

# Beyond Pink & Blue:

What teachers need to know to be successful in single-sex classrooms  
A two-day seminar for teachers in grades K – 8

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## Day One

### INTRODUCTION and RATIONALE: From Sam Cooke to 50 Cent:

Almost fifty years ago, Sam Cooke had a #1 hit song in which he sang “Don’t much about history . . . I don’t claim to be an ‘A’ student, but I’m trying to be, for maybe by being an ‘A’ student baby, I could win your love for me.” He mentioned specifically French, geometry and trigonometry as subjects in which he’s going to try harder to be an ‘A’ student. Fifty years ago, it was cool for boys to be smart.

Not any more. The culture has changed. It’s hard to imagine Akon, 50 Cent, Eminem or Justin Timberlake singing about how they’re going to try harder to get an A on their geometry quiz. Today, it’s cool for a boy to pretend to be a gang member. For Black, White, and Latino boys in the United States today, academic excellence is seen as unmasculine (for more on this point see *Boys Adrift*, especially chapters 2 and 7). For girls, the focus – even for elementary-school girls – is today often more on how you *look* rather than on who you *are*.

**The challenge for the school is to create an alternative culture** in which it’s cool to be smart – and where the focus is on who you *are* rather than on how you *look*. The better teachers understand gender differences, the easier this mission is to accomplish. *What’s cool for girls is not necessarily cool for boys, and vice versa.*

### 1) Some sex differences are hardwired.

Girls and boys see the world in subtly different ways (see *Girls on the Edge*, chapter 5, especially pages 134 – 138, for more information and scholarly citations on this point).

**Application:** Suppose you are teaching kindergarten or first grade. You give all your students a blank sheet of paper and a box of crayons and tell them to draw whatever they want. What do children draw? Studies using this paradigm have found that 5- and 6-year-old **girls** tend to draw people, pets, flowers, and/or trees, facing the viewer, with lots of detail, explicit facial expressions, etc.



Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to draw a dynamic scene of action, such as a rocket smashing into a planet, or soldiers shooting at each other. Faces, if visible, are often lacking features.



These differences may derive at least in part from hardwired differences in the visual system, as noted above.

Teachers who understand these differences will have boys who love to draw. Teachers who do not understand these differences are more likely to have boys who say, “Drawing is for girls.” But the importance of these differences extends beyond visual arts. How we see influences how we read and how we write. Some characteristics of “boy writing” – particularly the emphasis on action – may be traced in part to these differences in the visual system.



**Sequence of development.** We now know that the various regions of the brain develop in a different sequence in boys compared with girls (see *Boys Adrift*, pp. 17 – 22). If you teach the same subjects in the same sequence to both girls and boys, by the time students are 12 years old you may have many girls who believe that “geometry is tough” and many boys who believe that “poetry is stupid.” The teacher’s lack of awareness of sex differences has the unintended consequence of *reinforcing* gender stereotypes. Conversely, teachers who understand these differences can break down gender stereotypes: they can empower more girls to excel in math and science, and they can inspire more boys to get excited about creative writing, poetry, and Spanish.

## 2) What’s RACE got to do with it?

Race and sex are NOT comparable categories. There are no *innate* differences between children of different races comparable to the sex differences listed above. Nevertheless, racial and ethnic characteristics must be understood if these strategies are to be employed successfully, particularly if the teacher and student come from different backgrounds. Failure to understand the importance of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic factors can result in African-American and Latino boys who regard academic achievement as unmasculine, and African-American and Latina girls who regard the teacher as an enemy rather than as a friend (despite the teacher’s best efforts). We will especially consider how to master the challenges involved when the teacher’s race or sex do not match the student’s: for example, when an African-American *female* is teaching African-American *males*; or when a *White* woman is teaching *African-American* girls.

## 3) Sex differences are educationally relevant (this next section, on gender-specific best practice for each subject area, occupies most of the two-day workshop)

We will consider applications to the subject areas:

- ◆ Best practices for teaching **science** to girls, and to boys (see *Girls on the Edge* chapter 5). Professor Caitlin Kelleher’s strategy for engaging girls in computer science: see *Advances in Gender and Education*, volume 1, pp. 5 – 10 (online at [www.mrcrad.org](http://www.mrcrad.org)).
- ◆ Best practices for teaching **math** to girls (see *Why Gender Matters*, chapter 5)
- ◆ Best practices for teaching **math** to boys: Start with numbers for the sake of numbers. Abstract before concrete!! (Piaget got this point wrong.)
- ◆ Best practices for teaching **language arts and English** to girls
  - What about race and ethnicity? Judy Blume vs. Toni Morrison vs. Julia Alvarez?
  - Challenging and deconstructing the notion of “girl books”: How can you best teach *All Quiet on the Western Front* to 8<sup>th</sup>-grade girls?
- ◆ Best practices for teaching **language arts and English** to boys
  - Challenging and deconstructing the notion of “boy books”: How can you best teach *The Secret Garden* to 6<sup>th</sup>-grade boys?
  - Why are “graphic novels” generally NOT a good idea for boys?
- ◆ Best practices for teaching **social studies and history** to girls
  - Begin with “what would it be like to be a girl in . . .” Make a connection
  - Examples from the Southern United States before the Civil War: what would it be like to be a White girl on a wealthy plantation? What would it be like to be a Black girl on the same plantation?

◆ Best practices for teaching **social studies and history** to boys

- *In medias res*: why it sometimes makes sense to start in the middle of the story.
- Introduce technical elements, and maps: What was the difference between a Confederate rifle and a Union Army rifle? Why did it matter?

4) Some girls and boys are atypical.

Some girls don't want to play with dolls; they'd rather kick a football or wrestle a hog. Some boys don't enjoy football or soccer; they'd rather sit quietly and read a book. Research by Jerome Kagan, Patricia Cayo Sexton, and others, has demonstrated that these boys share a number of characteristics which distinguish them from 'mainstream' boys (see *Why Gender Matters*, chapter 9).

- These boys may be athletically talented, but if so, they tend to prefer tennis, track, or golf, rather than football or soccer
- These boys are more likely to suffer from allergies, asthma, and eczema
- These boys are more likely to be precocious, particularly with regard to language

What do educators need to do to ensure that all boys – including these atypical boys – fulfill their potential? And what about gender-atypical girls, a.k.a. “tomboys”? How do the principles described on Day One above differ for these girls – if they *are* different?

5) Best practices for classroom management – boys.

- A. **The team concept.** This strategy, also referred to as the “houses” strategy, is particularly useful for boys as young as kindergarten age. We will review how to introduce team competition within the classroom, how to assign students to the various teams, and how to address differing abilities among the various teams.
- B. **Bullying prevention.** The traditional approach – some variation on “How would you feel if someone did that to you? – doesn't work very well with boys. What *does* work?
- C. **Akon and Eminem vs. Barack Obama and Al Gore.** It's not sufficient for a boy to become a man; we want him to become a *gentleman*, i.e. a man who is courteous, responsible, and genuine. How to create a classroom in which it's “cool” to be a gentleman?

6) Best practices for classroom management – girls.

We will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of various seating arrangements, how to encourage group work without promoting the formation of cliques, and the difference – in girls' eyes – between *teammates* and *friends*. We will consider specifically **preventing the “Meangirls” phenomenon**. This strategy, developed initially at the Woodlands Academy of the Sacred Heart, a private girls' school north of Chicago, has been effective in preventing girl-on-girl bullying in public and private schools around the United States.

7) Best practices for testing and assessment.

How can you girls' and boys' performance on traditional parameters: grades, test scores, attendance, and discipline referrals? What other parameters should be assessed? And how do best practices for test *preparation* differ for girls compared with boys?