Gender Bias in the Classroom

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In the past we have made strides in battling gender bias and discrimination, but it is still alive today and affecting our children within their classrooms. In 2009 girls made up forty percent of athletes while still enrolling in chemistry, biology and pre-calculus courses at rates that equaled males. Girls also have access to the vast majority of all colleges, if they can reach the expected scores needed for admission. Males have made great strides too. They are scoring higher on standardized tests, taking advanced placement exams, graduating from high school and attending college. Gender bias short-circuits both boys and girls, and both move forward when gender restriction are removed (Sadker, 2009).

The classroom is a hierarchically arranged by, teacher first, then men and women last. Girls and boys continue to receive different classroom environments resulting in gender differences. Title IX laws have been successful in increasing school participation rates for females in academics and athletic pursuits as well as encouraging males to pursue nontraditional courses and career paths. But during the Reagan era, funds for implementing, disseminating and evaluating programs were sharply reduced (Rose & Dunn, 1989). Though we have made successful strides, traditions die-hard.

We need to reeducate ourselves on being aware of how sexism affects the lives of young people. This includes our schools and in other cultural contexts. We need to be aware of the practices we use in our own profession and daily lives. The more we can relate the inequalities in our own world to the world of our students and classrooms, the more we will be able to transfer these insights to future teachers.

There are deeply rooted social beliefs perpetuating the unequal treatment of girls and boys in school. Some educators want gender separate instruction. The “girls only,” approach to education. This “soft touch” approach, “wrapping calculus in a pink ribbon”
assumes that girls and boys need different instructional surrounding to flourish (Frawley, 2005).

Gender role stereotypes for femininity and masculinity are so strong; the students who do not fit these roles encounter problems with teacher and their peers. Boys are known to be boisterous, unruly, academically able, rational and socially uncommunicative, while girls are quiet, polite, and studious. Girls usually possess better social skills than boys, so the girls who present discipline problems for teachers, or quiet, studious boys, may encounter a lack of understanding from peers and teachers. What we need to remember is that gender bias can occur within any activity or subject. Some say that boys emotional needs have not been met and are now they are badly in need of attention. We need to stop labeling children and encourage androgynous behavior for both genders. The truth is that boys and girls exhibit different strengths as well as needs, and that gender stereotypes shortchange both genders. (Frawley, 2005) The myth that boys are naturally better at math and science than girls, implies that if a girl were to succeed, it was due to hard work and not her intelligence. But boys are automatically credited their success as a natural talent. The percentages of girls participating in science classes have increased and have become equal to that of boys in biology, chemistry, and algebra. But when these genders are enrolling in college, the engineering prerequisites are still dominated by males.

**Boys and Gender Bias Within the Classroom**

Some critics would argue that boys are being neglected within the education system. Boys have never been in more trouble than they are today. They make up two-thirds of student labeled “learning disabled.” There is a higher portion of boys receiving diagnoses, which should make us wonder if school personnel may be mislabeling some of the male
behavioral problems. Research shows that boys are referred for testing for gifted programs twice as often as girls. Plus young 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. (Chapman, 1995). Behaviors from boys are being tolerated because ‘boys will be boys’ which then leads to the continued oppression of female students. Sexual harassment, when allowed, leads to the degradation of girls.

The ratio of boys to girls in special education at my school, is 8 to 1. Females seem to have coping strategies and they are emotionally connected to their education before males. Females are developing earlier, while the males want to go outside instead of focusing on their education. This scenario begins to change when boys start to mature. Boys are often labeled as socially disturbed, retained and identified for special services more than girls. Boys struggle with academic expectations in reading, writing, and verbal abilities, which are cognitive skills. These specific cognitive skills tend to develop later for boys and sooner for girls.

Males have a tendency to dominate the pages of textbooks too. In social studies texts, males are shown five times more often then females. Award winning medals for children’s literature are going to twice as many males than female authors. Boys are expected to do better in math and the toys parents buy lean more towards math and science. The average parent has a tendency to lean towards traditional gender stereotypes, which influences their attitude and behavior, especially for math. All of this inadvertently sends the message to girls that math is hard. There is a myth that boys should be boys, and that they should be dominant and macho. But, boys who do not fit the pattern stereotype have feeling of failure and shame. If you are male and artistic, dramatic,
and theatrical you will soon be ridiculed, belittled and excluded. Essentially subordinated to being girl-like.

**Girls and Gender Bias Within the Classroom**

Educators need to be aware of the bias' they are reinforcing in their students through socialization messages, sexists texts and materials, unbalanced instruction time, and types of attention spent on boys and girls in the classroom of today's schools. Sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different educations.

Girls in the elementary years are out preforming boys in reading and writing and almost matching them in math and science. Girls are becoming more academically successful than boys, but they are being socialized in ways that work against gender equality. Girls have a tendency to believe their academic success is due to hard work and not talent or intelligence. Which has lead to teachers having lower expectations for girls academically than boys. Girls have a tendency to be people pleasers, follow directions better; they do not cause problems and therefore have better grades on their report cards during the early schooling years. Girls are enrolled in the majority in biology, chemistry, algebra, and precalculus classes, but “a survey by the Society of Women Engineers found that 75 percent of American girls have not interest in pursuing a career in science, math, or technology” (Zittleman & Sadker, 2009). They perceive these subjects as cold, impersonal, and with little clear application to their lives or to society.” (Zittleman & Sadker, 2009) But lately, girls have fallen behind in key college entrance exams scores (SAT and ACT) and one reason might be the fact that they are receiving instruction that is less in quality and quantity. Studies indicate that females receive less attention from teachers and the
attention they are receiving is often negative. So should we consider single-sex schools? For girls especially they offered an academic refuge, a place to free voices too often silenced in coeducational schools. Many girls in single-sex schools reported higher self-esteem, more interest in nontraditional subjects such as science and math, and were less likely to pursue stereotypical jobs and careers (Sadker, & Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009). Gender biased hidden curriculum, shows us that girls are being shortchanged in the classroom. How is this happening? Girls have been given a very feminine idea of what they are to be. Girls are praised for being neat, quiet, and calm whereas boys are encouraged to think independently, be active and speak up. Girls are responding that being popular is more important than academic success or independence. There are four self-sorted groups of girls within the classroom: the nice girls, the girlies, the spice girls and the tomboys. Nice girls was considered a derogatory term indicating an absence of toughness and attitude, the girlies were the 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 (Chapman, 1995).

With all of this being said, women make up the majority of college students on campuses, especially at the two-year college campuses. Women actually get better grades their first year of college than men. So the SAT Reasoning Test consistently under predicts female performance while over predicting male performance (Sadker, & Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009). After taking the SAT, girls may wonder if their excellent school grades were given for hard work rather than real intelligence (Sadker, & Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009). On college campuses, girls are leaning towards the stereotypical careers for women: teaching, social work, and nursing fields of study. Engineering, computer science
and physics are still overwhelmingly male dominated fields of study. When the average female student graduates from college, they can look forward to on average earning only 78 cents for every dollar a man earns. Asian American females earn 87 cents, African American females earn 62 cents and Latinas earn 53 cents, compared to a man. While women make up half the associates for law firms, less than 20 percent are made partners. In Fortune 500 Hundred companies, 97 percent of the top executives are men.

**Teachers and Gender Bias Within Their Classroom**

Gender bias can impact students’ attitudes towards learning and their engagement with the subject (Scantlebury, 2009). What’s common about most teachers is they treat all students the same. Students are diverse people with different learning styles. Teachers could be ignoring their own biases about gender in their students, in their schools and in themselves. Teachers should also be aware of the bias embedded within the textbooks, lessons, and teacher interaction with students.

Gender biases that teachers have and are unaware of, in turn, produce stereotypic expectation for their student’s participation within the classroom. Teachers are shown to give boys greater opportunity to expand on ideas and to be more animated, than they do for girls. Teachers will ask the boys harder questions than girls. When the girls falter, the teacher will repeat the question and ask another student, who is usually a boy. Target students are also typically white male students, and they usually dominate the teacher’s time in the classroom. These students usually answer most of the questions and will sometimes even blurt out the answers, which denies all other students the opportunity to answer question or understand the subject matter, especially girls. When teachers use target students to maintain the tempo or pace of the classroom instruction they are again
creating biases within genders. When teachers encourage students to call out answers to keep the lesson tempo moving, they are not giving enough “wait time” for other students. This lack of processing time can be detrimental to learning. If the teacher would wait three to five seconds before accepting a student’s answer, more students become engaged and the wait time will improve their understanding of the content instruction. Giving a longer wait time means that teachers can ask more cognitively challenging questions.

Types of praise the different genders receive is also developing biases and stereotypes within our children. Girls are given less meaningful and less critical praise than boys. While the boy’s work is described as unique or brilliant, the girl’s work is praised for mainly its appearance. This is detrimental to girls because it means they do not receive feedback on their work that could help them develop deeper understandings of concepts (Scantlebury, 2009). Teacher comments or criticism on work should promote learning and understanding, instead of focusing on appearance. Attention to both genders should be given equally and opportunities to engage in classroom discussions and to display their knowledge should be given equally to both. Most students, male or female, prefer to learn in cooperative groups. The boys usually complete the tasks and use the equipment, while the girls read the instructions and record the results. Textbooks depict girls in passive roles while the boys are given active ones. We need more messages within our curriculum, which highlights girls and women’s achievements, and more active participation for girls too.

Gender bias can also be extended to the student who challenges authority. Risk taking behavior is expected in boys, but assertiveness in girls is viewed as negative or labeled unfeminine. Sitting undisciplined boys next to girls in the classroom is a
management strategy every teacher has used. Teachers do this because a good boy next to a disruptive one may cause a problem. But a good girl next to the same disruptive boy may calm the boy and balance the classroom. This example gives the stereotype that boys are undisciplined, and girls are cooperative and orderly. It implies that boys need looking after and girls do not. Which furthers the gender expectations that girls are nurturing and will assume the mothering role to students who have fallen behind.

Teacher Programs and Gender Bias

Removing bias, and stereotyping would require changing the behavior and attitudes towards them. This type of change needs to start with teachers within our classrooms of today and students who are studying to become teachers. Though teachers are in favor of changing bias and stereotyping, they feel it is so deeply ingrained within culture as a whole, that they cannot make a dent in society to affect the change. Teachers feel they are ill prepared to tackle such a daunting topic. School districts need to set up individual training and group workshops to teach awareness of gender bias and way of reducing gender bias within the classroom. There are several important ways teachers or professors can prepare their students to deal with gender differences and biases in schools. Some strategies for implementing a change in bias and stereotyping are (1) teacher education programs should provide prospective teachers the opportunity to study classroom dynamics, their own and others, in order to eliminate bias in classroom communication, (2) students of teaching should have guided exposure to text materials containing sex stereotyped or using sexist language so that they become more aware of the messages conveyed with them, (3) methods courses should incorporate research finding on the biasing effect of teaching methods and how to counteract those effects, (4) courses on
curriculum should include resources that will help pre-service teachers promote equal participation and achievement in their teaching fields, (5) teacher educators should be familiar with the *Handbook for Achieving Sex Equity Through Education*, and lastly (6) teacher educators must model what they teach (Rose & Dunn, 1989).

The teacher’s job is to create an environment free of sex stereotyping within instruction styles, interactions with students, and instruction and curriculum materials. The first step is accepting children for who they are and putting aside your own beliefs and expectations. The second step is to become gender-neutral and not favoring one side or the other. Celebrating qualities from both sides may encourage neither specific feminine nor masculine behaviors. Some specific ways to develop these are, (1) examine your own classroom behavior, (2) be sensitive to ways of providing feedback, (3) pay attention to the time variable, (4) monitor language, (5) be an appropriate role model (Frawley, 2005). The types of instructional styles a teacher chooses will help set the classroom up for success. Working with others and matching the students learning style, the type of assessment instrument you choose, and not segregating your students within the classroom will make a difference in the delivery of bias free instruction. Teachers will want to analyze the instructional materials they choose to use from the books in the classroom to the computer sites their students use.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, current teachers are unaware of their own behavior biases because they are simply teaching the way they were taught. They need to become aware of their own gender-biased behaviors. As teachers, we need to be provided with strategies to help us change gender equality within each classroom. Teachers need gender fair material. The
curriculum needs to be inclusive, accurate, affirmative, representative and integrated, weaving together the experiences, needs, and interests of both males and females (Chapman, 1995). With these methods and resources teachers will be better able to promote gender equality within their classrooms. Girls will continue to receive an inequitable education, unless teachers are aware of the gender role socialization, sexist hidden curriculum, and biased messages we are sending to our students. In order to stop the damage that is done through hidden messages, teachers need to analyze their own attitudes and behaviors. They should scrutinize instructional material and be more conscious how they provide feedback to students. Teachers should promote equal opportunities for both girls and boys. Girls need to be encouraged to take chances, be leaders, and to be achievers. Boys should be allowed to be sensitive, and caring without being ridiculed, belittled and excluded. Both boys and girls can reach their fullest potential if they are sensitive to the quality and level of interaction they give to each gender.
References


