Gender Equity in The Curriculum

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Gender equity within curriculum should be a primary focus within our educational institutions to ensure equal access and representation for our students. There are still significant pay gaps between men and women doing the same job, political representation of women is far from equal, and "gender-based violence is a significant issue across the globe" (Esteves, 2018, pg. 5). While schools may find the prospect of changing these societal biases daunting, curriculum and instructional practices can have a significant impact on shifting focus in the right direction. According to Towery (2007), "research suggests that schools provide an excellent forum in which issues of gender inequity and the continued presence of institutionalized sexism and homophobia1 may be examined and challenged" (pg. 1). In order to be truly equitable in this approach, we need to look beyond the binary system of gender which perpetuates our society and deconstruct the concept of gender to better serve a diverse group of individuals. Gender equity can be achieved in this way through meaningful content connections, a conducive environment with respect to the hidden curriculum, and a shared school or district purpose for collective action.

Curriculum content can be structured in various ways, from more essentialist models to progressive models. For curriculum to be more gender equitable, students need to be able to see themselves within their learning. This meaningful integration requires a more student centered, progressive approach, which focuses on challenging societal norms and stereotypes. Esteves (2018) states that "within the progressive approach it is understood that sex or gender differences are a cultural phenomenon, a reflex of the dominant ideas of dominant culture" (pg. 894). Educational institutions provide a means to change social stereotypes and promote greater equality by taking actions such as using resources that equally represent women within STEM fields and leadership roles, providing opportunities for students to connect their personal selves

and outside experiences with the content, and be free of gender based misconceptions and assumptions of gender roles which promote biased views. Curriculum and instructional practices should include an array of texts and experiences which appeal to a variety of students of different gender identities, backgrounds, sexualities, and personal interests. This is supported by Watson (2011) when arguing how educational reforms should be based on opportunities for "representing the self, relating to others, and engaging with cultures" (pg. 791), instead of being based on essentialist understandings of boys and girls.

Along with the outwardly taught content based curriculum, the hidden curriculum also plays a major role in shaping societal norms. The hidden curriculum within schools can account for what types of programs girls are encouraged to participate in, what types of role models and career options are promoted, and in which subject areas girls receive less attention due to personal and societal biases. Geist and King (2008) discuss how to positively use the hidden curriculum by encouraging educators to avoid labeling and making "assumptions about gender roles and myths about learning mathematics" which "can sometimes lead to us treating boys and girls differently without even realizing it" (pg. 44). Additionally, educators can provide a more conducive learning environment for students of different gender identities by identifying biased gender binary policies, routines, and language, and work toward more gender neutral and equitable approaches to them. According to Goehring & Whittington (2017), children "quickly learn the stereotypes and roles expected of them in relation to culturally constructed gender norms" (pg. 51). Because of this quick learning of stereotypes and roles expected of them, promoting more gender equitable practices and delegitimizing biased societal norms within the school environment can assist in changing overall societal views by supporting more positive norms in respect to these students' identities and backgrounds.

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While individual teachers within a school or district may have a limited zone of influence when it comes to challenging biased societal norms and promoting more gender equitable mindsets, a shared school or district purpose for collective action can help to cohesively connect learning environments together in long lasting reforms. Educator preparation programs, school based policies, and district based initiatives all need to support the larger focus of gender based equity through curriculum and instructional practices. According to Rands (2009), "teacher education programs must prepare educators to teach gender in more complex ways that take into consideration the existence and needs of transgender people" (pg. 419). Additionally, curriculum support documents can include a more diverse array of equitable resources to model best practices in how to support students of different genders, gender identities, and personal backgrounds. Consistent and meaningful professional development for currently practicing educators may also be used but need to include specific connections and examples of how teachers can best incorporate these more equitable practices into their own subject area environments. According to Kappan (2015), more systemic professional develop opportunities may help to consistently focus on "supporting educators to challenge homophobic and transphobic attitudes and prepare them to intervene in anti-LGBTQ behaviors" (pg. 1). Input from relevant stakeholders is also necessary to ensure gender equitable access and inclusion. According to Johnson (2020), "educators and communities can use equity audits to examine their school's culture, trends, practices and policies" (pg. 1). These equity audits can include data from school climate surveys, disciplinary policies, interviews, observations, advanced placement rates, and student participate in school based leadership opportunities. By focusing on meaningful content connections, conducive environments with respect to the hidden curriculum, and a shared

school or district purpose for collective action, educational institutions can work toward making

positive changes to society as it related to gender equity.

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