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## Book Review: Gallas, Karen. (1998). "Sometimes I Can Be Anything": Power, gender and identity in a primary classroom.

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## Book Review

*by Zoe Donoahue*

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**Gallas, Karen. (1998). "Sometimes I Can Be Anything": Power, gender and identity in a primary classroom. New York: Teachers College Press.**

Karen Gallas' third book, *Sometimes I Can Be Anything: Power, Gender and Identity in a Primary Classroom*, is a fascinating account of how children use power and gender to find their place in the classroom community. Gallas examines children's social interactions, their "real" work in the classroom, focussing on gender in the context of the issues of power and social control. Gallas hopes "to provide the reader with an in-depth look at how the children [she] taught worked to understand the social terrain of the classroom and how [she] as their teacher made sense of their work" (p.3). The children's efforts are seen as a "subtextual dynamic that operated beneath the surface of classroom life but had great influence on the children's work at school" (p. 12). Gallas classifies their social interactions as "dramatic encounters", or performances, and believes that these performances are orchestrated by the children. She emphasizes that the children are learning about how gender and power relationships work by playing at them. She feels that this practicing is an important part of children's job at school and, as the teacher, Gallas is concerned about her role in this. She asks herself, "What is going on here?" and looks for patterns. Gallas' observations and findings will be of interest to teachers, school counselors, social workers and others who work with young children and wonder about what goes on between children, below the surface, in a classroom community.

Two groups of 6, 7 and 8 year olds that Gallas taught for two years each are the focus of the book. We meet a number of her students and see how they operate within the social dynamic of the classroom. The children are described through personae that they try on in order to explore different social roles. Both boys and girls uses these roles to try to control the social interactions. Gallas examines "silent" girls and discovers how they use this power to control relationships with their peers and "beautiful" children, who are considered to be attractive by others, and how both feel constraints that make it difficult for them to have real contact with others. Teachers will recognize her portraits of "bad" boys, who try to control the classroom socially and dynamically. She also reflects on how children use race as a basis to exclude others and maintain their own social power. An end of the year class dramatic performance, where children display their personae, is discussed as a "final melding of the children's unofficial social work within the official agenda of the classroom" (p. 134).

Throughout the book, Gallas shows how a teacher-researcher constantly questions her beliefs and refines research questions and practice. A realistic picture of the process of teacher research is presented, including data collection methods, such as writing field notes, making audio tapes,

collecting work samples and recording verbatim texts, that are used effectively in the context of day-to-day teaching. Transcriptions of children's conversations give the reader a real glimpse into the classroom, and Gallas' extensive field notes show her processes and thinking, how her focus changed over time, and illustrate how she sees herself as a "co-actor" along with the children.

Gallas is aware of her own "active control" in the classroom and has questions about her role as a teacher and the children's goals as learners. She feels that the children's motivation to understand their world is a healthy one, and that adults need to "carefully observe and actively participate" in their social interactions. Gallas writes, "I am a firm believer in eavesdropping, intervening, questioning, objecting and problematizing the motives of the children I teach and my own motives" (p.84). Personal reactions in her field notes and anecdotes about how she intervenes in situations give the reader a good feel for Gallas' picture of the teacher's role.

The reader is brought into Gallas' classroom and becomes acquainted with an exemplary primary program and routines such as sharing time, science talks, art journals and whole class discussions. Gallas is a firm believer in teaching the same children for two consecutive years, and the insights and knowledge she gains about each child over a two year period will also leave the reader convinced.

Gallas' classroom observations span four years, and she was fortunate to be able to spend a year away from teaching to focus on her writing. While others may not have such ideal circumstances and the same opportunities to know and collect data about the same children for two years, readers can certainly build on and use Gallas' findings in their own settings.

Gallas' book has helped me to think about my own students anew, and to be more observant and aware of gender, race and social issues in my classroom. Her clear and poignant portraits of her students made me think of my own students and helped me to see them with more clarity and empathy. Gallas' book is uplifting reading, and has been an inspiration to explore similar, related issues and questions that came to mind as I read the book. I will begin the school year with renewed enthusiasm to embark on my own journey of exploration and discovery with the children in my class.