Shortchanging Girls and Boys

Gender equity in education is more than putting girls on equal footing with boys—it's eliminating the barriers and stereotypes that limit the opportunities and choices of both sexes.

Recently gender equity in education has become a hot, or at least a "reasonably warm," topic in education. Higher education institutions across the country are under renewed pressure to provide equal athletic opportunities for female students. The U.S. Supreme Court is considering cases involving the admission of women to all-male, state-supported military institutions. And the continued under-representation of women in tenured faculty positions is prompting many donors to withhold contributions to Harvard University's fundraising campaign.

But it is at the elementary and secondary school levels that the shortchanging of girls has been most extensively documented (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women 1992, AAUP 1995, Orenstein 1994, Sullker and Sullker 1994, Thorne 1995, Stein et al. 1993). Twenty-four years after the passage of Title IX—which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any educational programs receiving federal funds—girls and boys are still not on equal footing in our nation's classrooms. Reviews of curricular materials, data on achievement and persistence in science, and research on teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction patterns all point to school experiences that create significant barriers to girls' education. These factors have fostered widespread discussion and action among parents, educators, and policymakers.

Barriers to Gender Equitable Education

As the principal author of the 1992 study, How Schools Shortchange Girls, I have followed the discussion with considerable interest and mounting concern. The central problem posed in the opening pages of this report continues to be ignored in our discussions of public K-12 education.

There are critical aspects of social development that our culture has traditionally assigned to women that are equally important for men. Schools must help girls and boys acquire both the relational and the competitive skills needed for full participation in the workforce, family, and community (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women 1992, p. 2).

Too much of the discussion and too many of the proposed remedies rely on simplistic formulations that obscure, rather than address, the complex realities confronting our society.

First among these are the assumptions that (1) gender equity is something "for girls only" and (2) if the situation improves for girls, boys will inevitably lose. These constructions are dangerously narrow and limit boys as well as girls. Gender equity is about enriching classrooms, widening opportunities, and expanding choices for all students.

The notion that helping girls means harming boys amounts to a defense of a status quo that we all know is serving too few of our students well. Surely it
is as important for boys to learn about the contributions of women to our nation as it is for girls to study this information. Surely adolescent pregnancy and parenting are issues for young men as well as young women. And surely boys as well as girls benefit from instructional techniques that encourage cooperation in learning.

A second set of assumptions concern the single-sex versus coed dichotomy. During discussions of gender equity, rarely does anyone stop to consider that coeducation, as the term is generally used, implies more than merely attending the same institution. It is usually assumed to mean a balanced experience as compared to an exclusive, one-sided, single-sex, all-female or all-male one. Thus the term itself undercuts our ability to achieve genuine coeducation by implying that it already exists.

We would do better to describe U.S. public elementary and secondary education as mixed-sex education rather than as coeducation. Girls and boys are mixed together in our schools, but they are not receiving the same quality or quantity of education—not are they genuinely learning from and about each other. Our task is to find ways to provide the gender-equitable education the term coeducation promises, but does not yet deliver.

Lessons from All-Girl Schools

It may indeed be easier in an all-girl setting to teach skills, career fields, and vocations generally considered feminine and to encourage girls in nontraditional pursuits. Pressures on students from peers, from popular culture, and even from many adults around them all define gender stereotypic behavior as normal, expected, and successful. Particularly for young adolescents, the clarity of these stereotypes can be reassuring; questioning them can be uncomfortable and risky. In a world where being labeled a "girl" is the classic insult for boys, single-sex environments for girls can provide a refuge from put-downs and stereotypes.

But these environments may also send messages that can perpetuate rather than eliminate negative gender stereotyping. Removing girls from classes in order to provide better learning opportunities for them can imply that girls and boys are so different that they must be taught in radically different ways. When all-girl classes are set up specifically in science or math, an underlying, if unintended, message can be that girls are less capable in these subjects. Separating boys from girls in order to better control boys' behavior can indicate that boys are "too wild" to control.

Rather than assuming that we must isolate girls in order to protect them from boys' boisterous, competitive behavior—or that boys will be unduly feminized in settings where girls are valued and comfortable—we must look carefully at why some students and teachers prefer single-sex settings for girls. We must understand the positive aspects of these classrooms in order to begin the difficult task of bringing these positive factors into mixed-sex classes.

In U.S. public schools, this is not only a matter of good sense, but it is a matter of law. Title IX permits single-sex instruction only in very specific situations. In doing so, we will be moving toward genuinely coeducational environments where the achievements, perspectives, and experiences of both girls and boys, women and men, are equally recognized and rewarded whether or not they fall into traditional categories.

How to Eliminate Barriers

As long as the measures and models of success presented to students follow traditional gender stereotypes and remain grounded in a hierarchy that says paid work is always and absolutely more important and rewarding than unpaid work, that the higher the pay the more valuable the work and the worker who does it, we will be unfairly limiting the development of, and the opportunities available to, all our students. Gender equitable education is about eliminating the barriers and stereotypes that limit the options of boys' and girls' sexes. To move in this direction, we need to take three major steps.

1. We must acknowledge the gendered nature of schooling. Schools are a part of society. Educators cannot single-handedly change the value structure we ourselves embody, but we can acknowledge and begin to question the ways in which gender influences our schooling. How Schools Shortchange Girls points out that the emotions and the power dynamics of sex, race, and social class are all present, but evaded, aspects of our classrooms. We can begin to change this by fostering classroom discussions that explicitly include these issues and that value expressions of feelings as well as recitations of facts.

2. We must take a careful look at our own practices. Years ago as a first-year teacher, I was proud of my sensitivity to the needs of my 6th graders. I carefully provided opportunities for
boys to take part in class discussions and lead group projects in order to channel their energies in positive ways. I was equally careful to ensure that two very shy, soft-spoken girls never had to be embarrassed by giving book reports in front of the class.

Only much later did I realize that rather than helping the boys learn cooperative skills, I may merely have reinforced their sense that boys act while girls observe, and that I may have protected the girls from exactly the experiences they needed in order to overcome their initial uncertainties. Further, in protecting the girls, I also deprived the boys of opportunities to learn that both girls and boys can take the risks and garner the rewards of speaking up in class and speaking out on issues.

One technique that teachers can use to gain a picture of their classes is to develop class projects in which students serve as data collectors. Having them keep a record of who is taking part in class can serve as a springboard for important discussions. These discussions can raise everyone’s awareness of classroom dynamics, dynamics sometimes so ingrained that they have become invisible.

3. We must learn from all-girl environments about teaching techniques and curricular perspectives that have particular appeal to girls and determine how to use these approaches successfully in mixed-sex classes. Working with teachers working in all-girl environments, I hear three frequent suggestions: (1) place less emphasis on competition and speed; and more emphasis on working together to ensure that everyone completes and understands the problem or project; (2) place more emphasis on curricular materials that feature girls and women; and (3) increase the focus on practical, real-life applications of mathematics and the sciences.

Three Practical Suggestions
Teachers can apply these three suggestions in mixed-sex settings. The first is the most difficult. What appears to happen naturally in all-girl settings—for example, girls’ working together in an environment where they feel empowered to set the pace—must be deliberately fostered in settings where a different style has been the norm. Girls and their teachers speak of all-girl classes as places where fewer students shout out answers and interrupt one another. Teachers indicate that they deliberately work to ensure that all girls take some active part in class activities. If teachers can directly address these factors in an all-girl setting, surely we can begin to address them in mixed-sex settings.

Further, teachers must experiment with instructions and with reward systems that will encourage students to value a thorough understanding of a task as well as a quick answer, and of group success as well as individual performance. In doing so, we will be encouraging strengths many girls have developed and helping boys acquire skills that they need.

The second suggestion is also not without difficulties when transported to mixed-sex settings. As television producers have discovered, girls may watch programs with male characters, but programs featuring girls are less likely to attract or hold boys’ interests. But schools are places where students come to learn. Boys and girls need to learn to appreciate and value the accomplishments of women and women’s groups who have succeeded in traditionally male fields: Shirley Chisholm, Indira Ghandi, Sally Ride, the Women’s Campaign Fund, as well as those whose success has been in traditionally female areas of employment and avocation: Jane Addams, Mary McLeod Bethune, the Visiting Nurses Association.

In In Natural Alliances, Women’s Associations in American History, Anne Firor Scott notes that “by the 1930s the landscape was covered with libraries, schools, colleges, kindergartens, museums, health clinics, houses of refuge, school lunch programs, parks, playgrounds, all of which owed their existence to one or several women’s societies” (1991, p.3). Our students—male and female—need to learn more of this work if they are to grow into adults who can carry on activities vital to our survival as a viable, humane society.
We must understand the positive aspects of single-sex settings for girls in order to begin the difficult task of bringing these positive factors into mixed-sex classes.

The third factor is perhaps the least problematic. Although girls may be most enthusiastic about pursuing science when they see it as relevant to daily life, boys will surely not be less interested when presented with more relevance! For teachers to develop new lesson plans and materials in the sciences, however, will require increased support from school administrators and school boards for professional development, new materials and equipment, and perhaps a reorganization of class time.

Operation Smart, an after-school informal science program for girls developed by Girls, Inc., is just one example of new relevant science programs. A unit on water pollution, for example, offers middle school and junior high school girls an opportunity to study the effects of pollution in their own communities and to gain an understanding of the value of scientific knowledge and procedures in improving living conditions (Palmer 1994).

Mixed-sex classes can easily adapt such projects, and many have. Last year my nieces, both middle school students in mixed-sex classes in Mystic, Connecticut, eagerly showed me their science projects. Sarah's, done with her close friend Caitlin, contained several different pieces of cloth, each of which had been put through a series of trials: burned, washed, stretched, and frozen. "We thought the synthetic pieces of cloth would be stronger, but they weren't! Now we know natural material is very tough."4

Aidan, a year older, collected samples of river water at points varying in distance from the mouth of the Mystic River where it joins the salt water of Fisher’s Island Sound. Expecting that the water would be less salty the farther away it was from the Sound, she was surprised to find that her graph was not a straight line: a very salty sample appeared at a point quite far up river. Trying to figure out what might account for this became the most interesting aspect of the project. For both Sarah and Aidan, science is about their own questions, not out of a book or in a laboratory and it is certainly not a boys-only activity!

Moving Beyond Stereotypes
As we move into a new century, we must leave behind our boys-only and girls-only assumptions and stereotypes. On any given measure of achievement or skill, we can find greater similarity between the average score of girls as a group and the average score of boys as a group than we can find when comparing among individual girls or among individual boys. We must no longer allow stereotypic assumptions to guide our expectations or obscure the reality that empathy, cooperation, and competition are all important skills—and are important for all our students.4

"Under Title IX, portions of elementary and secondary school classes dealing with human sexuality and instruction in sports that involve bodily contact may, but do not have to be, separated by sex. (Title IX Rules and Regulations of the Educational Amendments of 1972, section 86.34)

References

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