

## Gender Bias in Education

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"Sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different educations." (Sadker, 1994) In fact, upon entering school, girls perform equal to or better than boys on nearly every measure of achievement, but by the time they graduate high school or college, they have fallen behind. (Sadker, 1994) However, discrepancies between the performance of girls and the performance of boys in elementary education leads some critics to argue that boys are being neglected within the education system:

Across the country, boys have never been in more trouble: They earn 70 percent of the D's and F's that teachers dole out. They make up two thirds of students labeled "learning disabled." They are the culprits in a whopping 9 of 10 alcohol and drug violations and the suspected perpetrators in 4 out of 5 crimes that end up in juvenile court. They account for 80 percent of high school dropouts and attention deficit disorder diagnoses. (Mulrine, 2001)

This performance discrepancy is notable throughout Canada. In Ontario, Education Minister Janet Ecker said that the results of the standardized grade 3 and grade 6 testing in math and reading showed, "...persistent and glaring discrepancies in achievements and attitudes between boys and girls." (O'Neill, 2000) In British Columbia, standardized testing indicates that girls outperform boys at all levels of reading and writing and in Alberta testing shows that girls, "...significantly outperform boys on reading and writing tests, while almost matching them in math and science." (O'Neill, 2000) However, the American Association of University Women published a report in 1992 indicating that females receive less attention from teachers and the attention that female students do receive is often more negative than attention received by boys. (Bailey, 1992) In fact, examination of the socialization of gender within schools and evidence of a gender biased hidden curriculum demonstrates that girls are shortchanged in the classroom. Furthermore, there is significant research indicating steps that can be taken to minimize or eliminate the gender bias currently present in our education system.

The socialization of gender within our schools assures that girls are made aware that they are unequal to boys. Every time students are seated or lined up by gender, teachers are affirming that girls and boys should be treated differently. When an administrator ignores an act of sexual harassment, he or she is allowing the degradation of girls. When different behaviors are tolerated for boys than for girls because 'boys will be boys', schools are perpetuating the oppression of females. There is some evidence that girls are becoming more academically successful than boys, however examination of the classroom shows that girls and boys continue to be socialized in ways that work against gender equity.

Teachers socialize girls towards a feminine ideal. Girls are praised for being neat, quiet, and calm, whereas boys are encouraged to think independently, be active and speak up.

Girls are socialized in schools to recognize popularity as being important, and learn that educational performance and ability are not as important. "Girls in grades six and seven rate being popular and well-liked as more important than being perceived as competent or independent. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to rank independence and competence as more important." (Bailey, 1992)

This socialization of femininity begins much earlier than the middle grades. At very early ages, girls begin defining their femininities in relation to boys. One study of a third grade classroom examined four self-sorted groups of girls within the classroom: the nice girls, the girlies, the spice girls and the tomboys. Through interviews researcher Diane Reay found that 'nice girls' was considered a derogatory term indicating, "...an absence of toughness and attitude." (Reay, 2001) Furthermore, the girlies were a group of girls who focused their time on flirting with and writing love letters to boys, the tomboys were girls who played sports with the boys, and the spice girls espoused girl-power and played 'rate-the-boy' on the playground. Reay's research shows that each of the groups of girls defined their own femininities in relation to boys. (2001)

The Reay study further demonstrates how socialization of girls occurs at the school level by tolerating different behaviors from boys than from girls. Assertive behavior from girls is often seen as disruptive and may be viewed more negatively by adults. In Reay's study, the fact that the spice girls asserted themselves in ways contrary to traditional femininity caused them to be labeled by teachers as "real bitches". (2001) This reinforces the notion that "...girls' misbehavior to be looked upon as a character defect, whilst boys' misbehavior is viewed as a desire to assert themselves." (Reay, 2001)

A permissive attitude towards sexual harassment is another way in which schools reinforce the socialization of girls as inferior. "When schools ignore sexist, racist, homophobic, and violent interactions between students, they are giving tacit approval to such behaviors." (Bailey, 1992) Yet boys are taunted for throwing like a girl, or crying like a girl, which implies that being a girl is worse than being a boy. According to the American Association of University Women Report, "The clear message to both boys and girls is that girls are not worthy of respect and that appropriate behavior for boys includes exerting power over girls -- or over other, weaker boys." (Bailey, 1992)

Clearly the socialization of gender is reinforced at school, "Because classrooms are microcosms of society, mirroring its strengths and ills alike, it follows that the normal socialization patterns of young children that often lead to distorted perceptions of gender roles are reflected in the classrooms." (Marshall, 1997) Yet gender bias in education reaches beyond socialization patterns, bias is embedded in textbooks, lessons, and teacher interactions with students. This type of gender bias is part of the hidden curriculum of lessons taught implicitly to students through the every day functioning of their classroom.

In Myra and David Sadker's research, they noted four types of teacher responses to students: teacher praises, providing positive feedback for a response; teacher remediates, encouraging a student to correct or expand their answer; teacher criticizes, explicitly stating that the answer is incorrect; teacher accepts, acknowledging that a student has

responded. The Sadkers found that boys were far more likely to receive praise or remediation from a teacher than were girls. The girls were most likely to receive an acknowledgement response from their teacher. (Sadker, 1994) These findings are confirmed by a 1990 study by Good and Brophy that "...noted that teachers give boys greater opportunity to expand ideas and be animated than they do girls and that they reinforce boys more for general responses than they do for girls." (Marshall, 1997)

Beyond teacher responses, special services in education appear to be applied more liberally to boys than to girls. Research shows that boys are referred for testing for gifted programs twice as often as girls, which may be because, "...giftedness is seen as aberrant, and girls strive to conform." (Orenstein, 1994) Boys represent more than two-thirds of all students in special education programs and there is a higher the proportion of male students receiving diagnoses that are considered to be subjective. While medical reports indicate that learning disabilities occur in nearly equal numbers of in boys and girls, it may be the case that, "Rather than identifying learning problems, school personnel may be mislabeling behavioral problems. Girls who sit quietly are ignored; boys who act out are placed in special programs that may not meet their needs." (Bailey, 1992)

Gender bias is also taught implicitly through the resources chosen for classroom use. Using texts that omit contributions of women, that tokenize the experiences of women, or that stereotype gender roles, further compounds gender bias in schools' curriculum. While research shows that the use of gender-equitable materials allows students to have more gender-balanced knowledge, to develop more flexible attitudes towards gender roles, and to imitate role behaviors contained in the materials (Klein, 1985) schools continue to use gender-biased texts:

Researchers at a 1990 conference reported that even texts designed to fit within the current California guidelines on gender and race equity for textbook adoption showed subtle language bias, neglect of scholarship on women, omission of women as developers of history and initiators of events, and absence of women from accounts of technological developments. (Bailey, 1992)

Clearly the socialization of gender roles and the use of a gender-biased hidden curriculum lead to an inequitable education for boys and girls. What changes can be made to create a more equitable learning environment for all children? First, teachers need to be made aware of their gender-biased tendencies. Next, they need to be provided with strategies for altering the behavior. Finally, efforts need to be made to combat gender bias in educational materials.

A study by Kelly Jones, Cay Evans, Ronald Byrd, and Kathleen Campbell (2000) used analysis of videotaped lessons in order to introduce teachers to their own gender-biased behavior. Requiring in-service programs to address gender bias in the classroom will make teachers more aware of their own behaviors: "As a teacher, I was struck by the Sadkers' research on classroom exchanges and was forced to acknowledge the disproportionate amount of time and energy, as well as the different sorts of attention, I give to male students." (McCormick, 1995)

Once teachers have recognized their gender-biased behaviors, they need to be provided with resources to help them change. In their study focusing on how the effects of a gender resource model would affect gender-biased teaching behaviors, Jones, Evans, Burns, and Campbell (2000) provided teachers with a self-directed module aimed at reducing gender bias in the classroom. The module contained research on gender equity in the classroom, specific activities to reduce stereotypical thinking in students, and self-evaluation worksheets for teachers. The findings from this study support the hypothesis that "...female students would move from a position of relative deficiency toward more equity in total interactions...." (Jones, 2000) This demonstrates that teachers who are made aware of their gender-biased teaching behaviors and then provided with strategies and resources to combat bias are better able to promote gender equity in their classrooms.

However, beyond changing their own teaching behaviors, teachers need to be aware of the gender bias imbedded in many educational materials and texts and need to take steps to combat this bias. Curriculum researchers have established six attributes that need to be considered when trying to establish a gender-equitable curriculum. Gender-fair materials need to acknowledge and affirm variation. They need to be inclusive, accurate, affirmative, representative, and integrated, weaving together the experiences, needs, and interests of both males and females. (Bailey, 1992) "We need to look at the stories we are telling our students and children. Far too many of our classroom examples, storybooks, and texts describe a world in which boys and men are bright, curious, brave, inventive, and powerful, but girls and women are silent, passive, and invisible." (McCormick, 1995) Furthermore, teachers can help students identify gender-bias in texts and facilitate critical discussions as to why that bias exists.

Gender bias in education is an insidious problem that causes very few people to stand up and take notice. The victims of this bias have been trained through years of schooling to be silent and passive, and are therefore unwilling to stand up and make noise about the unfair treatment they are receiving. "Over the course of years the uneven distribution of teacher time, energy, attention, and talent, with boys getting the lion's share, takes its toll on girls." (Sadker, 1994) Teachers are generally unaware of their own biased teaching behaviors because they are simply teaching how they were taught and the subtle gender inequities found in teaching materials are often overlooked. Girls and boys today are receiving separate and unequal educations due to the gender socialization that takes place in our schools and due to the sexist hidden curriculum students are faced with every day. Unless teachers are made aware of the gender-role socialization and the biased messages they are unintentionally imparting to students everyday, and until teachers are provided with the methods and resources necessary to eliminate gender-bias in their classrooms, girls will continue to receive an inequitable education.

Departments of education should be providing mandatory gender-equity resource modules to in-service teachers, and gender bias needs to be addressed with all pre-service teachers. Educators need to be made aware of the bias they are reinforcing in their students through socialization messages, inequitable division of special education services, sexist texts and materials, and unbalanced time and types of attention spent on

boys and girls in the classroom. "Until educational sexism is eradicated, more than half our children will be shortchanged and their gifts lost to society." (Sadker, 1994)

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