Introduction

The known is the accustomed, and the accustomed is the most difficult of all to "understand," that is to say, to perceive as a problem, to perceive as strange, distant, "outside of us."—Nietzsche, "The Origin of Our Conception of 'Knowledge'"

Anthropologists often make the familiar strange. Similarly, historians seek to solve the puzzles posed by the origins of the ordinary. This book analyzes a practice that most Americans take for granted: coeducation in public schools. It treats coeducation as the major theme in a broader inquiry that asks why and how Americans educated not only sons but daughters as well. Carl Degler observes that when one views American educational history from the viewpoint of women, an issue "calls out for attention. It is the decision to include girls in primary and secondary schooling on a par with boys."

Although coeducation has been an institutional fact in public education since the early nineteenth century, both critics and advocates have been rare. To foreign eyes coeducational classrooms often seemed strange and disturbing; to most Americans they became a natural and unquestioned part of the educational landscape. But from time to time gender practices in schools have become the focus of attention and debate. This happened largely in periods when the everyday lives of women and men and cultural beliefs about gender were in transition. In such periods, educational policy became a stage on which Americans argued in largely symbolic but intensely serious ways about conflicting gender ideals and the part schools should play in sustaining tradition or
creating a new pattern of relations between men and women. Amid all this policy talk, however, coeducational practice did not change substantially once it had been established. Thus, the history of coeducation must deal quite as much with constancy as with change.²

In seeking to answer the question: Why coeducation? we explore both rationale and explanation. Americans have justified and attacked coeducation, and this debate runs through the past into the present. But beneath this conscious discourse lies a complex and often unarticulated set of causes of coeducation that we examine here as well.

Coeducation in public schools represents an important example of a gender policy and practice in one major institution. What do we mean by these concepts? We see gender as a social construct, a set of cultural meanings attached to the biological division of the sexes. By gender policies in institutions we mean explicit rules that apply in different or similar ways to the two sexes; by institutional gender practices we mean customary arrangements, regularities of expected behavior crystallized into patterns that may or may not reflect official policies.³

Gender is a basic organizing principle in society, but the importance of gender distinctions may vary between societies and between institutions within any one society. Gender policies and practices in Sweden are different from those in Saudi Arabia. Likewise, gender has different salience in armies or unions than in old-age homes or elementary schools. These differences in institutional gender policies and practices may be studied in various ways: across time in the same institution—historically; in the same institution in different societies—cross-nationally; or in different institutions in the same society—cross-institutionally. In this book we analyze the institution of public schools historically. This is not a comprehensive history of public schooling—other topics and approaches would yield other perspectives—but we have found that focusing on gender does point up problems in some traditional interpretations of schooling.⁴

Through the analysis of coeducation we seek perspectives on two broader questions: How do schools look when viewed through the lens of gender? And how does gender look when seen in an institutional context? Underlying both questions is the fundamental issue of gender differences and similarities: to what degree have femaleness and maleness mattered in public schools, and why?

Speaking of women writers, Adrienne Rich has called for “re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with new eyes.” Re-vision is also necessary in historical scholarship on gender in schools. Despite the useful pioneer
work of scholars like Thomas Woody and Willystine Goodsell, historians have largely ignored gender policies and practices in education. That is changing: today historians of women are illuminating the educational experience of girls and women. But there is not much work that looks at both sexes and the relationship between them (in our view, research on gender, as on class, needs to be relational). Paying attention to gender reveals many neglected topics.5

Looking at schools through the lens of gender also compelled us to “see with new eyes” some familiar subjects. As we sought to understand the gender history of nineteenth-century high schools, for example, we became aware of a critical but largely ignored feature of these institutions: their small size, a characteristic vital in understanding how they operated. Likewise, in assessing to what degree reformers of the Progressive Era succeeded in differentiating schooling by gender, we have come to question a position that we, like many others, have held: that a vocational emphasis transformed public education. In other cases as well, we have found that inquiry into gender from an institutional perspective forces a reevaluation of interpretive frameworks in the history of education.

These are some of the questions we address in the chapters that follow:

• Who were the major advocates of the education of women, what arguments did they use, and how much opposition did they face?
• Why were the idea and practice of coeducation accepted so rapidly and with so little dissent during the first half of the nineteenth century, a time when Americans were busily creating separate cultural and economic spheres for men and women? How did Americans reconcile separate spheres for men and women with sexually mixed common schools for children?
• Why and how did coeducation spread in a highly decentralized system in which policy decisions about gender issues were normally made at the local level?
• Why did debate over coeducation not become conspicuous until the practice was already well established, and why did this debate focus on city school systems? Where and why did single-sex schools persist?
• How did beliefs about the similarities and differences of girls and boys shape gender policies and practices in schools?
• To what degree did gender policies and practices in public schools differ by class, race, and region?
• Why did groups of men and women seek to differentiate "identical coeducation" by sex during the Progressive Era? To what extent did these attempts actually alter coeducation?
• Why did the gender biases in apparently "identical" coeducation not become apparent to large numbers of people until the last generation?

One way to avoid taking so familiar a practice as coeducation for granted is to imagine that coeducation did not become the mainstream of schooling for boys and girls. One should not assume that what happened was the only possibility, once citizens had decided to educate their daughters. Consider, instead, several alternatives that can be projected from practices and beliefs that were common in the early nineteenth century. Americans might have chosen to give only a rudimentary education at home to their daughters, as indeed many did. They might have restricted secondary education of girls to private single-sex schools, a practice common in prosperous families in the Northeast and the South. They might have emulated the European practice of segregating the sexes in public schools; where this was done—in cities in the Northeast and South—such communities typically invested less in girls' schools and often restricted their curriculum.6

In practice the mixed, or "coeducational," schools did not follow a single gender pattern or a uniform institutional arrangement. There were many ways to educate boys and girls together under the same roof of the public school: to separate them in distinct rooms or on opposite sides of the classroom but give them the same course of studies; to offer them distinct curricula; or to mix boys and girls together in the classroom, teach them the same subjects, and subject them to the same set of rules and rewards. The last arrangement became over time the most common gender practice in public education; school people of the latter half of the nineteenth century called it "identical coeducation." But mixed schools remained a patchwork quilt of different gender patterns in many communities. Some districts practiced coeducation in the primary grades but not in grammar or high schools; others began coeducation at the top and extended it downward from the high schools to the grammar schools.7

The tangled history of gender policies and practices in public schools is not a unified tale of pathology or progress. In every period one can find what today would be called sexual bias, but discrimination is only part of the story. Schools may also have been unusual in their gender practices. To some degree they have been sheltered enclaves in which children and youth
have been treated in ways that contrasted sharply with the lives of adult women and men. At the same time, societal conflicts about gender have entered gender discourse and practice in public education. Propelled by a millennial faith in schooling, yet driven by fears as well, Americans have made public education the repository of their hopes and anxieties about the gender order of the larger society.8

We suggest that the development of this variegated phenomenon called "coeducation" constitutes the central puzzle in the gender history of American public elementary and secondary schools. This book explores the emergence of coeducation and its career—contested but persistent—from the colonial period through recent years.9

*Explaining Constancy and Change: Thinking Institutionally*

The practice of coeducation became embedded in most public schools during the first half of the nineteenth century and then persisted despite a number of challenges and modifications. It became part of the standard grammar of the institution, accepted as one of the basic rules that governed its structure. Thus one phenomenon to explain is the origin and relative constancy of this organizational gender practice. At times, however, people did attack coeducation or seek to differentiate schools by sex; another task of interpretation is to account for change.

We focus primarily on the school as an institution. We could have directed our attention to individuals and their personal experiences in schools, as does much recent work by psychologists on sex-role socialization. We could have portrayed public schools as part of a seamless web of "patriarchy," or male-dominated society. Both of these approaches are common in scholarship on gender and education. But, we suggest, an institutional form of analysis, midway between the individual level and the societal, has a number of advantages. Because gender policies and practices became embedded over time in schools, an institutional and historical approach can illuminate which policies and practices were constant and which were transitory, which were hard to alter and which were malleable.10

The word *institution*—and even more the concept of institutionalization—has assumed protean shapes in the literature of social science. Without seeking a (probably nonexistent) consensual definition of the term, we employ the word "institution" in its traditional sense, to designate eco-
nomic, political, religious, familial, educational, and other agencies that constitute distinctive arrangements in organizing society. In this view, institutions have goals, organizational structure, boundaries, and legal standing. Institutions also have histories with their own trajectories, internal dynamics, and relations to their environments. Organizations within any particular institutional sphere—such as education—may take a variety of forms (for example, schools may be public in control or private, working class or elite, and may differ in size and complexity, as do rural and urban schools).¹¹

Using this institutional focus, we concentrate on gender policies and practices in schools. It is an open question whether an institutional analysis of some other topic in educational history—say, race relations—would follow a similar trajectory. Gender may be in some respects an idiosyncratic subject since it is often woven almost invisibly into the cultural fabric. But the turning points of an institutional history of gender in schools also intersect repeatedly with key events that shape education, such as the impact of major economic and political changes. The pattern of attempted gender reforms in public education, therefore, may illuminate more general processes of institutional change. Also, if there were comparable histories of gender practices in institutions other than schools, one could compare educational institutions with families, churches, and workplaces, for example. We suspect that if there were adequate gender maps of these institutions, one would find that gender was differently organized in each.

In recent years a number of scholars have criticized the views that institutions are merely passive products of larger social forces or simply neutral arenas for individuals and groups to work out their separate agendas. Instead, the “new institutionalists” argue, institutions (like schools) may strongly influence the behavior of their members and may have considerable autonomy and agency in setting and carrying out their own purposes (although, as we shall point out, schools have also been selectively responsive to their environments). Institutions have linkages with each other and mutual interactions that help to define the terrain in which they operate. As James G. March and Johan P. Olsen say, “institutions are actors in their own right.” Of course, various institutions differ greatly from one another in their autonomy and in the degree to which they are buffered from their environments.¹²

The new institutionalists’ approach applies directly to public education and helps to explain why schools often showed much continuity in practice amid shifting policy talk about gender. Public education played an important part in the allocation of prestige, money, status, and power, and thus
was an arena for contests about who got what and about symbolic issues involving gender. As we shall point out, changes in society triggered demands for different gender policies in schools. But at the same time, schools showed considerable continuity in their basic institutional patterns, especially at the core of the educational process, the classroom. Once embedded, a basic practice like coeducation became part of standard operating procedures and deflected challenges. Sometimes schools had explicit policies governing gender relationships, but they also had organizational cultures in which many gender practices were implicit (often all the more powerful for being taken for granted).  

One way in which institutions perpetuate familiar gender practices over long periods of time is by distinctive institutional socialization of members. Acquiring appropriate gender behavior through institutional socialization differs from individual sex-role socialization. It focuses not on some generalized formation of gender roles, presumably established early in life, that translates uniformly from one context to another but on gender expectations that may differ in particular institutions. People are quite capable of changing their behavior and beliefs to match the expectations of others as they shift from one institution to another—say, from family to school to church to army. Gender lessons may also differ in formal and informal groupings in the same institution. Boys and girls typically segregate themselves in the informal groups of the school playground, for example, but teachers tend to mix them in classrooms where coeducation is the institutional norm.

In the bureaucratized coeducational school that emerges in cities in the nineteenth century, for example, a child becomes part of an age-segregated group—a first-grade class—in which each student is only one among many, and similar tasks are assigned to each. The teacher is expected to employ the same standards of behavior, punishment, and reward for all. Pupils are supposed to learn not only to read, write, and do arithmetic but also to behave in an orderly manner in the group that forms the classroom.

Students in such a school also learn an organizational curriculum: that the school is arranged in successive grades for pupils of different ages; that they need to demonstrate what they have learned; that adults such as teachers and principals have positions of authority; and that days, months, and years are scheduled into a mandated climb up the pedagogical ladder. Students compete to acquire the knowledge the school decrees worth learning. Thus the child learns the role of student and the official culture of the school.

To understand the gender dimensions of this institutional socialization
to school one needs to ask not only in what ways was gender salient but how much was gender salient—that is, to look not only at differences but also at similarities in the way girls and boys were treated. Both historical and current research reveals a variety of explicit gender differentiation in the way schools have been organized. Some official policies treated the sexes differently in coeducational schools. In high schools, for example, educators established separate vocational and physical education classes, enforced different dress codes, excluded pregnant girls but not their impregnators, and favored male sports. Like segregated black schools, single-sex girls' schools typically received less funding per pupil and had a more restricted curriculum at the secondary level than did white boys' schools. Employment policies and practices favored men over women.17

In addition to obvious sex-defined policies, investigators during the 1970s have discovered an implicit hidden curriculum of sex stereotyping in coeducational public schools. By portraying separate and unequal spheres for males and females, textbooks have reinforced the gender stereotyping prevalent in the larger society. Studies of classrooms and guidance offices have documented how teachers and counselors have treated boys and girls differently. Personal accounts of such schooling have illuminated the subjective effects of such school practices.18

No doubt such forms of sex differentiation have influenced how pupils experienced their gender as they passed through the school system. One should not assume, however, that sex discrimination marked all aspects of the curriculum or of organizational arrangements. We have discovered relatively few school-district policies that were gender-specific with regard to the core activities of the coeducational school: instruction in classrooms. In the rules governing such matters as admission to schools, promotion from grade to grade, curriculum, and rewards and honors, we have found little that distinguished boys and girls.

Institutional socialization in coeducational schools thus silently taught boys and girls that all students had similar institutional rights and duties and were subject to similar constraints and rewards. This second, hidden curriculum of organizational arrangements downplayed the salience of gender in school. Looking at gender through the institutional lens of the school, then, shows the multiplicity of gender messages the young received.

Thus far, we have suggested that an institutional approach may illuminate one part of the story of coeducation: the issue of constancy in gender policies and practices. But there is another part of the puzzle: explaining
change, the origins of and alterations in coeducation. The institutional character of schools may help to explain continuities in practice, but schools were hardly hermetically sealed against the larger environment. Indeed, many school leaders prided themselves on adapting education to new conditions, while from the outside, lay activists lobbied for reforms in gender policies and practices. Throughout the story we tell, women and girls have been active participants in the campaign for educational opportunity.

In complex ways that differed by time and setting—for example, in rural versus urban districts—gender practices in the schools did change as society itself was transformed. As we see it, there was no automatic or simple correspondence between shifts in the political economy of gender relationships in the broader society and reforms in the schools. Instead, as changes occurred in the objective conditions of the lives of women and men or in the ideologies through which they interpreted the meaning of those transformations, individuals and groups sometimes translated their concerns into particular gender policies for schools. They then pressed these demands by influencing public opinion and through the political process. Some reformers appealed to traditional concepts of male and female spheres; others, to new concepts of gender justice.

Enacting new gender policies was only one stage in reform, however; they still had to be incorporated into the school. The gender changes that became institutionalized, that lasted, were often those that could be assimilated to the standard structure of instruction without disrupting it. Often such reforms ended up on the periphery of the school, not in the instructional mainstream, but they demonstrated that the school was doing something. And sometimes the intent of the reform became transformed as it was implemented.19

Change in gender policies and practices in public schools thus usually came about through a three-stage process of societal change, policy mediation, and institutional incorporation. The creation of home economics courses for girls provides an example. At the turn of the twentieth century, many Americans believed that new conditions—urbanization, the increasing employment of women, a rising tide of immigration—were producing a deterioration in family life characterized by symptoms such as increased rates of divorce and child mortality. As a remedy, reformers proposed teaching girls directly in schools to be better homemakers. Coalitions of women organized in clubs and professional associations lobbied legislatures and school districts to mandate programs in home economics. Edu-
cators installed home economics as a sex-segregated part of the curriculum in courses similar in structure to the rest of the instructional program. Such courses persisted and demonstrated that the schools were responding to a perceived problem, but they were marginal adaptations only.\textsuperscript{20}

A number of other deliberate changes in gender practices followed such a pattern of initiation, enactment, and implementation. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that either change or constancy in gender policies and practices was necessarily the result of conscious decisions. Major shifts in gender relationships in the schools sometimes took place with minimal public discussion, while ardent debate sometimes produced little institutional innovation.

\textit{Silence, Policy Talk, and Gender Practice}

Coeducation in public elementary schools came about in the first half of the nineteenth century gradually and for the most part quietly. Most justifications for and attacks on the practice appeared after the mid-century, when coeducation was already embedded. By contrast, some controversies left practice largely untouched. In the late nineteenth century, for example, doctors and psychologists claimed that coeducation in secondary education maimed the health of girls, but this did not stem the flood of girls into high
schools. Critics complained that there were too many women teachers, but this did not halt the rapid exodus of men from the teaching profession. The King Canutes commanded, but the tide of coeducation did not stop.

Policy discourse about gender in public education has taken many forms, some of which did have a real impact on practice. After the Revolution, for example, advocates of women's education played an important part in convincing parents to send their daughters to school (although many of them proposed separate rather than mixed schooling). By reconciling education with the separate spheres of the sexes, they defused conservative criticism. William T. Harris, while superintendent of schools in St. Louis in the 1870s, penned a persuasive justification of coeducation that gave city school leaders strong arguments for adopting coeducation or for continuing what most of them were already doing. In the 1960s and 1970s feminists discovered and publicized the sex bias latent in coeducational schools and thus raised policy issues that had long gone unnoticed.

Looking at coeducation in public schools through the lens of gender illustrates the complex relationships between silence, policy talk, and educational practice. Silence about major institutional changes in gender relations, attacks on coeducation with little practical effect, influential rationales, research on institutional sexism, reforms that had unintended consequences on gender relations in the schools, constancy in the basic forms of instruction in coeducational classrooms—these illustrate the need to analyze silence as well as policy talk, continuity as well as change.

In periods of rapid social change, gender relations have sometimes come into sharp focus and have been extensively discussed rather than ignored. On occasion, vigorous disagreement erupted about what was a just, natural, or God-ordained relationship between the sexes, and such controversies influenced rhetoric about schooling. In the nineteenth century, when traditionalists were determined to set sharp boundaries around the separate spheres of the sexes, critics claimed that coeducational public schools made girls too virile. In the Progressive Era, when feminists were pressing for the vote and greater opportunities in the economic and political world, conservatives worried that the schools were too feminine. In the 1970s reformers argued that the schools made the girls too feminine and the boys too masculine, thereby reinforcing sex stereotypes that restricted their opportunities both in school and later life.

Today there is vigorous disagreement about what constitutes a proper gender order in school and society. Some feminists urge educators to eliminate different treatment of the two sexes and to create gender-neutral
schooling. They believe that such a nonstereotyped education will enlarge the aspirations of youth and cultivate competence in both boys and girls. Other feminists question whether a gender-neutral school is either possible or desirable. Coeducation as it currently exists, they claim, is male-defined and male-dominated. To integrate girls into such a system of male values and practices is to deny the worth of female experience, ethical outlooks, and cognitive styles. A better goal than gender neutrality, they believe, is education that honors both feminine and masculine qualities. Meanwhile, traditionalists hold with equal passion that schools should reflect and strengthen the separate spheres of men and women. Congress has both passed legislation to eliminate sexual discrimination in schools and considered a family-protection bill that would have reinforced traditional values in public education.\textsuperscript{23}

The present period of self-consciousness about gender policies, however, is somewhat anomalous in the long history of gender policies and practices in public education. During most of that history, gender was rarely used as a root category of analysis in policy but rather was taken for granted. Only infrequently have Americans adopted explicit institutional policies about gender (as compared with the implicit policies represented by practice). Law is one place to look for formal policy; surely it reveals much about race, for example. But the educational provisions of state constitutions, state statutes, and court decisions dealt hardly at all with gender until recent years. In local district rules and regulations one finds few mentions of gender, compared to the elaborate provisions about age, proficiency, curriculum, and other matters that mark the boundaries or shape the content of schooling.\textsuperscript{24}

The story of coeducation in public schools is in part one of silent change, of unintended results, of unlikely causes, of unheeded criticisms, and of hidden benefits and costs. Thus, the subject is replete with ironies and obscure transformations. The historian of gender in public schools, like Sherlock Holmes, needs to be aware of the importance of the dog that did not bark.