

Researcher explores the gendered social construction of exceptionalism in early adolescence

June 18 2019



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"Are boys better at school than girls?" Michela Musto, a postdoctoral fellow at the Clayman Institute, asked middle school students, after observing their classrooms. Musto recently presented their answers to an

audience of Clayman Institute faculty fellows. Her talk, titled "Brilliant or Bad: School Regulation of Boys' Rule-Breaking and the Gendered Social Construction of Exceptionalism in Early Adolescence," has since been published as the lead article in the June 2019 *American Sociological Review*.

This study arose from a peculiar puzzle. Girls outperform boys at every stage of the academic path—so much so that the media has declared this underachievement the "boy crisis." Yet students and teachers often perceive boys as smarter and more gifted. "Why?" asked Musto.

To answer this question, Musto conducted a 2.5-year longitudinal ethnography and 196 interviews with students, teachers and administrators at a suburban middle school. She followed a class cohort from sixth through eighth grade to examine classroom dynamics over time. Studying middle school provides important insights into [student's](#) academic development. It is when education pathways as well as gender and sexuality become more salient in students' lives.

Musto's observations focused on two academic tracks: higher-level and lower-level courses. She found that boys in both tracks frequently broke classroom rules, such as not raising their hands to speak. Boys regularly interrupted class, cracked jokes, and whispered side comments. Meanwhile, [girls](#) tended to follow teachers' instructions to listen quietly and raise their hands.

For example, in Mr. Green's honors English class, Musto observed boys repeatedly interrupt the class. At the beginning of class one day while Mr. Green explained the day's activity—a debate—a white boy who Musto calls Tristan interrupted the teacher to say, "I'm turning 12 in this class at 11:03!"

"Okay, very good," Mr. Green responded, and then reminded the class to

talk in turn during the debate.

Then, precisely at 11:03 am, and amid the debate, Tristan interrupted the class again to announce, "It's my birthday." In general, Mr. Green ignored these kinds of disruptions, as was common in higher-level courses.

In another classroom, Musto observed William, an Asian American boy, pejoratively call another boy a "girl." When the teacher, Ms. Kiefer, interjected, he replied, "It wasn't an insult. I was calling him a girl because he was being all whiney."

Rather than punishing the student, Ms. Kiefer responded by patiently reasoning with William and explaining why the comment was hurtful.

William only further insisted, "Fine! Let the baby have his way."

Ms. Kiefer recounted William had previously misbehaved in the class, including an incident when he poured water on her head, yet she described him as "really, really intelligent" and attributed his misbehavior to lacking "humility."

On another day in Mr. Carr's classroom, Tristan blurted out an answer to a math question, again without raising his hand according to the class rules. Mr. Carr responded to the interruption by saying, "This boy here, he's genius."

In another class, the students participated in an activity where they were tasked to brainstorm a new concept for a theme park. Amber, an Asian American girl, suggested an amusement park for cats. The novel idea was quickly shut down by several boys who groaned and said, "No!"

Moments later, Logan, an Asian American boy, proposed a theme park

for senior citizens. The class enthusiastically supported his idea—several boys laughed and said, "Yeah"—and then spent the rest of class designing roller coaster rides for seniors. One boy named the park "Sea-N-Your World."

In one English class, Musto recorded as boys made 156 comments compared to 63 by girls, even though the class comprised 18 girls and 16 boys. Four boys alone took up about 46 percent of the opportunities to speak.

Musto identifies how this unequal airtime shaped students' perceptions of their own and their peers' abilities. In interviews, white and Asian American boys were perceived as exceptional, and white boys received the highest praise. As one girl said, "Everyone in class is super smart." But a select group of white boys, she said, are "like prodigies." This dynamic became more pronounced throughout middle school.

In lower-level classrooms—disproportionately filled with students of color—boys broke the rules and interrupted in similar rates as their peers in higher-level classes. Yet, these boys were regularly punished, including detentions over lunch called "benchings." Meanwhile, Musto observed that Mr. Green, for one, rarely "benched" his honors math students.

Over time, in these lower level classes, the boys' confidence waned and they disengaged from class. Yet, girls expressed more confidence over time. The students and teachers described the girls as smarter than boys, yet thought they weren't smart enough for the higher-level course. These girls were called "smart" but not considered to be exceptional.

This begs the question, "Are higher-level courses better for students than lower-level courses?" The typical answer is "yes." But Musto's study shows that not all students benefit from higher-level classes. And some

students, girls in particular, may get more time to participate and be recognized in lower-level courses, even though these lower-level courses do not benefit them in the long term.

Moreover, Musto's research sheds light on the role of jokes in classes—and workplaces—in giving boys positive reinforcement. Musto found that boys' jokes were met with laughter, while girls often were rebuked or belittled. For example, in response to one girl who often interjected class with a quip, the teacher responded each time, "Well, bless her heart," in a demeaning way.

In general, teachers perceived the school as a "good school, full of good kids" and treated students with leniency. Previous research has focused on punishment and policing practices in low-income schools dominated by students of color. By observing how gender, race, and social class interact in a predominantly middle-class school, Musto provides a more nuanced account of how these forces interact to shape how students perceive one another's intelligence, including their own.

This research has broader relevance for explaining men's dominance in fields that place a premium on what is perceived as "raw intelligence." And it provides insight into how they gain entrance into the C-Suite. As one teacher said, "Jacob's a full-package kid. He's super nice, he's brilliant and he's a well-rounded kid. He likes sports and all this stuff . . . He's going to be the next Elon Musk or something," implying that Jacob, a white boy, is destined to become a CEO.

Such positive reinforcement accumulates over time, and helps to explain why today women comprise only 6.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs—of which only one is a woman of color. This is a record high. To "uninstall" the gender revolution, perhaps we need to go back to middle school.

More information: Michela Musto. *Brilliant or Bad: The Gendered*

Social Construction of Exceptionalism in Early Adolescence, *American Sociological Review* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0003122419837567](https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419837567)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Researcher explores the gendered social construction of exceptionalism in early adolescence (2019, June 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-06-explores-gendered-social-exceptionalism-early.html>

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