Gender Equity in the Classroom

Some ideas on how to minimize gender bias in our teaching practice and curriculum.

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Education Equity

For two decades I’ve worked in public schools, and when it comes to female students in the classroom, I’ve noticed a trend: In the past, when I observed primary grade classrooms, a good number of girls would routinely raise their hands, share their opinions and ideas, and volunteer to read aloud. Now I observe seventh and eighth grade and high school classes, and there is a change that starts around seventh grade: Female students are much quieter
and less outspoken than they were in primary grades.

What’s behind this unsettling shift?

During puberty, children seem heavily influenced by the traditional gender norms amplified in pop culture. Education research has found that the stereotypes of assertive male and passive female are often reinforced in our schools and in our very classrooms. A commercial titled “Like a Girl” both captures and disrupts that very gender stereotype.

**Gender Disparity: Participation**

So what about our classrooms? In my many observations of middle and high school classrooms, male students often lead and dominate classroom discussions. They raise their hands more often to answer questions than female students, and they volunteer more frequently to read aloud their writing or the class texts. According to research by Fengshu Liu, because of this, teachers often unconsciously rely on male students as their target or go-to responders and volunteers. The result is that girls are then called on less frequently, compounding their silence and resulting in unintended gender bias in instructional practices.

In their book *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and What We Can Do About It*, researchers David Sadker, Myra Sadker, and Karen Zittleman describe observing public and private school classrooms nationwide over several years. They found that starting in grade school, teachers engaged less frequently with female students, asking them fewer questions, while at the same time providing males with more feedback.

The authors also observed that there was an uneven distribution of teacher time, energy, and attention—all in favor of male students. After thousands of
observation hours in various classrooms and grade levels, the research team reported that the amount of gender stereotypes in lessons and teaching practices was “startling.”

**Gender Disparity: Curricular Materials**

In addition to the gender disparity in class participation and teacher attention, education researcher Kathleen Weiler found that male-dominant curricular materials are prevalent in schools throughout the United States.

In my own education research, I recently tallied authors by gender in three language arts textbooks currently in use in the second-largest school district in the United States, Los Angeles Unified (LAUSD). In the eighth-grade language arts textbook, less than 30 percent of the authors were female. (Girls comprise 52 percent of the students in LAUSD.) In the other two textbooks (for ninth grade and 10th grade), the results were similar.

It’s important to note that this particular textbook publisher is one of the largest used in public schools across the United States and, along with language arts textbooks, publishes textbooks for math, science, social studies, and other content areas for high school as well as for elementary grades. Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman state in their nationwide findings that male characters continue to dominate and outnumber females two-to-one in curricular materials.

**Examining Our Practices and Curriculum**

Hidden gender biases in curricula and the socialization of gender roles lead to inequitable education for girls and for boys. What changes can be made to create a more equitable learning environment for all students?

Take a moment to consider the following questions as you reflect on your own
classroom and gender equity:

1. Do any texts I use omit girls and/or women, or tokenize their experiences? How are boys and/or men stereotyped?

2. Are females or males presented in stereotypically gendered roles in any texts I have selected? If these are historical texts, how might I teach students to be critical of the limitations in the gender roles presented in these texts?

3. Do I encourage empowering and nonsexist behaviors among my students? Do I discourage both female and male gender stereotypes?

4. If I have a classroom library, is there a balance in male and female authors? Are there plenty of books with strong female protagonists? Do the nonfiction books feature notable women and girls?

5. In what ways do I encourage gender equity of voice and participation?

6. Do I ask girls as well as boys complicated questions? During discussions, do I inquire as diligently and deeply with female students as I do with male students?

**Strategies to Improve Practices and Curriculum**

Here are some ideas for improving gender equity in your classroom. Please add any strategies you’ve used in the comments section below.

1. If you find more male authors, scientists, and mathematicians featured in the textbook you use, do your own research and add more notable women to the mix.

2. Use wait/think time deliberately. Instead of calling on the first or second hand, choose the fourth, fifth, or sixth.
3. Be aware of the number of female students you call on. Be incredibly proactive in making sure that all students (regardless of gender, ethnicity, language, or learning ability) are equitably included in discussions and participation.

4. Call out sexist notions or terminology in texts used in the classroom—for example, a textbook, magazine article, poem, research report, or blog post. You can also highlight any gender stereotypical language used by students in the classroom and use it to invite broader discussion.

5. Videotape your classes and review your interactions with students. You could also invite a colleague to watch you teach and note which students are being asked questions, and what type of questions.

6. Design a lesson or unit of study based on exploring with your students issues of gender, self-image, and equality. In partnership with USA Today, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media offers eight lessons that explore media and bullying in the context of gender equality.

Disrupting Gender Inequities

Female physicians and surgeons earn 38 percent less than their male counterparts, and female lawyers earn 30 percent less than male lawyers, according to Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman. Education is a vital tool in helping close this wage gap. For teachers, continued monitoring of gender bias is necessary to minimize its impact on students’ opportunities for learning and for achievement.

We all need to work to become more aware of any gender-biased tendencies. We need strategies to help us reflect and change any biased practices, and we need to commit to combating gender bias in educational materials.
References

