

# ED426409 1998-00-00 Gender Issues in the Language Arts Classroom. ERIC Digest.

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## Gender Issues in the Language Arts Classroom. ERIC Digest.

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A growing volume of literature suggests that gender issues underlie numerous classroom activities. For example, McAuliffe (1994) and Kamler (1993) found that the portrayal of characters in children's writing often reflects gender stereotypes. In addition, individual beliefs about the dominance or subordination of particular genders frequently determine whose ideas are heard or ignored in student discussions (Evans, 1996), and

unfacilitated group discussions may therefore reinforce gender stereotypes among students (Alvermann et al., 1996a). Thus, without some intervention, unstructured language-learning situations may actually encourage children to reproduce gender stereotypes (Purcell-Gates, 1993).

What is the role of the teacher in addressing such problems? The literature suggests that teachers have differing views of the position they should take in this matter. The different positions reflect individual beliefs about gender roles and about the role that teachers should play in children's lives. This Digest provides an overview of various perspectives on the teacher's role in addressing gender-related issues in the classroom.

## ISSUES RELATED TO THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Teachers differ in their perceptions of the foundations of human gender differences. Some teachers believe these differences are rooted in purely biological factors; others attribute gender differences to processes of socialization; and many believe they result from a combination of both the above factors. Opinions held on this pivotal issue usually determine the extent to which teachers believe they can and should attempt to impact gender roles in their classrooms.

Grossman and Grossman (1994) outline four positions among educators about the role they should play in the development of their students' gender roles:

- 1. Educators should prepare the genders to fulfill different roles because there are underlying physiological differences between the sexes.
- 2. Educators should prepare students for androgynous (gender-neutral) roles.
- 3. Educators should decide if they want to prepare students for different gender roles or not.
- 4. Educators should help students decide for themselves whether they wish to conform to any particular gender roles or prefer to be androgynous.

There is much controversy regarding these various standpoints. The first viewpoint is frequently criticized for its suggestion that students should be socialized to fulfill traditional gender roles, as this implies a limitation to individual freedom to make

choices. However, proponents of that viewpoint believe that individual choices are often governed by innate differences between the genders. Individuals promoting androgynous behavior, on the other hand, believe educators and schools should work towards making society less sexist by discouraging gender-stereotypical behavior among students. Detractors of this position state that some gendered behavior may be the result of personality features. They also question the legitimacy of actively promoting androgynous behavior when students come from backgrounds where this may not be supported.

The other two positions debate the extent to which teachers should play a role in shaping students' decisions about the gender roles the students to adopt. Some individuals believe teachers who are uncomfortable dealing with gender issues have the right to not address this issue in their classroom (Alvermann et al., 1996b). Others say teachers should address gender issues because students who are never encouraged to question assumptions behind gender portrayals may accept traditional gender roles as fait accompli (Mitchell, 1996). Some educators believe gender role socialization is chiefly a function of the home, and that schools should maintain a neutral stance. According to these individuals, schools should treat all children equally while empowering them to make their own gender role choices. Others believe schools should encourage both genders to adopt forms of behavior that reflect the values of the local school and community.

Among teachers who believe that gender inequalities should be actively dealt with, there is much debate about whether we should try to achieve gender equity or gender equality. Teachers promoting gender equality believe all students should receive the same opportunities to access classroom resources and participate in activities. Those who promote equity advocate extending unequal and greater levels of support to the group perceived to be "at risk" or "less advantaged," thereby enhancing this group's chances of finishing at the same level as the more socially privileged students (Streitmatter, 1994). Each of these positions is fraught with drawbacks. While many teachers feel uncomfortable about treating students unequally, they also feel uncomfortable treating unequal groups in the same manner for the sake of achieving equity. A number of individuals believe the cause of gender equity is best served through a combination of both approaches-by extending equal opportunities to all students, and being particularly sensitive to the special needs of groups perceived to be "at risk."

Regardless of their beliefs in the matter of equality versus equity, teachers' levels of comfort in actively dealing with gender issues in their classrooms greatly influence their decisions about what strategies they will be willing to use. In a recent survey of 1519 K-12 teachers' positions on gender issues in literacy education, Commeyras et al. (1997) found that 86% of the teachers reported feeling most comfortable (i) monitoring equal participation by males and females in discussions, and (ii) including in the curriculum men and women's works that are generally considered non-mainstream.

Most teachers did not feel comfortable having class discussions on the use of sexist language and the portrayal of males and females in a non-traditional school texts, or asking boys and girls to identify with characters of their own sex. It is possible that they perceived these options as potentially controversial, while the other scenarios did not seem as likely to lead to divisive discussions.

The study by Commeyras et al. (1997) reflects a situation of teachers agreeing, generally, on the need for implementing gender-fair strategies, yet feeling uncomfortable actively addressing gender issues in their classrooms. Even when teachers do address gender issues, they are often faced with the difficulty of assessing how much authority they should exert in determining the content and direction of students' talk during classroom discussions. This is because by intervening in certain gendered discursive practices, teachers may inadvertently reinforce them. At the same time, it is possible that by trying to be neutral in a discussion, teachers may constrain students from expressing their actual viewpoints (Alvermann et al., 1996b).

In general, educators find they need to maintain a balance between playing an active role in student discussions on gender issues by introducing alternative viewpoints to ingrained ways of thinking about gender (Alvermann et al., 1996b), and not becoming oppressive themselves through their active involvement in student discourse (Evans, 1996). While promoting sensitivity to gender-specific behaviors, teachers also need to realize that there are often more differences within each gender group than between them.

## CONCLUSION

As the issues explored above reveal, there are multiple positions on the role teachers can and should play in addressing gender issues. While they are all valid, the legitimacy of each philosophical position can also be questioned. Educators need to come to terms with these thorny issues and decide upon the philosophical position with which they are personally most comfortable. It is impossible to consistently implement gender-sensitive strategies in the classroom without congruency between beliefs and actions. It is also clear that educators will need to regularly reexamine their position in response to evolving understanding and heightened awareness of educator roles in shaping gender perceptions among learners. On the individual level, teachers need to reflect upon the strategies they have been using to address gender issues in their classrooms, and to explore the validity of other perspectives. At the school level, sensitivity to gender issues can be facilitated through discussions and collaborative action between teachers.

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