



Gender Equity in Schools

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute

By

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## INTRODUCTION

This work has been undertaken as part of the Caroline and Sigmund Schott Foundation's ongoing enterprise to promote gender equity, and more specifically, as part of the current effort to promote gender equity in the context of education. In particular, we have set out here to determine how American adults concerned with education understand the nature of the relationship between gender and the school experience (as well as related identity issues such as race and class). We focus not on opinions about particular issues relating to gender and schools (some of which have been documented in previous polls and surveys), but on the more fundamental cultural models that define the key concepts associated with School and Gender, and on which the various opinions are based. A clear understanding of the public's deeply held and widely shared assumptions will be instrumental in helping the Schott Foundation shape effective communications campaigns.

This report will be followed in the coming weeks by a catalog of recommended language, which will provide specific suggestions on framing the issues in ways that further the goals of the Foundation.

## METHOD

The report is based on a series of twenty in-depth, one-on-one interviews – or “elicitations” – conducted by Cultural Logic with parents, educators, administrators and other adults in Massachusetts (primarily Boston and Cambridge, but also Western Mass.) concerned with the issue of education. Subjects came from a range of ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds, and included a number of self-described conservatives.

“Cultural models research” (CMR) — based on cultural anthropology and cognitive linguistics — provides an unusually detailed picture of people's deeply held and usually hidden assumptions about a given topic. And unlike traditional qualitative research techniques that are typically aimed at discovering stand-alone opinions, CMR focuses on the *connections* between basic assumptions. Understanding these connections is the key to understanding how people reason about a given topic, for predicting how the public will respond to new ideas, and for suggesting new ways to frame issues.

In summary, CMR is designed to provide a clear picture of strong, recurrent patterns in thinking — in this case a set of values and beliefs that underlie a distinctive understanding of the relationship between school and gender.

Additional discussion of our methodology is provided in the Appendix.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- **Many people feel there is little or no gender inequity in the classroom — the classroom is seen as set apart from society.**

Simply put, gender equity in schools is not seen as an important problem by most people, even when they agree that there are gender inequities in society more generally. This may reflect the fact that an important part of the American cultural model of schools holds that they are “set apart” from the larger society, safe and controlled environments in which children are protected from the evils of the world.

- **If gender equity in schools is a meaningful issue, it isn’t reducible to “helping girls succeed.”**

Considerations of gender equity are informed by a more basic model of “fairness,” which in this case encourages Americans to consider the points of view of boys as well as girls.

- **One important model of gender inequity holds (in its strong form) that boys are “defective” while girls are “disadvantaged.”**

When gender inequity is accepted by Americans, it is sometimes interpreted as the idea that boys have internal problems (intellectual deficits, attention problems, propensity toward aggression, inability to express feelings) and external advantages (prejudices in their favor, etc.) while girls are internally gifted (morally, intellectually, socially, and emotionally superior) but held back by external circumstances. An implication of this model is that boys need to be constrained while girls need to be liberated.

- **An alternative to the “Defective Boy” view is the “Bad Fit” view.**

Many people believe that the way schools are traditionally structured seems designed to have boys fail. Boys are seen as more active and less able to adapt to the constrained setting of traditional schools, and for that reason more likely to be treated as troublemakers.

- **People are sometimes conflicted on the issue of gender equity in the classroom because of a clash between “public discourse” and “lived experience” on this issue.**

Many people seem to experience something like “double-think,” simultaneously believing that girls are discriminated against (a model that is prominent in public discourse), and that teachers and the school setting favor girls in a number of ways (a view that is often more consistent with their personal experience).

- **There are two conflicting ideas of the ideal classroom: one emphasizing individual students and teachers and one emphasizing the “culture” of the classroom.**

The first view leads to a foregrounding of public policy issues such as the importance of “individualized instruction,” with an emphasis on taking account of differences between students and between teachers and students. The second places the emphasis on a shared classroom culture rather than on the individual qualities of teachers and students.

- **Key elements of social/emotional experience are seen as playing a critical role in academic success.**

While lay people sometimes fall back on a simplistic separation between academic performance and other aspects of a child’s personal experience in school, they more often demonstrate an awareness of the strong causal connection between these two domains.

- **The issue of gender equity plays out differently at different age/grade levels.**

When people think of “school,” they tend to think first of elementary school – a space that is largely protected from the dangers of the larger world, including its gender and racial inequities. According to this model, high school, by contrast, is much less separate from the influences and problems of the larger society.

- **Most people believe that there are important differences in how teachers should communicate with different individual children, but not different groups (e.g. ethnicities).**

An important part of the American model of education is the idea that teachers must tailor communication to individual children. There is little emphasis on the importance of tailoring the communication process to different groups – perhaps due to the contradiction with the idea that one purpose of school is to forge a common identity.

- **People have a consumer model of education: it’s mostly about getting the best quality and best advantage for their own kids.**

People feel that ideally their kids will be engaged and excited by school. But the bottom line is that the school system should ensure that their children will have all the advantages that other kids have.

- **Findings Related to Specific Language:**

In addition to findings about relevant American models of education, the interviews revealed consistent attitudes towards two phrases that are prominent in the public discourse on education:

*Gender equity*

This phrase is not easily understood by most people, and when discussed in terms of the specific disadvantages faced by girls, it sometimes leads to resistance.

*Individualized education*

While this term conjures an ideal which most people support, it often has slightly utopian connotations, amounting to an idea that is wonderful but impractical.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### **Many people feel there is little or no gender inequity in the classroom — the classroom is seen as set apart from society.**

While it is widely acknowledged that women do not enjoy the same degree of opportunity for success in society as men, subjects do not necessarily agree that this disparity extends to the classroom. The majority of subjects feel that gender inequity in the classroom is probably inconsequential, and that where it does exist it is the product of a particular teacher or school rather than a systemic problem.

In effect, the classroom is often seen as a sort of (permeable) bubble, set apart from the outside world. Social and political issues that affect society as a whole are largely absent from most people's view of the prototypical classroom.

This is not to say that the classroom is thought of as entirely free of society's inequalities and prejudices; some negative aspects of society do "leak" into the classroom – e.g. some teachers are certainly racists (usually in subtle ways); class, family situations, and economic status do affect students' experience and success in school, and so forth.

While teachers are the most obvious agents who bring aspects of society into the classroom, students themselves also carry in some baggage from the outside world. In particular, the child's family experience – whether the child comes from an encouraging family or not, the degree to which the family is engaged in the child's education, etc. – is an important aspect of the outside world that has an impact in the classroom. In addition, negative messages that children have internalized from the media – e.g. that girls are not as capable as boys in certain areas – are also perceived as finding their way into the school experience.

Another sense in which schools represent a "bubble" is that they are often seen as having resisted historical change. That is, many lay people do not feel that schools or the school experience have changed much over the decades.

(Not surprisingly, experts tend to see the situation differently from most non-specialists. They tend to be aware of gender-based differences in boys' and girls' experiences in school, though this awareness can take several different forms, as we discuss in sections below.)

The strategic implication of this finding is that the Schott Foundation certainly cannot assume that the public will be moved by a campaign built on redressing inequities. For most people, the inequities simply are not there.

*... some kids, their families for whatever reasons don't have book bags. But you're supposed to have book bags. ... does the child feel already that they don't have a commitment from home for their education?*

### **If gender equity in schools is a meaningful issue, it isn't reducible to "helping girls succeed."**

Considerations of gender equity are informed by a more basic model of "fairness," which in this case encourages Americans to consider the points of both girls and boys.

Almost no one felt girls were disadvantaged in the classroom (but see attention issue, below). In fact, from early on, school is felt to be a better fit for most girls than most boys (see below). It's

boys who have troubles with school: trouble sitting still, reading, expressing themselves, following rules, quelling aggressiveness and competitiveness. Even through their teen years, when children of both genders are concerned with image, girls fit schools more naturally. The dominant, shared cultural model of girls predispose them for compliance and success in the classroom, whereas the comparable model of boys does not.

Attention from teachers is an important issue, however. Many people feel that boys get more attention than girls (often for inappropriate reasons), with the result that girls are relatively neglected. On the other hand, others believe girls get a disproportionately large amount of teacher attention, based on the fact that girls are better students and thus that teachers prefer them.

*... the fact that boys acting up get more of your attention ... much more than their share of teacher's time.*

*I do think that boys, because of their greater aggressiveness for whatever reason, tend to take and get more of the attention in schools...*

The most easily accepted conception of gender equity is closer to “gender-blindness,” than to “affirmative action for girls.” A gender-blind education would be one in which teachers (and school policies) would work toward distributing attention and support fairly; toward implementing an unbiased curriculum; toward teaching mutual respect and tolerance; toward up-ending expectations of success or failure in certain areas according to gender (e.g. girls in math and science; boys in expressing themselves or “behaving”). If schools were gender-blind, everyone would be able to achieve their full potential, without biases and preconceptions getting in the way.

Though the model of racial and class equity is less salient in people’s minds, the evidence suggests that a similar kind of reasoning would apply to these kinds of equity as well — which indicates a specific challenge for efforts to communicate the importance of cultural diversity, for example.

*Boys couldn't play a violin, and girls couldn't hit a home run. I think kids do that to each other as soon as they get exposed to TV and social stuff.*

*... girls have an image, but it's an image where you're not supposed to be acting out in school, and you know, you're there to learn*

*... boys ... feel that they have this image that they have to keep up, and like, well, I don't want to be like oh sits there and he's all into his books, and he's nerdy, and you know and all this and you got this other one that wants to be the class clown, because he like I said he doesn't know how to reach out and ask for help.*

**One important model of gender inequity holds (in its strong form) that boys are “defective” while girls are “disadvantaged.”**

While most people are hardly aware of the idea that there could be significant gender inequity in schools, or else feel that there are unnecessary pressures on both boys and girls to conform to

stereotyped expectations, there is also a view, held by a smaller but vocal group, that gender inequity is important and asymmetrical. In effect, this group believes that boys suffer from internal inadequacies (and are advantaged by external circumstances), while girls are largely the direct or indirect victims of external circumstances (including boys' behavior).

In its extreme form, this "Disadvantaged Girls/Defective Boys" model casts boys as defective and even immoral. According to this model, boys are inferior to girls in various ways, and a noxious influence, and it is important to gain greater control over them in the classroom.

*I think girls are more intelligent. You know, ... it's just my bias. But that's what I think. ... girls have more ability to speak, ... express themselves, to think, to organize information, to keep everything on track, keep the group together ... If I have a group of all boys, it will be difficult for that group. They will have chaos and mayhem.*

According to this view, the greatest problems facing girls are largely imposed by their surroundings (unlike boys' problems, which belong to their nature as boys). They suffer particularly from not receiving enough attention, and from not being held to the same high standards – i.e from being expected to perform more poorly.

The appropriate remedies implied by this view would seem to involve greater control of boys, by various means. "Strict Fathering," for instance, in the sense discussed by George Lakoff in his book *Moral Politics*, involves behavior management through forceful discipline. And an option often brought up in the context of boys' "problematic" behavior, though not by subjects in this study, is the hyperactivity drug Ritalin.

*[Boys] always want to show which one is the toughest, or if there is a new student the other students like to show which one controls the classroom. One of them must start something just to let the new student know that they are in control.*

There are, of course, much milder or partial forms of this view – for instance, many people express the idea that girls are more focussed and capable in school, or that boys get into trouble more, without going so far as to imply that boys are "bad."

Interestingly, this view is encountered more often among education professionals than among other adults. While this may be because their greater experience tells them that there are real differences between boys and girls in school – differences which the public at large is much less aware of – a caveat is still warranted: Framing boys' difficulties in school (which are very well documented and quantified) as consequences of innate shortcomings is not necessarily justified (see below).

While the view that girls are shortchanged in school has currency among some populations, there are strong and potentially counterproductive versions of this view which the Schott Foundation should be careful to avoid in its campaign. An alternative model, potentially the basis for more constructive reframing, is discussed in the next section.

### **An alternative to the "Defective Boy" view is the "Bad Fit" view.**

Many people believe on some level that school is not very natural for kids in general. The setting works against many of children's natural tendencies rather than playing to their strengths, and it takes a great deal of effort and skill on the part of all concerned to make the system work well. (Very good schools, of course, can actually feel like natural places for kids, but this is more the exception than the rule.)

One way in which this question of naturalness comes up is that avoiding boredom and “keeping kids interested” play very salient roles in people’s understanding of the classroom experience. Even though many people think of kids as having a natural desire to learn, they may feel that the typical classroom environment stifles rather than harnesses this instinct. One metaphor for this view is that kids are something like fires that need stoking (rather than, for example, plants that grow on their own with only a minimum of attention).

People are particularly likely to feel that it is difficult or even unnatural for most boys to do the things that are expected of students – sit still, be obedient, etc. Rather than seeing this is a moral (or any other kind of) failing on boys’ parts, this view frames the problem as one of fit between boys and a particular environment. There is significant support for the idea that school, particularly in the earliest grades, is a better fit for girls than for boys.

*Boys ... like 11 to 12 ... they’re just all over the place with their testosterone ... if they were ... doing the physical stuff [e.g. chopping wood] ... they could blow off some of this excess energy they have, so they could focus better on their education.*

*It’s harder for young boys to concentrate and sit still and work on tasks and be more physically passive, and cooperate and collaborate and do group things.*

This view would suggest solutions very different from the ones following from the “Defective Boy” model – in this case, the solutions would be more about changing environments so that they offer boys more of what they need, which could include, for example, opportunities for physical movement. Note that this is not a suggestion that schools abdicate their role in helping instill responsibility and self-control in children. Rather, it is a more positive framing of boys which offers the possibility of working with their strengths rather than against them. The notion of “working with the grain” may be a fertile angle to explore.

An interesting question raised by the study is whether the set of standards that make up “school morality” is more like “feminine” than “masculine” morality – i.e. do expectations in school (and definitions of who is “good”) fit better with feminine than masculine behavioral tendencies? While some aspects of school – particularly, competition in later grades – seem to play to stereotypical masculine strengths, many others are easier for girls to adapt to, with the result that girls are judged as “better,” not only in the sense of competence, but often in the sense that they are better people.

*... on the whole most girls can tolerate the imprisonment of the old fashioned classroom that boys at a young age have trouble tolerating.*

*Well I think this open classroom worked very well. Because there’s a lot of movement, and there’s a lot of physical freedom. You’re not free to disrupt, but you’re free to move, you’re free to make reasonable noise. You’re free to move about.... But a kid like that in another classroom is labeled disruptive, and tied up and put away.*

**People are sometimes conflicted on the issue of gender equity in the classroom because of a clash between “public discourse” and “lived experience” on this issue.**

It is not uncommon for people to express conflicting views, sometimes only moments apart, on the difference between boys’ and girls’ experiences in the classroom. Consider this statement, in which the subject seems to contradict himself within the space of a single sentence:

*I think [girls] identify with the teachers more, and the teachers are paying more attention to the girl students, which is great, because you know, you hear about girls being ... left out and left behind, which I think is a shame because they're ALL our kids.*

On the one hand the subject is saying that teachers pay more attention to girls, and on the other hand that girls are being “left out.” Are girls being neglected or not? This person, like many people, seems simultaneously to hold two conflicting views.

In previous research, Cultural Logic has often identified a pattern which we refer to as “toggling” – individuals hold conflicting models and move back and forth between them at different moments. Typically, this toggling reflects two different sources of input – specifically, ideas that come from various forms of public discourse, such as the media, vs. impressions based on the individual’s own lived experience. For instance, Americans tend to toggle between the view that teenagers are reckless, selfish and alien (a stereotype propagated in public discourse) and a view more based on their personal experience with teenagers, in which teens are more like less experienced, less confident versions of themselves (see Aubrun & Grady 2000, “How Americans Understand Teens: Findings from Cognitive Interviews”).

In the case of boys and girls in school, some people appear to have one model based on certain strains in public discourse (what “you hear about” in the media, for instance) and another based on more direct knowledge, such as their own children’s experience. Various forms of the “Disadvantaged Girls” or “Defective Boys” model have gained currency in public discourse, even though individuals may not have discerned the pattern in their own encounters with classrooms. As a result, people may experience something like “double-think,” simultaneously believing that girls are discriminated against (public discourse), and that teachers and the school setting favor girls in a number of ways (personal experience).

Note that this is not to say that one view or the other is right. We have already argued that the Defective Boys model may lead to unfortunate consequences, but the point here is that the Schott Foundation has an opportunity to have an effect on public discourse, and therefore to help resolve a contradiction in people’s minds.

Interestingly, as we have noted, experts have a greater tendency to think in terms of the Disadvantaged Girls model than lay people. There may be more than one explanation for this discrepancy: (A) Experts are aware of facts about education that the public doesn’t know about; and/or (B) Experts are more conversant with the theories and the models that are played out in public (including expert) discourse, and are used to dealing with these models explicitly in their professional lives.

**There are two conflicting ideas of the ideal classroom: one emphasizing individual students and teachers and the other emphasizing the “culture” of the classroom.**

The American model of school includes two alternative ways of thinking about the shape that the ideal classroom would take – the opposition between what could be called the “Teacher-Student” perspective and the “Classroom Culture” perspective. These aren’t so much distinct opinions as distinct ways of understanding aspects of the classroom experience.

The first of these models — which is closer to “top of mind” understanding — emphasizes better relationships between the teacher and the individual students. Teachers who are as aware as possible of the strengths, weaknesses, backgrounds and needs of each student could, in principle, create educational plans that would be ideally suited to their students. The term “individualized education” is an expression of this version of the ideal, and most people find it

quite appealing (if impractical – see our discussion below). Nearly everyone is ready to say, when asked, that a teacher should try as hard as possible to take the needs of the individual child into account in creating an instructional plan. This view springs from an understanding of education as primarily being about communication of knowledge from teacher to student. A simple diagram of the key causal relationship in the classroom would look like this:

Teacher → Student experience.

The other model of ideal classrooms — more implicit, but very common nonetheless — emphasizes the culture of the classroom: the organic network of relationships and interactions among teacher and students, and especially among the students themselves. When people think about the culture of the classroom they are thinking about how it feels to be in class from day to day – for instance, is the atmosphere studious, energetic, passive, fearful? Teachers facilitate the classroom culture, and so their skills (as well as their personalities and attitudes) are still quite important, but this understanding of the class highlights a different set of skills. The emphasis here is less on their ability to explain concepts, for instance, than on their ability to create an atmosphere of comfort and respect:

Teacher → Classroom culture → Student experience

The Teacher-Student perspective is more explicit, a view to which more people are likely to assent when questioned, probably in part because of the strength of individualism in American culture in general; students are thought of as unique individuals with individual purposes and trajectories in the classroom. But most people do directly or indirectly comment on the importance of the shared reality of the classroom, and focusing on this aspect of school has substantial advantages for Schott. For one, it has the potential to liberate teachers from the daunting challenge of finding the ideal way of reaching each student; if they create the right atmosphere, there are benefits for everyone. This approach addresses the common concern that “individualized education” is more of an ideal than a practical reality.

There is some overlap between the individualized-instruction/classroom-culture opposition and the very familiar opposition between a “regimented” classroom, where students sit quietly and absorb information dispensed by teachers, and a “free” classroom, where students are more active, both in the sense of physical movement and with respect to their role in their own education. The former model is more closely related to Lakoff’s “strict father” model – teachers instruct, push, discipline and punish their students. The latter is more closely related to Lakoff’s “nurturant parent” model – teachers encourage their students, give them freedom to explore their own ways of learning, and take some cues from them in setting the agenda for class. People certainly differ with regard to which of these two models they regard as more ideal. On the other hand, some are inconsistent about which is better, and the regimented model seems to be more of a prototype in most people’s minds. As a consequence, the regimented classroom represents an image which they fall back on as a default from time to time, even if they strongly support the idea of active classrooms (i.e. there is “togglng” on this issue).

*[The] ideal classroom is one where the children feel that it’s their classroom, and that they’re in control of the learning. That the teacher is a resource for them. That there is no teacher’s desk at the front of the room or anywhere, really. The classroom is a cooperative classroom, and the learning is organized to build that learning community.*

*... individual attention to individual students is absolutely important, but that everybody's individual attention can be everybody's learning opportunity. So, we could, you know, share in that way.*

**Key elements of social/emotional experience are seen as playing a critical role in academic success.**

While laypeople sometimes fall back on a simplistic separation between academic performance and other aspects of a child's personal experience in school, they more often demonstrate an awareness of the strong causal connection between these two domains. These key concepts, associated with the social realm, show up in discussions of all aspects of gender equity.

EXPECTATIONS is an issue that applies to the classroom as well as to other areas of life. Just as parents should expect the most from their children, teachers are seen as needing to be available to lend additional support to kids having trouble reaching their full potential.

ATTENTION is a social factor that has obvious and critical importance in equity issues: The lack of attention can undermine the fairest, highest expectations. In an ideal learning environment the teacher is not spread too thin. She or he provides support and helps to motivate so that all students can learn. Teacher attention unevenly distributed effectively undercuts a favorable student/teacher ratio for those fortunate enough to have one.

People see children's COMFORT level as a critical component of their success in school. School is seen as an intimidating place on a variety of levels. Children are required to function publicly under various adult demands, in an environment which may be radically unlike their home life. One important purpose of schooling is socialization. (Many people mention this as the principal argument against home-schooling, for example. This presents an interesting contradiction to their preference for teaching that comes as close as possible to a one-on-one relationship.) School is seen as a good social environment – *the place* – for children to learn how to work together, which is the argument that counters the frequent observation that boys and girls are distracting to each other.

Furthermore, mutual RESPECT is seen as a critical element in a comfortable classroom environment.

**The issue of gender equity plays out differently at different age/grade levels.**

When people think of "school," they tend to think first of elementary school – perhaps prototypically of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades.

It is important to keep in mind that some aspects of the cultural model of school do not apply equally well to high school as to elementary school. In particular, the idea that school is a kind of "bubble," existing within society but not quite of it (see above) is less prominent in the case of high school. High school students are older – more like the adults who make up the larger society. In some ways, a high school is more like a workplace, where one expects issues of gender inequities to crop up. In addition, as students become teenagers, issues of sexual harassment — as well as issues of ethnic and gender identity and orientation — become more salient, all of which contributes to a lessening of the "bubble" model of school.

**Most people believe that there are important differences in how teachers should communicate with different individual children, but not different groups (e.g. ethnicities).**

There is near unanimity that teachers should tailor communication to individual kids. Many people go beyond that, believing that a teacher should get to know each child: their strengths, weaknesses, family background.

Most people are unaware of, or wary of, considering possible differences in communication style among different ethnic, racial, or gender groups. Yet a minority of people feel quite strongly that for some children the gap between the school atmosphere and their home life is a chasm.

Some evidence suggests that the lack of emphasis on tailoring the communication process to different groups is due to the fact that it contradicts the powerful cultural model of the classroom where a common (American) identity is forged. The ideal classroom culture (see 6, above), in which the teacher knows the students and the students develop in a social environment of respect and cooperation, is seen as reducing differences between children, including differences based on race, class, and family circumstances.

**People have a consumer model of education: it's mostly about getting the best quality and best advantage for their own kids.**

Beneath their stated reasons for supporting public schools — people are quick to share such mantra-like statements as “kids are our future” or “it’s the fundamental responsibility of a society” to educate its young, parents tend to have a *consumer model* of education. Their concern is first and foremost with getting the best quality for their own kids. More than anything else, they want their kids to *learn*. For example, parents feel cheated when kids are passed before they’ve learned the requisite amount. Ideally their kids will be engaged and excited by school; but the bottom line is that the school system should ensure that their children will have all the advantages that other kids have (“everyone should have pretty much equal chance”).

Any communications message must take account of the consumer perspective on education — quality. Education is about individual achievement, benefit, and advancement. Self-betterment through education and hard work is one of the lynchpins of American individualism. Its outcome is expected to be personal gain — epitomized by upward social mobility.

Interestingly, many people articulate a more communitarian vision of education, with a parental role more active than mere passive consumer. Yet when pressed, most interviewees see “parental involvement” as nothing more than monitoring their children’s homework completion. The more fundamental (if less directly expressed) consumer view is evident in the overriding concern with quality. Some education consumers actively “shop around” for the best schools and even relocate to give their kids access to the best districts.

Specific skills — especially literacy — are important to people. Parents think, “Is my kid learning to read?” before they think about whether there is gender equity. It follows that tying gender equity to “quality” issues should be effective. For example, for the people who believe that teacher attention is unfairly distributed by gender (with potential neglect of girls vs. boys, or vice versa), this link should be drawn out.

**Conclusion**

This report has explored the public's "mental map" of the relationship between gender and the school experience, and described ways in which perceptions of the issues go beyond the simple thesis that one sex or the other is specifically disadvantaged by current conditions in the classroom. Most people are aware of and accept the fact that serious inequities (based on gender, race, and class) exist in American society, they draw a strong distinction between the larger world and the classroom. Indeed, most people are either barely aware of the role of gender in defining students' experience, or feel that the problems are more symmetrical: (A) There is a set of stereotypical gender-based expectations that constrains both boys and girls and diminishes their experience; and (B) By its current nature, schools often provide a poor fit for boys and girls, in different and specific ways (and more so for boys). A minority view that girls in particular are short-changed in the classroom seems to be tied to some unwarranted and potentially damaging framings of boys.

In the brief discussions below we summarize differences in thinking across two salient fault lines: lay people vs. experts (i.e. individuals with a close involvement in decision-making about education) and conservatives vs. liberals (as we define these below).

#### *Experts vs. Lay people*

Naturally, experts in education are more knowledgeable than the public at large about conditions in the classroom. As a result, they are more aware than the rest of the population of differences between boys' and girls' experiences in school. On the positive side, this means that they tend to be ready to think about solutions, and to have already given the issues a fair amount of thought. In some ways, though, they may prove to be a tougher audience for the Schott Foundations' ultimate campaign, whatever its content might be. This is because experts are more likely to be comfortable with particular theories already – for example, the commitment to the "Disadvantaged Girls/Defective Boys" model which we encountered among some professionals appears to correspond with particular trends in public discourse on the issues – and more likely to adopt an authoritative stance towards the issues.

Additional points to note about experts are that (1) they are more likely to be open to the possibility of tailoring educational practice to particular groups (e.g. ethnic groups) of students, and therefore more open to tying gender issues to identity issues more broadly; and (2) that the consumer model of education ("What quality of education is my kid getting?") is less appealing to them than it is to others in the community. This second point means that experts should, overall, be more open than the public as a whole to messages that seem less directly tied to bottom-line issues like test scores.

#### *Conservatives vs. Liberals*

Two caveats are required here. The first is that the population we discussed these issues with does not represent an accurate cross-section of adults in Boston, Cambridge and Western Massachusetts – adults who are concerned enough to commit time to talking about education are, to an extent, a self-selecting group. And in fact, self-described conservatives are not as well represented in our sample as self-described liberals. On the other hand, and as predicted by cultural model analysis, the division between political conservatives and liberals is less significant than a division between "cultural" conservatives and liberals. That is to say, people's implicit understandings of daily life do not always correspond with their explicit theories of how society should be organized (e.g. as reflected in how they vote).

The most general conclusion from a comparison between conservatives and liberals is that the distinctions do not fall out in the simple ways one might expect. First, the idea of traditional sex roles seems to play no role in most people's current thinking – the idea that conservatives, for

example, are less interested in girls' education than in boys' is probably false, outside of certain restricted populations (some religious fundamentalists, for example). The individualistic consumer model favored by conservatives is clearly compatible with some forms of gender equity – conservatives have daughters and think of them as consumers who deserve the best.

But there are differences between the groups. For example, cultural conservatives favor regimented classrooms, while progressives are more likely to favor free classrooms. More directly relevant to gender issues, cultural conservatives seem less likely to support the idea that each student's cultural background must be taken into account in the classroom, instead favoring the idea that schools, among all our institutions, should most exemplify the American notion of the "melting pot." As a consequence, conservatives are probably not predisposed to respond positively to a campaign based on tying gender to other identity issues.

The good news for Schott is that these starting differences will not necessarily lead to schisms on particular issues. To take just one example, conservatives' reliance on the "melting pot" assumption can lead them to a "culture of the classroom" view, which jibes in various ways with many liberals' belief in an "organic" model of the classroom. In short, both conservatives and liberals are potentially open to a number of messages, depending on how the issues are framed.

A forthcoming report will examine a number of possible strategies for framing messages that support gender equity in the classroom.

## **About the Author**

*Cultural Logic*, directed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum effect. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute, Cultural Logic focuses on research relating to public interest issues. Topics have included global warming, violence reduction in communities, conserving the Chesapeake Bay, global interdependence, gender equity in schools, and toxins in the domestic environment. Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Joseph Grady, Ph.D. is a linguist whose research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication.

## **APPENDIX – “THE COGNITIVE APPROACH”**

This appendix discusses the assumptions and principles that form the basis for the “cognitive approach” taken by Cultural Logic.

### **Frames**

Researchers who study cognition and culture have established that people understand all concepts in terms of related networks of ideas, also known as *frames*. For example, the concept of a “father” is not understood in isolation, but in connection with understandings of mothers, children, families, biology, responsibility, and so forth. People are usually unaware of the frames they are using, and the frames themselves are usually expressed indirectly. Instead, frames are revealed based on the language and reasoning the person uses in connection with a concept. Seeming contradictions in the way a person discusses a topic can be particularly enlightening, because they may reveal conflicting frames at work. It should be noted as well that frame is a general term — used somewhat differently in different disciplines — to refer to more specific concepts such as cognitive model, cultural model, and *cultural theory*, discussed below.

### **Cultural models vs. cultural theories**

A cultural theory is a set of explicit propositions that describe the nature of some general phenomenon (R. D'Andrade 1995, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*). Cultural theories are typically the most apparent and immediately coherent structures of knowledge — the ones that are volunteered by focus group participants for example, and the ones that lend themselves to direct description and summary by the analyst.

A cultural model, by contrast, consists of a set of largely implicit assumptions that allows a person to reason about and solve a problem (D'Andrade 1995). A cultural model specifies relationships between a given concept and others — specific domains (e.g., School) are typically connected to broader cultural assumptions (e.g., understandings about Achievement or Growth).

A classic example of the difference between cultural models and cultural theories is provided by Strauss's study of blue collar workers in Rhode Island (1992). Her informants clearly understood, and explicitly articulated to the interviewer, the American model of self-made Success. In some cases, they even claimed that this style of success was important to them. Close analysis of discourse, however, revealed that these men were actually basing their behavior on an implicit model of a Breadwinner, which is more strongly related to ideals of husband and father than to wealth and status.

Cultural models, while less explicit and more challenging to identify than cultural theories, typically have more directive force — i.e., they are more relevant to understanding what people actually do.

### **Cognitive Analysis**

An important assumption of this view of human motivation is that a variety of cultural models typically compete for expression in a given defined situation. Putting it simply, people often have conflicts about basic issues. For example, many Americans believe that a woman should work outside the home; a contradictory assumption, held by many of these same people, is that women

should stay in the home and nurture children. Though contradictions such as this one often find partial resolution (e.g., through the contemporary American notion of the "Supermom"), typically such deeply held beliefs are compartmentalized; i.e., only one will be invoked in a given context.

Cognitive analysis first identifies the relevant deeply held models to which a given subject such as "School" is connected (literally or through metaphor). Second, it attempts to map the fault lines that predict which of the models will be expressed as action in a given situation, often triggered by particular cues. Third, it suggests a picture of the dynamic relationship between public messages, cultural models, and individual action around a given topic.

### **Metaphors**

It is a universal finding of cognitive linguistics that people use metaphors to think, speak and reason about the world, even on topics as familiar as adolescence and teenagers — i.e., some of the cultural models used to reason about teenagers are metaphoric models. For example, teenagers are sometimes metaphorically understood as unfinished objects, materials that haven't been formed into their final shape. The metaphors people use to think and talk about teenagers contribute to guiding adults' behavior towards adolescents, including whether and how they choose to nurture, ignore, discipline, or otherwise engage with adolescents. Reasoning by way of metaphoric models also affects adults' evaluation of the appropriateness and efficacy of political policies and programs directed at adolescents (cf. Schön 1979).

### **Cognitive interviews**

Because cultural models tend to be organized into distinct and recognizable patterns, they lend themselves to qualitative investigation. The cognitive interview format is designed to approximate a "natural conversation" (Quinn 1982). In an interview situation people are often most comfortable providing cultural theories (explicit and familiar explanations which are known to have general currency); the semi-structured interview puts them in a situation which encourages them instead to do their own reasoning about the issues we are interested in, i.e., to use the relevant cultural models.

Skilled interviewing shifts the informant away from a "performing" mode and toward a "training" mode. The natural give and take of a conversation puts informants in a position of teaching the interviewer how to think about a given issue. The analyst's job is to identify cultural assumptions, first in the interview setting by responding to and subtly challenging or asking for clarification of intuited premises, and second in the analysis of transcriptions by making these assumptions explicit.

### **Subjects and sample size**

Because a culture is defined by a set of broadly shared understandings and assumptions, studying cultural models is analogous to studying the structure of a natural language. One does not need a large group of speakers to determine the basics of a language's grammar and syntax — a few speakers will typically suffice. Similarly, working with only a few subjects, one can identify the commonly held belief system typical of those subjects' culture. In-depth work with a relatively small group of informants has been the norm in cognitive anthropology, allowing researchers to work more closely with subjects than is possible using large-scale methodologies. Findings from cognitive interviews may subsequently be expanded upon and refined through quantitative methods, which may establish, for example, how strongly particular models are held in different

segments of the population. Where the cognitive approach identifies the nature of the models, carefully devised quantitative research, using fixed-form surveys for example, can establish the distribution of the models (see Kempton et al 1995).