin (1995) opens up similar questions when he explores the absence of school-based discussions about socially relevant, though potentially charged, issues. What is gained by not talking about certain experiences? More importantly, for this community, what is lost by these choices? The more I spoke with the students, the more I recognized that communities of privilege have a lot invested in maintaining an order in which emotionally and/or socially complicated issues are absent. I would argue that this avoidance arises from a determination to create and maintain communities that feel safe and comfortable. It is hard to talk about poverty, racism, or social justice without talking about power and human suffering. Such conversations invite critical self reflection, which has the potential to cause discomfort. The chosen institutional path is one of avoidance, with social conflict seen as threatening, even when it comes from community members themselves. These students learned, from parents and teachers, what they should and should not talk about. For them, talking explicitly about human struggle, personal and shared, encountered and inherited, was a transgression of expected behavior. Such transgression, in turn, might result in rejection by the adults who provide a sense of warmth and belonging. In this light, the pervasive silence made sense. It was a silence born of self-preservation.

## THE LAST CONVERSATIONS: REMINDERS OF EXPERTISE

The portraiture project, the personal interviews, and our growing trust facilitated the creation of a space that invited a new kind of sense-making. The students increasingly spoke with an authority and sensitive knowing strikingly absent from our earlier discussions. Reminded of what they knew and the questions they had, these children conversationally collapsed worlds of school and home, private and political. A sense of paralyzing visibility ran throughout their talk, a visibility that constrained both their thoughts and their actions, and that ultimately yielded silence. By the time early summer arrived, I was convinced that these white, privileged students were far more socially critical than any book, article, or academic meeting had led me to believe. They also knew the costs of articulating their criticisms. Thus their critiques remained unspoken. And this is precisely what the broader research community has heard: an unexplained silence.

In light of this realization, I decided to meet with the kids one last time, hoping both to test my emergent understanding and to ask the questions that I knew would be asked of me once I left the school. Though I was still cautious about initiating a pointedly political conversation, I also knew that if I were going to contribute something new to the scholarship about white children, I needed to return to the issue of race. How had they approached race in school? What had they talked about? What did they hear when I said the word “racism”? Now, in stark contrast to the first time I asked these questions, all the students wanted to participate.

At the start, the remarks were vague. They referred to books they had read but didn’t really remember. They described how conversations in class “made it all seem as though racism was a thing of the past.” Soon, however, our conversation became more direct and immediate. Using words like “bigoted,” the group described feeling deep discomfort when people they knew used racial epithets. They drew links between racism and homophobia. And they tussled with identifying bigotry in their own families. Racism, Caleb said, made him think of “an

old, fat, Southern guy dragging a black man from the back of a pick-up;” it also made him think of his uncle who had “fought in Vietnam and hated anyone who wasn’t white”—and, apparently, anyone who was gay. Despite these prejudices, Caleb explained, his uncle was still “a really nice guy.” Caleb’s struggle to place his uncle within a family system and a broader social framework took on particular poignancy because Caleb himself was in the process of coming out as gay. Again and again, I was reminded that asking the kids to talk about race and racism was asking them to unpack their most intimate stories.

Our final conversation ended in a particularly revealing way. Rather than focusing on the topic I had brought to the table, the students segued into a series of reflections about the nature of community at school. They told me about a class meeting that a head administrator had facilitated to deal with the discovery of some objectionable graffiti. Insulting epithets naming a specific girl had been scrawled on the climbing structure outside the eighth-grade rooms. The message of the meeting, the students explained, “was that you shouldn’t be mean to each other.” When I asked what lessons they took away from the session, Paul said, “I think mainly not to deface school property.”

“If you have to be mean, do it on a piece of paper,” Gus added, with a clear note of sarcasm. “Yeah, that’s kind of how it came across,” he continued. “We prefer you not to be mean, but if you have to, don’t do it on school property.” At this point we were all laughing at the absurdity of the school’s priorities. Yet this conversation revealed that the students had gleaned more about the ideological workings of the school than one might have expected.

To be a part of this community, you needed to be nice. And the students’ critique of this situation revealed their awareness of the unrealistic expectations embedded in this philosophy. This awareness helped me to understand their initial hesitation to speak, and why so many of our conversations had started slowly but had grown more liberating over time. In those early discussions, the students’ fears that they needed to say the right thing, or else risk rejection by the school, stymied our discussions.

And so we come back to the place and purpose of silence. Embedded in the structures of these students’ worlds were messages demanding that they not



speaking about parts of their lives. Whether they were off-handed comments by parents, insisting that stories “stay within the family,” or school precepts that equated community with niceness and comfort, the messages complemented each other in ways clearly evident to the students. Learning these rules is a process I call the acculturation of silence. It is an insidious kind of experiential layering, in which children learn socially expected behaviors. From my perspective as a researcher, identifying the acculturation of silence facilitates a far more compassionate, though no less critical, way of understanding the struggle the children went through when talking about socially charged issues. In the early stages of our time together, they expressed a power-evasive way of thinking about the world. Their inability to tell their own stories made explicit conversations about race and class exceedingly difficult. Not until they practiced talking about their own experiences, and thereby took an essential step for any understanding of power structures, could they articulate more socially critical narratives. To move “beyond silenced voices” (Weis & Fine, 1993), they needed my support and acknowledgement that speaking may feel awkward and scary.

## **COMPASSIONATE PEDAGOGY: THE TEACHER CONTINUES TO GROW AS A PERSON AND AS A PROFESSIONAL**

What significance do these stories hold for current or future educators? Why, when we face challenging educational times, do I foreground the need for a compassionate approach to white children who are endowed with privileges that buffer them from the material realities of current political changes? The answer is two-fold. First, these stories ask educators to rethink their assumptions about privileged white children and how they understand their worlds. Second, the stories can be used as an educational template that highlights the personal challenges all children face when they think about themselves as members of a diverse social world.

My goal is not to take the side of the privileged. The reality is, however, that white children are just that—children. By focusing only on the legacy they inherit, rather than the role they can play in the future, we short-circuit the possibilities of social reform. We know very little about the experiences of upper-middle-class white students in school. The invisibility of the “normative” has both protected the privacy of white communities and left huge gaps in our grasp of how power re-inscribes itself (Fine, 1994). The absence of critical and compassionate understanding of privilege as it is lived maintains the extant power structures while leaving white children alone, struggling to figure out the nature of life in a pluralistic society. I’m not sure how many adults could rise to this challenge, even under ideal educational circumstances.

The approach I am suggesting acknowledges the difficulty of socially complicated conversation while simultaneously holding a vision in which that very difficulty becomes the stuff of open dialogue. I suspect that the students at the Community School were representative of many white, upper-middle-class early adolescents. When I asked them if the color of a person’s skin or the language they spoke should determine friendships, they knew to answer “no.” When asked if the government should do more to provide for the poor, they would just as

readily say “yes.” But my experiences show that these socially sensitive, well-intentioned comments do not translate into critical social thinking, or reveal an ability to navigate thoughtfully in the face of inequality.

In doing educational work oriented towards equity, we have to help white children discover how their identities consist of more than the legacies they have inherited. They need to see images of diverse alliances, and hear stories of white individuals who have also fought for social change (Tatum, 1997). White children have to see what collective activism looks like. Significantly, though, they have to find ways that their own stories of struggle can become the places where they receive, learn about, and give compassion. The legacy they carry is hard. It is not hard in the ways experienced by communities facing the harsh realities of disenfranchisement, but it is hard nonetheless. And if, as educators, we want all students to reclaim the possibilities of democracy, then white children will have to learn how to speak their own stories so they can become part of the collective conversation. By extension, if we want white children to enact a compassion for human struggle, they must know how it feels to receive that same kind of compassion. What I learned from the students at the Community School challenged my assumptions about white privilege. These eighth graders courageously leaned into those places of discomfort in ways that they had not done before. What they clearly sought was a group of adults to help facilitate that process.

The students’ strategic use of silence as a tool for self-preservation masked a desire to speak more openly and critically. This unarticulated reflexivity points to places of educational opportunity. Socially critical conversations can be learned. And I would contend that many children, particularly early adolescents, want to have them. But in asking students to move in this direction, teachers need to understand why the journey is difficult. The process of questioning the various strands that make up social identities takes courage because one is permanently changed by the process itself. When we ask students to engage in this work, we ask them to rethink their identities. Their desire to hold on to dominant ideas about their communities of origin is understandable, because these ideas tell them who they are.

After nearly twenty years in politically oriented educational conversations which often assumed shared visions of social justice as the end point, I now think

that we educators stumble over foundational areas that make a hard process even harder. We insist on seeing the stuff of politics and equity as existing outside ourselves. We talk about a socially just, inclusive world as if it can be achieved by moving individuals around like pieces on a chessboard. There is little, if any, explicit recognition of why such changes are frightening; why, if you come from a conservative or religiously observant community, an open politic about sexual orientation is difficult; why exposing racism is painful if you come from a family where racial epithets are the stuff of dinner-table conversation; why looking at your communities of origin through a new lens can disarm even the most politically active individual. I am not saying that such work is impossible, or that it shouldn't be done. Instead, I am inviting teachers to consider the emotionally complex nature of this work, especially when it is being done by children.

Often, as teachers, we forget what it felt like not to know a set of ideas, not to think about the world through a certain frame. We make choices to surround ourselves with friends and coworkers who share ideas similar to our own. And perhaps we only go home, to those places that birthed us, when absolutely necessary. We work to create social continuity in our lives. But children in schools do not possess the same kinds of self-securing structural decision-making abilities we do. Even if they articulate a desire to claim a certain political agenda, there is no guarantee that the world beyond school will let them do that. And if school stands for one educational or political agenda, home may embody a very different set of ideas.

If we want our students to willingly explore ideas that put them in conflict with the places that have nurtured them thus far, we need to think about holding steadfast to an ethic that permits a gentle shepherding through difficult ideas. We need to be able to let our students hold and explore their own stories as precursors to meaningful, broad, social understanding. In this process, the humanity of any political agenda will become manifest. And the vision enacted will be one that grows, simultaneously, outside and inside the individual. This is a more intimate kind of political work than most of us want to claim as part of our profession. It takes the loud calls for social justice and replies to them with a whisper. In the quietude we offer a time for reflection and the construction of social meanings

that allow students to understand themselves as they would understand others.

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