

Something Is Missing from Teacher Education: Attention To Two Genders

Assumptions about gender roles continue to limit children's aspirations and achievements. If we are to overcome those limitations, Ms. Sanders argues, gender equity must become a standard part of the curriculum of preservice teacher education.

BY JO SANDERS

E DUCATORS may have noticed the recent disputes between Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *The War Against Boys*, and such advocates of gender equity as David Sadker and Carol Gilligan about whether boys or girls are being more shortchanged in the classroom. If it achieves nothing else, the debate should remind us that we need to talk about the educational well-being of *both* sexes, not either one separately.

For example, here is a sampling of what's going on in our schools today that affects both girls and boys:

- There were more than nine boys for every girl who took the highest-level Advanced Placement test in computer science last year.¹
- Eighty-five percent of eighth- through 11th-grade girls report having been sexually harassed at school; for boys, the figure was 76%.²

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• All but one of the fatal school shootings reported in recent years were committed by boys — in fact, by white boys.³

• The average 11th-grade boy writes at the same level as the average eighth-grade girl, and boys read worse than girls at all grade levels. Moreover, these data have been unchanged for the past 30 years.⁴

In addition, there are still plenty of gross imbalances among adult men and women:

• Women make up 18% of the U.S. Senate and 13% of the U.S. House of Representatives.

• According to a recent study by *Catalyst*, women fill just 11% of the seats on the boards of Fortune 500 companies. Fourteen percent of the companies have no female board members at all.⁵

• More than 93% of inmates in our prisons and jails are men.⁶

• The life expectancy of men is 73 years, as opposed to 79 years for women.⁷

Where do these peculiar imbalances come from? Let me answer with a few more questions. Why is it considered masculine to be violent and aggressive? Why is it considered feminine to be nurturant and intuitive? Why are art, languages, and music considered feminine subjects in school, while math, science, and technology are considered masculine subjects? How many of our assumptions about gender are truly essential?

All these imbalances — dilemmas, problems, tragedies, limitations, injustices — have a developmental history that starts with notions of femininity and masculinity learned by everyone, beginning with the pink and blue receiving blankets still used in hospitals today. In other words, these assumptions concern *gender* (what we learn about the proper ways for the sexes to behave) not *sex* (what we're born with). So, for example, it is correct to speak of gender roles and of single-sex education. Moreover, it is increasingly apparent that our traditional gender roles have not served us all that well. While it is obvious that men and women and boys and girls have gender roles, properly understood, gender equity is a *human* issue, not a women's issue.

Given the reality evident in the facts I've cited above, we might assume that teacher educators would be preparing their preservice education students to teach equitably in their classrooms. Certainly, we would reason,

because awareness of gender issues has been on a front burner in society for three decades, gender equity must be a hot topic in the preparation of teachers. But if we made these assumptions, we would be wrong.

In response to several decades of societal concern about inequities facing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic

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ic groups, multicultural education has become a thriving component of teacher education nationwide. Gender equity, however, is in the earliest stages of consideration.

Several studies carried out in the 1990s confirm that gender equity is in its infancy in teacher education. In a Michigan survey of 30 administrators and 247 faculty members from 30 preservice teacher education programs statewide, Cynthia Mader found that, while faculty members thought that gender equity was important, only 11% of them reported extensive coverage, while 38% reported minimal to no coverage.⁸

Patricia Campbell and I conducted a nationwide survey of a randomly selected national sample of 353 methods instructors in mathematics, science, and technology. We found that, while three-fourths of the respondents said they considered gender equity important, most taught it less than two hours a semester. What's more, they focused almost exclusively on such problems as biased classroom interactions and spent very little time on exploring such solutions as gender-fair pedagogical techniques.⁹

Taking another angle, Karen Zittleman and David Sadker analyzed recent textbooks used in educational foundations courses and found that they did not include significant material on gender equity.¹⁰ And a recent survey of preservice students and faculty members found that faculty members thought that gender eq-

uity was important but taught it relatively little, while students said that, if they did learn about gender equity at all, they did so in their teacher education courses.¹¹ So if students don't learn about gender equity in teacher education, they probably won't learn about it at all.

The scarcity of attention paid to gender equity is particularly surprising in view of the opportunity provided by several reports on reform in teacher education issued recently by major organizations. The Association of American Universities passed a resolution on teacher education that did not address gender equity. The American Council on Education published *To Touch the Future: Transforming the Way Teachers Are Taught* and did not address gender equity. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities published its *Call for Teacher Education Reform* and passed up an opportunity to address the issue when it referred to "the challenges presented by the full range of ethnic, economic, and intellectual diversity." Indeed, the title of a new publication by Peggy Blackwell and her colleagues says it all: *Education Reform and Teacher Education: The Missing Discourse of Gender*.¹²

Leaving the issue of gender equity in teacher education up to committed individual faculty members is not an adequate professional response to the need to prepare students. Leaving students' learning about gender equity up to their assorted gleanings from television or the newspaper is even worse.

Just about the only help in this area has come from the Program for Gender Equity of the National Science Foundation (NSF), which has supported several projects dealing with gender equity in teacher education, including three of mine since 1993. Because gender equity involves far more than mathematics, science, and technology (NSF's key areas), I have urged the people I've worked with to take advantage of the opportunity to extend the reach of their projects to literacy, history, the arts, and other areas. And often they have done so.

Many valuable lessons for the profession have emerged from these projects, but all of them rest on a single fundamental decision. Colleges, schools, and departments of education must decide whether they believe that gender equity has a legitimate place in the curriculum of preservice teacher education. In other words, do they believe that preparing future teachers with an understanding of gender roles will result in better academic and social learning for girls and boys and better equip them for life in the 21st century? If so, then several points follow.

First, gender equity must be systemic. It doesn't work to rely on the efforts of a personally committed faculty member. If that person leaves the university, no knowledge is left behind. Even if the faculty member remains, unless the department is very small, only a fraction of the students will have the opportunity to learn about gender equity. Making gender equity a required course is also problematic. It achieves coverage, but there is so little available course time in most programs that it's usually out of the question. Moreover, when gender equity (or multicultural education for that matter) is delivered in the form of a required course it becomes balkanized — a sidebar for students to the "real" work of education — and leaves other faculty members ignorant of important gender equity dimensions in educational foundations, methods courses, and field experience.

Second, while teacher educators very much want to learn about gender equity so they can teach it to their students, they understandably aren't about to embark on time-consuming self-education on top of their other work. Teacher educators need a concise program of instruction and materials to jumpstart their new expertise, and a way must be found to give it to them. This is called "education," and it should not be beyond the capabilities of educational institutions to provide it.

And the third point is that for the first two conditions to be met, gender equity needs to be on the agenda of the teacher education profession. Professional associations need to issue position papers and commission reports on the topic. Professional meetings need to feature well-known speakers addressing the importance of gender equity in teacher education. Academic journals and presses need to solicit manuscripts and publish on the issue of gender equity in teacher education. Accrediting organizations need to make gender equity an explicit standard for review. The silence on the topic must not continue.

In my three projects, I've worked with teacher educators in 45 colleges and universities. They have received intensive high-quality instruction, voluminous amounts of background and teaching materials, and as much supportive follow-up as possible. Beyond enabling their students to encourage girls and boys to follow their talents without the arbitrary barriers of narrow gender roles and to treat one another with respect, many of the teacher educators I have worked with have in turn spread the word among their colleagues. All over the country, "my" teacher educators have joined others who have arrived at a teaching knowledge of

gender equity independently. But they are still far too few to make a substantial impact.

So find out for yourself. Survey your teacher education faculty members and students on the extent of their teaching and learning in the area of gender equity.¹³ You will probably find out that not much is happening. If so, welcome to the ranks of those who recognize that the world will surely demand more of women and men in the future than the last generation's gender roles permitted. After 30 years of research and programs, we know about the subtle influences in classrooms that limit children's aspirations and achievements, and we know how to eliminate them. Let's get to it.

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cation for Colleges and Universities (Seattle: Washington Research Institute, 2000). For more information, contact the author at jsanders@wri-edu.org or by phone at 206/285-9317. **K**

An Educator's Primer

(Continued from page 240)

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