

Sociology 3221
Fall 2006
Trina Smith
Homework #1
10 points
Due 10/5/06 in class

Gender and Education

Orenstein (1994) defines the hidden curriculum as “the unstated lessons that students learn in school: it is the running subtext through which teachers communicate behavioral norms and individual status in the school culture, the process of socialization that cues children into their place in the hierarchy of larger society” (5). An important dimension to add on to Orenstein’s definition is that peers also play a role in this. Orenstein also argues in her book *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*, that girls experience a confidence gap in relation to boys.

This homework assignment asks you to identify the hidden gender curriculum you experienced and/or observed during your primary education years (i.e. elementary school, middle school, and/or high school). Thus, below I provide you with a list of examples that you can discuss in your writing, but feel free to deviate from the list. I would rather you focus on one or two topics and examples in depth than trying to include a lot of examples.

Thus, for your homework I want you to discuss examples of the hidden gender curriculum you either experienced and/or observed during elementary, middle, or high school. Also, you should address the idea of how the hidden curriculum may play a role in the confidence gap between boys and girls.

Trina’s Example

Let me give you an example that is fresh on my mind for you think about. I attended my ten year high school reunion this summer. Before the reunion, a web page was created in where we could give our bios, but before I tell you what I wrote, let me tell you about myself in high school and my high school.

I went to the “good” high school where many students came from middle to upper class backgrounds. I was neither super popular in high school, but I was not the “underdog” either. I actually tended to hang out with students who were not in my school. I also took the “Advance Placement” classes, but honestly, I received good grades in high school, but I did not devote a ton of time to studying. Look wise, again, I was not a beauty queen, but I was not considered a complete “ugly duckling” if you will. I dressed more in an alternative style during this time period. Also, my high school was predominately white.

I approached my high school reunion with a great deal of trepidation. In some ways I did not want to go, because I do not really look back at high school fondly. I made my best friends in college and do not stay in regular contact with anyone from high school. But in other ways I wanted to go because I wanted to “prove” to them that I did something great with my life.

Before the reunion, I wrote my lengthy bio, in which I talked about making friends in college, being close to getting my PhD, my volunteer work, my work as United Nations rep, and about my partner and baby. I did not just write this because I wanted to show off, but I am proud of what I have accomplished and worked hard for these things. Then it is reunion time. Most of the compliments and/or comments I received were: a) it is great you are getting your PhD, b) you seem to be the only one who likes their job, c) you make me feel bad because I did not complete college, and d) you must be smart.

Let me contrast this with other comments I overheard, in particular to the women. Jane looks great, so much better than she did in high school (said about her to other people and then also told to her). Most of

the girls said to each other similar things... you look great! The only comment I received about my looks was from a classmate who was 7 months pregnant at the time and told me I looked great for having a baby. What's the significance of this? One, I chopped my hair right before this. I was the only female there with hair shorter than her shoulders.

So, here is my analysis on this situation and where I see the hidden curriculum still shining through ten years later. There are ideals and norms about what "pretty and attractive" girls look like, as they apply to who is popular. Girls have long hair. Second, few women received compliments on both their "smartness" and their looks. It was one or the other and I was definitely not the latter category. Lastly, from my observations, I think people were nice to me, but my "intelligence" was not an automatic in into the popular club. How did this make me feel? I pose this question, because it is a part of my analysis of the situation. Part of me did not care as I really value my schooling, like my jobs researching and teaching, and I have a partner and baby. But another part of me did feel hurt and questioning why I was not given compliments on my looks and why did people make comments to me as you make me feel bad because of your achievements. The hidden curriculum, in what I assess from my example, is that girls/women pick up on the ideals from their peers that self-esteem stems from a normative beauty standard. This is where others will compliment you. You may feel proud of yourself because of your academic achievements, but people do not react as positively to that as the way you look.

This assignment should be typed and double spaced. The page length should be 1-2 pages.

Areas where you may have experienced or observed the gendered hidden curriculum:

1. School sports that girls and boys played
2. After school activities (like Girl Scouts, French club, etc)
3. After school jobs or internships
4. Lunch room seating
5. Who your "best friends" were
6. Activities you and friends shared (football games, movies, etc)
7. Who were "popular" girls and boys (what made them popular)?
8. What kinds of clothes (fashion) did girls/boys wear?
9. What kinds of music/movies did girls/boys listen to/watch?
10. How did girls attract a boy the wanted to date?
11. How did boys attract a girl they wanted to date?
12. Following my lead, you can also talk about high school reunions or another event where the hidden curriculum is still exemplified.

Source for this assignment: Alexander, Susan M. 2005. "Hidden Curriculum: Gender Socialization" in eds. Marybeth Stalp and Julie Childers. *Teaching Sociological Concepts and the Sociology of Gender*. American Sociological Association.