

Myra and Me

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In the fall of 1968, two worlds would collide in Amherst. Myra was living in one world, ready to start her new English Ph.D. program. On the other hand, I was a new émigré to the exhilarating school of education's experiment inspired by Dwight Allen. Within a week, I would be boarding a plane for the Rockies, off to invent an "ideal" school of education. Really. Dr. Kettering funded the adventure west, giving school of education faculty, students and staff sunsets to spark our souls and conjure up our Brave New World. While I contemplated the sunset, Myra stayed behind in Amherst, living the good life in Colonial Village Apartments, and attending classes in subjects like "Middle English."

Middle English made an imprint that has endured three decades. Myra's objective in that course was described by her literature professor: "To speak Middle English so well that Chaucer, up in heaven, will smile down at us." (Quite a behavioral objective!). A week later, I returned from the Rockies, immersed in a stream of endless possibilities. Myra was less enthralled with her options - Middle English has fewer fans. In fact, much to the dismay of the registrar, she soon made an unprecedented move: she transferred from the English Ph.D. program to the far less prestigious Ed.D. program. She also abandoned her English fellowship, a major financial sacrifice for a couple trying to see how far the GI bill could carry them. Myra had decided that she really didn't care if Chaucer smiled or not.

How lucky we were that she made that change, and no one was luckier than the nation's schoolgirls. By the time she completed her degree, Myra was set on a path that would make her a champion for the educational rights of girls, a national voice speaking for so many silent girls. But in the beginning, it was Myra who needed to find her voice.

To understand Myra's transformation, you need to know a little about the "UMass Revolution." For those of you who missed it - or never even heard of it - the UMass Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s is difficult to explain in the context of today's more conservative environment. Picture a school where sorting out professors from students was sometimes challenging, where parliamentary procedure was replaced by a Quaker style meeting, a place where five students could choose a topic they want to investigate, and the school would assign a professor to help them do just that. Picture a place so exciting that a reporter for the *Saturday Review* would come to do a story, and stay for a degree. A place where Bill Cosby could call home. It was an exciting community where the difference between schooling and education could not have been clearer. "No, is not the answer," and "Yes, is the right answer," reflected the positive school attitude and its willingness to explore new ideas. The phrases were soon transformed into buttons that

students and faculty would wear (for those that needed reminding that in THIS school, it was the old ways that were suspect).

Of course, beyond the buttons and liberating ideas, not all was wonderful. There were abuses and failures, and some students and faculty took advantage of the school's openness. But for Myra and me, after meeting at Harvard, two tumultuous years in the military (one in Thailand at a B-52 base), and one year teaching in the Boston suburbs, the contrast between harsh reality and UMass experiment in idealism was a welcome change. UMass was one exciting place to learn, a description too rare in today's schools of education.

Part of the excitement of the place was the school's commitment to educational equity, and the significant numbers of students of color in the doctoral program. Multicultural and race issues were a major focus of the school's curriculum, and shaped much of the school's goals. But as our sensitivity to race bias grew, Myra and I became increasingly uncomfortable with a growing reality: gender bias was one big blind spot.

When Myra and I co-authored articles and proposals, faculty and students would refer to our co-authored work as "David's" article and "David's" proposals. When Myra said: "But I wrote it too!" a faculty member responded, "Of course, when we say 'David', we mean 'Myra' too!" In class, a similar pattern developed as males dominated class discussion, (me included). Female voices, if not silent, were quieter, less frequent, less influential. As Myra took her turn as editor of the school newspaper (another UMass norm was rotating editorships), she wrote an editorial entitled "The Only Socially Acceptable Form of Discrimination." She discussed how it felt to be female, and invisible in a doctoral program. As chance (or was it fate?) would have it, that editorial was read by Lou Fischer, a professor who also edited a series of issues oriented books for Harper and Row. "Would you be interested in writing a book about what happens to girls in school?" he asked. And so it began.

A one-page editorial, printed in a mimeographed school of education newspaper, with a circulation of about 150, guided our professional lives for the next 25 years. That question, "What happens to girls in school?" became the focus of our research and writing. How strange that for us, the formal curriculum became far less influential than the informal one. While certainly useful and necessary, in the final analysis, the courses we studied, the long list of books we read, the worry over the next test, those long nights finishing term papers (before the advent of the word processor!), and the enduring double trauma of completing two very different dissertations, did not shape our professional focus. All that sweat, effort, and worry led us to a degree; much of our professional contribution, however, came down to figuring out if our UMass experiences were personal - or prevalent. Was sexism a factor in America's schools?

In *Sexism in School and Society*, Myra helped define a field. Few studies had been done about sexism, and the majority of those focused on males. Let's face it, many people did not know what sexism meant. (It was coined around 1970 at the Women's Studies program at Cornell University, along with another phrase, sexual harassment.) Before

then, there were no terms to identify bias based on gender. In fact, when Betty Freidan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, she referred to gender bias as "the problem that has no name." Not surprisingly, the library had few studies or articles on the topic. Myra took what was available, and began observing schools, reading school texts, and interviewing educators and students. Her book was published in 1973, the first book to outline what sex bias looks like in the classroom.

While Myra was researching her book, a new law was also being researched, one called Title IX, a law that would begin to balance the educational scales. As Bernice Sandler describes in another article in this issue, Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments Act specifically prohibited many forms of sex discrimination in education. The opening section of Title IX states:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

Every public school and most of the nation's colleges and universities were covered under Title IX, which prohibited discrimination in school admissions, in counseling and guidance, in competitive athletics, in student rules and regulations, and in access to programs and courses, including vocational education and physical education. Title IX also applied to sex discrimination in employment practices, including interviewing and recruitment, hiring and promotion, compensation, job assignments, and fringe benefits. Myra's book had addressed those very issues, and now the power of the federal government resonated with Myra's insights.

In her research for *Sexism in School and Society*, and later for *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*, Myra uncovered not only current examples of bias, but a hidden civil rights struggle as well, an historical struggle to win educational rights for half the nation's citizens.

For almost two centuries girls were barred from America's schools. Although a woman gave the first plot of ground for a free school in New England, female children were not allowed to attend the school. In 1687, the town council of Farmington, Connecticut, voted money for a school "where all children shall learn to read and write English." However, the council quickly qualified this statement by explaining that "all children" meant "all males." In fact, the education of America's girls was so limited that fewer than a third of the women in colonial America could even sign their names. For centuries women fought to open the schoolhouse door.

By the end of the Civil War, a number of colleges and universities, especially tax-supported ones, were desperate for dollars. Institutions of higher learning experienced a serious student shortage due to Civil War casualties, and women became the source of much-needed tuition dollars. Female funding did not buy on-campus equality. Women often faced separate courses and hostility from male students and professors. At state

universities, male students would stamp their feet in protest when a woman entered a classroom.

In *Sex in Education* (1873), Dr. Edward Clarke, a member of Harvard's medical faculty, argued that women attending high school and college were at risk because the blood destined for the development and health of their ovaries would be redirected to their brains. The stress of study was no laughing matter. Too much education would leave women with "monstrous brains and puny bodies . . . flowing thought and constipated bowels." Clarke recommended that females be provided with a less demanding education, easier courses, no competition, and "rest" periods so that their reproductive organs could develop. He maintained that allowing girls to attend places such as Harvard would pose a serious health threat to the women themselves, with sterility and hysteria potential outcomes. And this "invisible" civil rights struggle continues even today. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that ivy league colleges would admit women, and not until the 1990s that the last state supported military colleges would, under court order, open its doors. But access is not equality; it is simply the first step to equality.

With two decades of federal funding, Myra and I investigated teacher education textbooks, only to discover that sex bias was rarely mentioned, receiving less than one percent of content coverage. Based on these books, tomorrow's teachers were more likely to repeat sexist practices than remedy them. And so we decided to write teacher education books of our own, books that would remedy this oversight.

Most of our effort in the 1980s into the 1990s focused on classroom interaction. We discovered that from grade school to graduate school, boys received more attention. Teachers praised boys more, punished them more, helped them more. Although girls continued to get better report card grades (partially, we suspected as a reward for their more docile, less threatening behavior), boys received a more intense educational experience, as well as better scores on high stakes tests like the SATs and the GREs. Myra and I uncovered the light and the shadows in America's classrooms: an intense spotlight often focused on boys, and a quieter world of females, more likely to be learning in the shadows and on the sidelines. After two decades of work, we had our answer to the UMass question: Myra's invisibility at graduate school was not personal, it was prevalent.

As the evidence and research mounted, so did the political backlash. In the book *Backlash*, Susan Faludi documented the negative impact on women resulting from the conservative political gains of the 1980s and 1990s. Most of the educational programs designed to assist girls and women now are gone. Title IX itself is threatened. In certain areas, such as engineering, physics, chemistry, and computer science, few women can be found. In nursing, teaching, library science, and social work, few men can be found. A "glass wall" still keeps women from the most lucrative careers and keeps men from entering traditionally "female" jobs. Even in careers where tremendous progress has been made, like medicine and law, a second generation of bias persists. In both professions, women find themselves channeled into the least prestigious, least profitable areas.

A cadre of ultra-conservative ideologues have been funded to denounce, decry, and discredit the work of educators like Myra and myself. This group, suffering from historical myopia, claims that real victims of sexism are males. Creating a destructive win-lose scenario, they propose that the problems boys confront is due, in large part, to the feminist movement, to female teachers, and to the efforts to even the educational playing field. Ignoring evidence to the contrary, they continue to promote an anti-female agenda. Since boys receive lower grades and are more likely to be found in special education classes, they conclude that gender equity has gone too far. Not understanding that sexism is a two-edged sword, one that hurts both males and females, they conclude that equity for females means penalties for males. These opponents are particularly incensed by the gender gap in college enrollments, a gap which indicate that for the first time in three and a half centuries, females outnumber males at college. Untroubled by the previous 350 years of male dominance, they now are alarmed at this development. But this is a convenient oversimplification, and quite misleading. The fewer number of males in higher education is related to many factors, including a booming economy that makes immediate employment more profitable than college for many males, a greater number of females in the population, a longer period taken by females to complete their degrees, and the need for females to earn an "insurance" degree, since they continue to earn less than males with the same level of education. Studies show that males with a high school education, and even males who dropped out of high school, still earn more money than women with a college degree. In addition, many older female students are returning to schools after raising a family, only now getting the undergraduate education postponed in earlier years. The major issue in college enrollments continues to be gender segregation. Females prepare to enter fields like teaching and social work, while males major in physics, engineering and technology. Males continue to dominate the high pay, high status college majors.

As one author in this issue describes the problem, we seem to be going through a national case of "girl-fatigue," growing tired of the uphill battle to win equality. But the truth is that for both boys and girls, gender bias continues to be documented in curricular materials, staffing patterns, and teaching behaviors. Given the powerful and painful history of sexism in U.S. schools, and the current challenges we face, it is surprising that so many Americans are unaware of the subtle (and not so subtle) barriers that still exist.

Although Myra's premature death while undergoing treatment for breast cancer has been a terrible loss, her life has been a beacon of hope, opening the classroom door to the concept and promise of gender equity. It is now up to us to keep that door open.