

Negotiating the Classroom to Promote a more Gender Equitable Approach

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Equity is a major focus within our educational institutions and plays a major role in ensuring that all students receive an educational experience which is cognizant of their interests, backgrounds, and identities. While the concept of equity is well known, strategies are not always incorporated that ensure its consistent focus within our schools. According to Andrus, Jacobs, and Kuriloff (2018), “although the number of women who hold undergraduate degrees is nearly equal to that of men, they only make up 30% of the degree holders in STEM fields” (pg. 47). Additionally, “women working full time in the United States typically are paid just 80 percent of what men are paid, a gap of 20 percent” (Hill, 2017, pg. 4). Achieving gender equity will require changes to how our educational institutions and the curriculum behind them are developed. Negotiating more equitable classrooms requires educators to facilitate the teaching and learning of curriculum in meaningful ways, create learning environments which seek to diminish gender biases, and for administrators and higher educational institutions to develop programs and professional development which is geared toward promoting more gender equitable approaches.

The content and delivery included within our curriculums play a major role in either providing an equitable experience or failing to. If students are not able to see themselves within their learning, they are also less likely to pursue careers within that subject area. According to Baker, Tisak, and Tisak (2016), “children might inadvertently build expectations based upon which genders typically fulfill certain roles” (pg. 25). Due to this connection, meaningful delivery of the content is crucial in ensuring gender equity through interest in a subject area. According to a study from Brackett (2008) regarding a high school world history curriculum in California, students predominantly “examine the institutions run by men, but are often not given a chance to gain knowledge of the many women political leaders that have ruled throughout the world since prehistory” (pg. 6). Instead of focusing so heavily on male leaders throughout

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history, educators and curriculum developers need to take a more inclusive approach. Examples may include using individuals such as Mary Wollstonecraft when teaching about the Enlightenment, or Queen Elizabeth when providing “students with the perspective and knowledge of female world leaders” (Brackett, 2008, p. 7). For subjects within the STEM fields, female speakers and professionals should be included to ensure that appropriate role models are included to promote all students in taking interest in different fields of study. This is supported by Hand, Rice, and Greenlee (2017), when stating that “one obstacle for women seeking to join STEM fields is a lack of women role models in science” (pg. 932). This concept is further supported by Kafai (2007) when discussing how “girls who study science in classrooms with mainstream teaching practices probably cannot hear women’s voices in the curriculum and might find it difficult to identify with these fields” (pg. 235). Gender equity through the infusion of more female voices in these curricula can be further developed through the construction of learning environments which are cognizant of gender biases and proactive in influences related to the hidden curriculum.

The learning environment also plays a major role in ensuring gender equity within our schools. While biases in the content may be outwardly noticeable and adjustable by educators and curriculum developers, the hidden curriculum also plays a major role in influencing how students view society and themselves. This hidden curriculum consists of “assumptions and expectations that are not formally communicated, established, or conveyed within the learning environment” (Alsubaie, 2015, pg.1) According to a study by Stevens (2012), “schools reinforce stereotypical gender roles where girls are meant to be quiet and compliant, while boys more actively participate” (pg. 4). Gender stereotypes such as those presented within this study may result in female students receiving less specific academic attention and feedback, reinforced

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societal biases which promote male hegemony, and less self-confidence through the inability to demonstrate their intellectual abilities and leadership skills. This is supported by Wienclaw (2013) when discussing how the hidden curriculum impacts gender stratification by subtly reinforcing “behavior and attitudes that are deemed appropriate by the society or culture” (p. 3). Another example of promoting a more gender equitable learning environment comes from Wah Ng (2016) when stating that “challenging the traditional roles in which men, women, and trans individuals are expected to play in the workforce and at home in terms of their gender performance, through anti-bias literature and class discussions would be especially useful” (pg. 65). Ensuring that all students receive an equitable amount of attention within the learning environment will help to diminish biased societal norms.

According to Engebretson (2016), “attention to gender and gender equity in teacher education appears to be systemically lacking and most often appears when individual faculty members consciously devote time to addressing them” (pg. 28). Based on this conclusion, administrators and higher educational institutions need to ensure that gender itself is included within professional development opportunities and pre-service teacher education coursework. While many of these programs include a focus on diversity related to culture, backgrounds, and student interests, gender may not be consistently included within this focus. According to Kafai (2007), “current equity concerns also challenge the work done in professional development, which has to shift its own perspective on how to engage teachers and situate its work within school, community, and social issues” (pg. 236). For these programs to be successful, they need to engage teachers in a targeted manner which allows for open discussion and reflection on how equity can be promoted within their respective classrooms. Additionally, professional development in gender equity needs to be an ongoing process to ensure that educators are

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continuously supported, and that data is reflected upon to discuss further opportunities for growth. With this consistent and targeted approach to teacher education and professional develop, focus on the facilitation and teaching of curriculum in meaningful ways, and creation of more gender inclusive learning environments, educational institutions can help to promote gender equity across many different domains.

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