Gender Work Revisited

Understanding the resistance

Diane Handlin

As I write this today, finally at enough distance to reflect on one of the most challenging chapters of my independent school experience, I find myself wondering how it all began. From today's perspective, the beginning seems to have been my decision, after twelve years of teaching at The Pingry School (New Jersey), to enroll in a Master's program in Art and Leadership in Education at Bank Street College of Education. It was there that I read Ted Sizer's *Horace's Compromise*, and was, apparently, in just the right place developmentally for it to be a catalyst for changing my life.

In the book, Sizer talks about the compromise often made in public schools (where I had taught before coming to Pingry) between students and teachers. It goes something like this: "You don't bother me, and I won't bother you." In independent schools, however, it seemed to me that the compromise was between different parties and went something like: If you don't bother the administration, the administration won't bother you. The compromise that I recognized as existing at Pingry was that teachers were allowed to run their classes relatively autonomously as long as no problems were created for administration, and as long as the framework on which value assumptions rested was not questioned.

Before I go further, I want to make it clear at the outset, how very much I loved The Pingry School. When I was teaching there, I felt more whole, as if I were using my fullest potential, than at any other time in my life. I had been, in good independent school tradition, a teacher of the history of philosophy and the history of religion as well as ceramics, a guidance counselor, run a dance program, been a member of the child study team and the values committee, and had approached these disciplines as vehicles for exploring multiple perspectives or multiple ways of viewing reality. My investment had been in helping adolescents learn to trust and articulate their own perceptions. My independent school experience was one of the best experiences of my life.

In 1985, shortly after attending Bank Street College, I heard Carol Gilligan speak, and "way led on to way," as Robert Frost has it, until I ended up working in a Dodge Foundation Seminar with Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style as one of twenty New Jersey educators chosen to integrate a gender perspective into the curriculum. I was drawn deeply and passionately into work on inclusive curriculum.

Resistance

Because we at Pingry who worked so hard for change shared a deeply felt commitment to trying to better tell the truth about reality, I believe it would be most helpful not to speak so much about the exhilarating moments in our work, but about the *resistance* we met and some of our responses to that resistance. Resistance appeared first in the form of external opposition, from intelligent, practical friendly realists as well as people who vigorously tried to silence our voices. Looking back, I believe that our work was unique because we tried to open ourselves to the resistance, to deeply understand what the source of people's questions about our work really was. To do this, we had to be deeply honest with ourselves, and find the places in ourselves where we could recognize our own ambivalence. In many ways, it was because we allowed in doubt — including self-doubt — that we were able to move forward.

Activities

Our work began with a voluntary faculty group that focused on the question, "Why bother to integrate a gender perspective into the curriculum?" Pingry had been an all-male school established in 1861. I arrived when women were admitted in 1974. Our research into the place of gender in the school's values and assumptions began in the late 1980s, and we were able to attract thirty-five of the eighty faculty members as well as two trustees to our work. Besides having every department in the school represented, we had several department chairpersons, the assistant headmaster, and the head of upper school (both males), and the support, though not the active participation, of our headmaster. In looking back, it seems a great tribute to Pingry that there was such a vital interest in and commitment to this investigation. Besides having interest from the top, we also had student interest. I want to emphasize here that not all students

supported our work, but because they sensed it was based on genuine intellectual curiosity and a wish for dialogue, they became interested in what we were doing.

Early on we ran a panel discussion on "Why bother to integrate a gender perspective into the curriculum?" and included faculty who both supported and questioned the school's direction. After the program, the school's director of admission who had been at Pingry for many years wrote us a note that said, "Today's program was one of the most stimulating and provocative programs that I have ever witnessed at Pingry. It had balance, pacing, variety, and stimulation: The format also shows what we *can* do here to get the kids more involved. Bravo." Later in the year, following the faculty model, the students ran a voluntary panel discussion on the topic, "The Importance of Listening to the Voices of the Non-Dominant Cultures," which was attended by faculty as well as students and was powerful because of the process of genuine intellectual inquiry that the faculty panel had modeled. The students spoke from multiple points of view and both listened to others and defended their positions rigorously. Also during this time at Pingry, four outside speakers were invited to address the faculty on the topic of including perspectives from the nondominant cultures — Monica McGoldrick, Evelyn Lee, Ann Chapman and Meryle Kaplan. Eventually, I was given the title of diversity coordinator, and my work was recognized by allowing me to drop one section from my teaching load. I became a speaker at other schools and conferences and we ran very successful Gender Institutes for teachers and administrators from other institutions. Many of our faculty became so interested in our work that we videotaped and audiotaped all of our meetings and presentations so that people who could not attend could catch up on the process.

Steps Toward Institutional Change

We found it helpful to think about resistance from the perspective of "Steps in the Process of Institutional Change," a framework shared with us by planning consultant Susan Stone. The steps include: uninformed optimism; informed pessimism; checking out (e.g., find out why people *really* are opposed, ask them to articulate in detail why "gender issues" is a terrible idea); analysis of findings; hopeful realism; informed optimism; and completion or internalization.

As we proceeded, we were helped by Wendy Kolmar and her associates at Drew University who advised us to start small with a committed group of individuals, to rely on grass roots, the ripple effect, and, to, in effect, "each one teach one." Working with small steps, we found the "checking out" of resistance phase the most intriguing step in the institutional change framework.

We began our first year optimistically, inviting a professor from Columbia University to speak to the entire faculty on recent psychological research on gender. From the outset, we began taking written evaluations at the end of each presentation, anticipating the possibility of a vocal minority complaining about the presentation to the headmaster. We made copies of the forms, two thirds of which were extremely positive, and gave them to the headmaster to read before critics could vent their annoyance.

"Gender Issues" Is Not Feminism

As we became more involved in the process of "checking out," we became fascinated with the various aspects of the resistance we met. When I introduced our opening speaker at the beginning of the year, I tried to speak calmly, but clearly and strongly, about the fact that "gender issues" is not feminism. I used humor in my opening talk, and tried from that moment on to be a good listener, not the "pushy broad" some people were ready to see no matter what I said. For the rest of the year I made a conscious effort not to bring up gender issues in most conversations I entered, but I found that in many instances if I joined a conversation or discussion someone else would point out potential gender issues and say, "Isn't that right, Diane?" I believed and continue to believe that the single most important phenomenon that we had to wrestle with was that people often listened, yet didn't seem to hear what we were saying.

The actual words I initially said and repeated in many different forms were these: "Gender issues" is not feminism. "Gender issues" means the liberation of all human beings, males and females, from the stereotypical images of gender. It is concerned with improved relationships with oneself and between people. It is concerned with dispelling illusions, with the construction and deconstruction of society's stereotypical images of each gender. It refers not to an individual's sex but to the socialized roles he or she is asked to play. First and foremost, it raises questions and concerns itself with balance by including and listening to voices from the nondominant cultures.

Before each public presentation several of us went before the students and faculty and repeated this message.

A small cadre of people seemed dreadfully threatened by our work, and in some instances, simply by our continuing existence at Pingry. A number of members of the gender issues group (which consisted of twenty to thirty people who met monthly and always audiotaped meetings for those who could not attend) were fascinated with the resistance, so we split up and each person made it a personal goal to talk with, *listen to,* and really try to understand what people disapproved of in our work.

Articulation of Concerns

Some of the concerns we found were:

- There are so many things we need to be concerned with in educating students. Time and energy are limited. Demands to teach, coach and advise are great. Gender issues are the least important concern.
- "Gender issues are passé"; we've heard it all before; there is no more problem.
- What will we drop out of the curriculum? What will happen to our school, to its excellence, if we are teaching literature by women and minorities? (Trustees and faculty members were most concerned about this "standards" question.)
- Some women were outspokenly against our work with gender issues. Some women seemed afraid, as Catherine Stimpson has put it, of having their "gender arrangements" shifted. Because there are very few women in leadership positions at Pingry, my becoming visible through this work seemed to threaten many women. No matter how I tried to share and collaborate, the criticism went

on until a male faculty member grew concerned and took some of the critics aside and said, "You women need to support each other. The more women who successfully fill leadership roles, the more likely the school is to put other women in such roles. Power when shared expands and increases. By undercutting each other you are undercutting yourselves and playing in to the old gender stereotypes that some men and women still have about women."

• Our biggest surprise was the resistance of students. I personally visited every psychology class and the twenty-six senior peer leaders, believing that since identity was the key adolescent issue, gender issues had to be an important concern for high school students. On the side of what we labeled progress, the students and I talked about how we were "out of sync." The old stereotypes no longer fit; while social conditions had changed, expectations had changed less. The old stereotypes were still in our heads, suggesting that males should be competitive, independent, aggressive, intellectual, mechanically inclined and good at math. Females should be dependent, supporters, submissive, verbal, emotional. We talked about the fact that when the demands and realities of people's lives don't correspond to their stereotypical images of their mates and themselves, stress results. Students said, "It's not just a woman problem, but a gender problem." In terms of student resistance, however, we began to wonder if there were some things that at certain times in the life cycle are too difficult to face.

Are Some Things Too Difficult to Face?

Gloria Steinem has remarked that 18-year-old girls are at the height of their powers in terms of health, security, and beauty in one of the most egalitarian institutions of which they will ever be members. It is hard for them to think that there are "gender issues." Barbara Reinhold, director of the Career Development Office at Smith College told me that Smith waits until junior or senior year of college to bring up gender issues. When girls are struggling to achieve and worrying about whether they will be lovable if they do, they can't hold at the same time the notion that there is prejudice out there waiting for them. The most important message we can give young women is, "When you find sexism, don't think it's *your* problem, that there is something wrong with you."

Answering the Concerns

People in our gender issues group developed several useful responses that proved useful during the "checking out" phase. In response to the question of standards and the introduction of nontraditional materials into the curriculum, we said:

• An administrator or educational leader's job is to raise consciousness, as well as to be a pillar of tradition.

• Students are interested in perception, so developing multiple perspectives or multiple ways of processing information about the world is vital to them.

• Students need to become active learners, to realize that gender issues or multiple perspectives are not somewhere out there but are inside them. Teaching so-called "fringe figures" can empower students to value and to analyze their own perceptions and ideas.

• Educators need to be concerned with learning styles, and gender research enhances our understanding of learning styles.

Regarding the resistance of women to our work, I began to consider how complex women's relationships with each other can be. When I think about why, and try to think about the complexity and ambivalence of our earliest intensely close relationships, what comes to mind is how complicated mother-daughter and sister-sister relationships can be. Mother-daughter relationships may be the material out of which we begin to fashion our sense of self, but they also have the potential to threaten our feelings of powerfulness and autonomy. In terms of sister relationships, even though sisterhood has the potential to enhance and strengthen our sense of self, sibling and sister rivalry has deep roots. Since all human beings bring their earliest experiences into their present lives, one needs to take this reality into account. One needs to pay special attention to one's "sisters" in this work and never take goodwill for granted.

In terms of student resistance, we decided that one avenue in was to raise the question: Can a human being be all things to all people ? Because of societal and economic pressure our young people will be expected to be all things to all people — ambitious, career oriented, and successful as well as sensitive, caring, and nurturing. We talked with students about a *New York Times* article that dealt with the depression and suicide rate of the country's young millionaires and we spoke of the need to develop new maps for successful living. The messages they hear from the media, their parents, and a highly competitive college preparatory school like Pingry are that they should strive to have it all. What came out of our discussion was the discomforting idea that they might have to make choices, establish priorities, make sacrifices.

Students Go Underground

We did an equity audit with many of the students and faculty and ran a subsequent "Gender Issues Edition" of the school newspaper. By the time the paper was published in January there was a vocal group of students who said they didn't want to hear any more about "gender issues." When the term was mentioned, many students would shut down. In assemblies or classrooms some of the boys would groan when the term came up. There were students who continued to be vitally interested in the questions we raised, but many of them would speak to us privately, not wanting to have other students know they cared. A high number of them were minority males.

"How" Is as Significant as "What"

It was our conviction after working intensively on this change project that individual teachers whom students admire can successfully integrate a gender perspective and gender questions into their courses. But in some schools — including ours — it might be something of a red herring to introduce "gender issues" as an abstraction to the student body as a whole. We eventually called the topic of the spring student panel discussion, "The Importance of Listening to the Voices of the Non-Dominant Cultures." (And it helped.) Renaming can be invaluable. Leita Hamill, a teacher at Lawrenceville, changed the name of her very successful English course three times — from Women in Literature, to Men and Women in Literature, to The Sexes in Literature. We ourselves renamed our group, describing our focus as diversity.

Where the Men Stood

Our most powerful meeting with adults occurred after we read Peggy McIntosh's article, "Feeling Like a Fraud" in the *Work in Progress* series published by Stone Center at Wellesley College. One of Pingry's master teachers, a young man, spoke of the need he has always felt to cover up his feelings of vulnerability. Particularly at Pingry, where the aim of this formerly all male school was to develop rigor. "Not too many people around here show their vulnerability, and if they do, people thrive on perceived weaknesses." Some men in our group spoke of learning, in competitive sports, and then having it reinforced in the army, never to admit that they were afraid. One of our male group members was a former world champion gliding pilot and had written a book entitled, *Winning*. He said that if he went into a competition admitting fear, people would think he was a "wimp." Our one female department chair said that if she went into a department heads meeting and apologized (sounding uncertain, or beginning with disclaimers), she'd be eaten alive. She said she'd had to learn to "be a man." We all spoke that day of the tremendous expectations to which men, or the few women in leadership positions at Pingry felt subjected. Our committee came to the conclusion that if we hoped to make changes for women, one of the first things we have to do is to make changes for men.

Back then, this took the form of our believing that we needed to make it acceptable for men to be more expressive. A book our group found valuable on this topic was Warren Farrell's *Why Men Are the Way They Are.* Two other recommended books were Mark Gerzon's *A Choice of Heroes* and Herb Goldberg's *The Hazards of Being Male* . It seemed to me that there was a fear among the men who shared so much of themselves with us that, in many arenas, if they expressed vulnerability, they would indeed be vulnerable, i.e., weak. There didn't seem to have been much validation in there lives that to talk about feelings of vulnerability might be a strength that required courage as well as honesty, and that choices and actions are not synonymous with thoughts and feelings.

Where the Men Are Today

Since the time of our work together, the men's movement has gotten well under way, championed by figures like Robert Bly and Sam Keen. They, too, have had their detractors. Some claim that what they are doing is too self-centered. But in fairness, if our direction was right, the work these men are doing on themselves to become more expressive and to get closer to their authentic selves is a necessary step in the role flexibility that our current lives demand. Some of the work on stress in women's lives, outlined by

Grace Baruch and Rosalind Barnett in *American Psychologist*, in 1987, has emphasized that we need to think more deeply about how our roles operate. We need to look beyond the labels we carry: liberated or traditional, man or woman. For example, according to Abigail J. Stewart and Janet E. Malley, a career woman could be using a "communal" rather than an "agentic" style or a homemaker could be using an "agentic" or "communal" style. (They are using "agency" and "communion" in the sense that D. Bakan used them in *The Duality of Human Experience*": to characterize two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms, agency for the existence of an organism as an individual, and communion for the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which it is part.) The same holds true for a man, whether he is an administrator, classroom teacher, or house husband. What Baruch and Barnett's work invites us to do is not to look at the question of shifting gender roles too simplistically — not to approach it with dualistic or either-or kind of thinking.

Men Are Relational Too

Stephen Bergman, in Wellesley College's *Work in Progress* series, writes of his belief that most theories of male development written by men "fail to describe... men's authentic experience." He believes that for men as well as women, "there is a primary desire for connection with others...." He speaks of how in our culture, men are socialized to succeed at mastery and don't always have the expertise at relating and empathy that some women have. He speaks of a phenomena he describes as, "male relational dread," which occurs at times when a woman who is important to a man asks him what he is feeling. Bergman says that he believes that since men are less practiced in identifying feelings, it takes a man longer than a woman to identify his feelings and that if a woman pushes for a response while he is trying to answer, he may feel attacked. He also believes that men sometimes think that "sensitivity to the welfare of others drains power and is hazardous." He believes that it is essential to work from the "creative space called relationship" rather than looking at one gender or the other in isolation. In terms of the phenomena we labeled as resistance to our gender issues work during our "checking out" phase, it seems that the negative response of some of the males was something akin to "male dread."

A Male Voice

In the spirit of inclusiveness that characterized our work at Pingry, I would like to let one of our friendly male "resisters" speak for himself. One of our group members taught us the Progoff Intensive Journal Method and we each wrote our own dialogue with gender issues (GI). This is what the male "resister" wrote:

Me: Like, are we ever going to change the basic male-female cultural differences? Do we want to? Do I want to?

GI: So what benefits do you see coming from change?

Me: Increased understanding, decreased friction, less time standing first on one foot then on another waiting for an endless string of women to "get themselves fixed up."

GI: And the drawbacks?

Me: We..., er, what about jolly old passion? That thrives on mystery. Lack of understanding, opposites, and Mona Lisa smiles.

GI: So you can be friends *or* lovers?

Me: Yeah. And I love excitement, mystery, suspense and — sorry, liberated ladies — conquest, that life-invigorating plunge into a fountain of youth.

GI: ???

Me: And it is women's nature, as God knows the behavioral psychologists that advise the advertisers seem to think... I'm not so sure what I think about this gender issues stuff. Sometimes I think I understand it; then it gets away from me.

GI: So what's to understand?

Practical Solutions (P.S.): You got any?

Me: Yes. Wherever the final result leads, increased awareness and increased respect must be good, stereotypes and tunnel vision must be bad.

P.S. So?

Me: So let's look for ways to broaden perspectives in courses. More books by women or books that show sensitive awareness or use thought-provoking situations by either sex.

P.S. And overt gender issues won't work with adolescents?

Me: Hopeless except with a selected and enthusiastic few. Attempts to break the stereotypes just brings up threatened resistance in both sexes. Girls fear for the loss of pretty dresses and sexual power; boys fear that they will lose, not gain, power by this female-initiated (as they see it) threat.

My Understanding Today

In closing, I would like to try to summarize my thinking about the adventure that we at Pingry shared during the '80s. It seems to me that those of us who were interested in teaching at a fine independent school like Pingry shared an attraction to a seemingly safe and secure reality. Many of us who send our children through independent schools often have as part of our motivation the wish to protect them from some of the harsher realities of life.

There is a saying in couples therapy that people often get divorced for the same reason they get married. We who were attracted to teach at Pingry because it enabled the pursuit of rigor and excellence became in part pillars of tradition. When some of us began to respectfully question the very framework on which that tradition was based, we met what

many people would call resistance. Today I think I can reframe it for myself, and hear the voices of the opposition as voices or shadow aspects of ourselves. By following our intuition and emphasizing process as well as content, we were able relate to "the other" as a part of ourselves, thus sustaining an authenticity in our work that often attracted the curiosity, if not always the respect, of others. There was an integrity or wholesomeness about what we undertook. Today, faculty members at Pingry have differing memories of and interpretations of the meaning of the work we did. Some who were not very involved might say that not much has changed. But others who still teach within those special walls know that changes have occurred. There are more women administrators and more voices of the non-dominant cultures included in the curriculum than ever before. Recently, much to the current headmaster's credit, he asked in a full faculty meeting, "Are we a coed school or a boys school that allows women to attend?"

I believe that the liveliness of our work grew out of a spirit of honest and respectful questioning which is the essence of a fine liberal arts education. It is too easy to divide into camps — progressive versus traditional, Democrat versus Republican, inclusive versus exclusive, men versus women. Pingry enabled us to actively experience the precious fruit of education in a democracy functioning at its highest level. After all, in Latin, the word to educate means "to draw out." The work we did at Pingry inspired us to dig deep inside ourselves to try to articulate where we really stood, as well as to connect with and draw the same from others. Because the aim was listening rather than telling, we created an atmosphere of relative safety in which the dialogue that we became part of vivified us all. Without people feeling safe and respected, they jump to defend; resistance to change, rather than new understanding, occurs.

Throughout the ups and downs of this work something that a mentor had shared when I first began teaching at Pingry was helpful, "Think of your students not as they are now, but as they will be in their futures." Today, thinking back ever so fondly of Pingry, I believe that through our not being thrown off course by what often seemed to be fear masquerading as anger, we planted the seeds that contributed to healthy change in the school. The up side of the story is that when change does take place in independent schools, as I believe it has at Pingry, it becomes part of the values framework and has great solidity.

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