The New Educator, 6:118–134, 2010
Copyright © The City College of New York
ISSN: 1549-9243 online

Confronting Gender Issues in a Novice Teacher's Classroom: Student and Parent/Teacher Educator Perspectives

JUDITH HAYMORE SANDHOLTZ
University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

SARAH HAYMORE SANDHOLTZ

This paper stems from a classroom discussion in which one author, a sixth-grade student in that classroom, contended that boys only read books about boys and proposed that the teacher change the situation by assigning books with both male and female main characters. The boys who responded emphatically denied the girl's claim, and the teacher later ended the discussion with a caution against stereotypes. In this paper, the authors describe their reactions to the incident and their decision to explore the students' claims by conducting a study based on the students' year-end reading records. Incorporating first-person reflections, they present the findings of their study, suggest alternate approaches for the teacher, and discuss implications for teacher education programs.

INTRODUCTION

As a sixth-grade student in a class comprised of a majority of boys and taught by a novice male teacher, Sarah took a stand that provoked a spirited reaction from her classmates. She contended that boys only read books about boys and proposed that teachers could change the situation by assigning books with both males and females as

Address correspondence to Judith Haymore Sandholtz, Associate Professor, Department of Education, University of California, Irvine, 3400 Education Building, Irvine, CA 92697-5500, USA. E-mail: judith.sandholtz@uci.edu

Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article as long as it is attributed to the author(s) and *The New Educator* journal, is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or *The New Educator*. *The New Educator* is published by the School of Education at The City College of New York.

main characters. The boys who responded emphatically denied her claim, and the teacher later ended the discussion with a caution against stereotypes. In contrast to behavior described in the research literature, these boys were in the unusual position of asserting that they do cross gender boundaries. In this paper, we describe our reactions to the incident and our decision to approach the teacher about conducting a small study. We wanted to explore the validity of Sarah's claim and the boys counterclaims by analyzing the independent reading choices of these students over the course of the school year. Throughout the paper, we incorporate first-person reflections to describe our contrasting perspectives as a student, parent, and teacher educator. We begin by describing the classroom event and drawing comparisons to situations described in the research literature on gender and reading practices. After explaining our methods, we discuss our findings and the students' reading patterns, suggest alternate instructional approaches the teacher might have implemented, and propose implications for teacher education programs.

CLASSROOM EVENT

> Parent/Teacher Educator: I was completely surprised by my daughter's emotions as she recounted the classroom discussion in her sixth-grade class that day. When working on her assignment the previous evening, she seemed confident about the issue she selected and her stated position. Now, she felt embarrassed and upset by her classmates' and teacher's reactions and wished she had selected a different topic—even if it was not personally meaningful to her. I was stunned by the transformation in her attitude.

As part of in-depth study of selected novels, Sarah's teacher (at that time in his second year of teaching) frequently asked students to draw comparisons between events in the books and situations in their lives. These short writing assignments served as a way for students to develop greater understanding of and feeling for the characters in the novels and the circumstances they faced. In addition, they required students to analyze their own views and provide the rationale for their positions. Rather than emphasizing right and wrong, the assignments appeared to focus on reasoning. This particular assignment asked students to identify "something that is just accepted by people that should be changed" and to respond to the following questions: (1) Describe what needs to be changed. How is it done now? (2) How would you change it? What would be the new way? (3) Why would your new way be better?

Randomly selecting students, the teacher read responses aloud and other students could choose to comment. When he read Sarah's assignment, a spirited discussion ensued. An avid reader, she had written that "most boys only read books about boys, while girls read books about both genders" and she referred to personal experiences in support of her claim. She pointed out that the two novel study books

assigned to date had boys as the main characters. She suggested that novels with a girl as the main character "are just as exciting as books about boys" and proposed that teachers could help change this situation by assigning novels in which a girl was the main character so that "girls and boys would read books about both genders."

> Student: Before reading sample responses to the class and conducting a class discussion, my teacher gave everyone a few minutes to share his or her "LitN'Life" assignment with other students around them. I exchanged papers with some of my friends, all of whom were girls, and received very enthusiastic and complimentary reactions to my work. They all agreed with me completely. I felt confident that my argument was solid, as I had spent a good chunk of the day before thoroughly thinking about the topic and carefully articulating my ideas, and I was proud of my work. In my view, I had selected a topic that was intriguing and actually relevant to my fellow classmates and me, which was the whole goal of that "LitN'Life" assignment. Even though I knew that the boys would not necessarily agree with my position, I did not expect what happened.

The whole group discussion, in the class of 18 boys and 14 girls, took a totally different turn from the small group. The boys who spoke emphatically denied Sarah's assertion, contending that they had read or were then reading books with girls as main characters. Only one or two girls contributed to the discussion, one clarifying that J. K. Rowling's editor had advised her to use initials rather than her first name when publishing the first book in the Harry Potter series. The editor's rationale was that books by male authors, at least in the fantasy genre, tended to sell better than those by female authors. The novice teacher said that the third novel to be studied in depth that year had already been selected and conceded that, as with the first two novels, it also had a boy as the main character. He told the class that he based his decisions about novel study books on connections to the social studies curriculum. He wrapped up the discussion by cautioning the class against stereotypes and assertions that pit boys against girls.

> Student: At the end of the class, I felt embarrassed about my assignment and discouraged from writing about gender topics. Since I had written about a topic that actually mattered to me and that I cared about, it was really hard to listen to my classmates and teacher attack my ideas. The message was clear: not only were my ideas wrong, but also I was wrong to write about them. It was as if I had put a little piece of me in my paper, so when my classmates ripped it apart, I felt like they were ripping me apart too.
>
> Parent/Teacher Educator: After listening to Sarah's emotional account, I experienced a mix of emotions myself. I was upset that

Sarah felt she was wrong to write about gender issues and discouraged that she had not spoken up and defended her position. I was disappointed that a potentially empowering experience had instead left her feeling dejected. I felt annoyed that the teacher had not handled the situation differently, and I initially thought about contacting him. When my child has a problem at school, my instinctive reaction as a parent is to try to remedy it, yet I know that parental intervention is not always the best solution. In fact, because I am an educator myself, I make a conscious effort not to act on my first reactions in school-related issues. Consequently, I opted not to do anything at that point.

Although I had limited contact with the teacher, I was confident from my interactions and observations that he genuinely cared about his students. I knew he would not intentionally take action that would embarrass Sarah or another student. As a parent and a teacher educator, I empathized with both my daughter and the beginning teacher, and I wished that they had reacted differently to the boys' comments. Initially, I was particularly concerned about Sarah's reaction. In the face of a few vocal boys, she had quickly retreated from the discussion, becoming a silent participant who neither explained nor defended her position. Her silence likely supported the underlying message that her assertion was wrong. I wished she had entered the debate and offered the counter-arguments that swirled in her mind. But as I thought more about it, I decided it was unrealistic to expect a sixth-grade girl to stand up for her views in a male-dominated classroom without the encouragement of her teacher.

As I reflected in the coming months about the classroom exchange, I thought about the boys' assertions and wondered exactly how many books with girls as main characters they were reading. I recalled that researchers have documented an emphasis on male characters and experiences in both textbooks and children's literature. Would not an imbalance between male and female characters in children's literature make it less likely for boys to read books with girls as main characters? Beyond the restricted pool of books with girls as main characters, the reaction of the boys who spoke seemed curious to me for another reason. These boys had asserted emphatically in a group discussion that they do cross gender boundaries in their reading choices.

GENDER AND READING PRACTICES

Research suggests that literacy is a gendered practice in a number of ways (Guzzetti et al., 2002). The pool of children's literature is dominated by books with males as main characters. Studies of award-winning books, such as the Caldecott Medal or Honor Books, covering different time periods consistently report an under-representation of female characters. For example, the percentage of female characters was 35% for award-winning books published from 1940–1971 (Czaplinski, 1972) and 39% for those published between 1972 and 1997 (Davis & McDaniel, 1999). The decade with the highest percentage of female characters, 51%, was the 1950s (Davis & McDaniel, 1999). During the publication period of 1976–1980, a time when the feminist movement had focused attention on the issue of equal treatment of males and females, the percentage of female characters was only 26% (Engel, 1981). In the 1990s, the percentage reached only 35% (Davis & McDaniel, 1999). In a study of books on the International Reading Association's Children's Choices list, Goss (1996) reported that only 36% of the main characters were females. A study of a stratified sample of non-award winning books published between 1963 and 1995 reported a similar trend, with females representing 40% of the characters (Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001). These studies repeatedly suggest that children's literature is largely focused on male characters and experiences.

The emphasis on male experience appears in textbooks and school reading selections as well. H. Grossman and S. Grossman (1994) report that only 5% of the content in history texts is focused on women's experiences and contributions. M. Sadker and D. Sadker (1994) conducted a content analysis of 15 mathematics, language arts, and history textbooks and reported an emphasis on males in both pictures and text. One world history text for sixth graders included only 11 female names, and not one of them was an American adult woman. "In the entire 631 pages of a textbook covering the history of the world, only seven pages related to women, either as famous individuals or as a general group" (M. Sadker & D. Sadker, 1994, p. 72). Applebee (1989), in a study of books taught in high school English courses, found that only two of the 27 titles listed as required reading in 30% or more of the public schools in the U.S. were authored by women. In children's basal readers, female characters appear infrequently in stories and pictures, and when they do appear, the girls are depicted as passive observers of the boys who actively achieve important feats (M. Sadker & D. Sadker, 1994; Shannon & Goodman, 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 1991). A similar pattern appears in the reading selections of teachers. In a study of picture books most frequently read by kindergarten teachers to their students, Narahara (1998) concluded that males appeared in central roles three times more than females and male images appeared in the books more than twice as often as females. Pipher (1994) points out that in schools students encounter "almost three times as many boy-centered stories as girl-centered stories" and read "six times as many biographies of males as of females" (p. 62).

The imbalance between male and female characters in children's literature and school readings creates a situation where boys rarely may be required to cross gender reading boundaries. In addition, the group socialization of individual readers may reinforce gender reading preferences. Researchers have observed boys, even as young as five years old, taunting other boys for reading what they designated a "girls' book" (Dutro, 2002). Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis (1998) reported that when asked about their favorite fictional female characters, some middle-school boys in the U.S. emphatically contended that they had never read, or would not read, a book with a female main character. Similarly, a study of middle school students in Canada found that "not one boy would admit to ever having read a girls' book" (Cherland, 1994, p. 148). The students explained that "girls' books" had both female and male characters whereas "boys' books" had mostly male characters. In a U.S. class of high school sophomores, many of the males reacted negatively to some of their required summer reading and "dismissed the mélange of short stories with mostly female characters as a 'chick book'" (Cleary & Whittemore, 1999, p. 86). In a study of a fifth-grade U.S. classroom, Dutro found that gender was "always an overt issue in the children's choices and discussions of popular series fiction" (p. 383). Students based their assumptions about boys and girls reading preferences, not only on stereotypes, but also on their observations of and interactions with each other. For example, all of the students witnessed a "book-choosing episode in which boys showed real anxiety at the prospect of reading a girls' book" (p. 383). Whereas boys sometimes told the researcher in private conversations that they would be happy to read a book about a girl, they would overtly reject books about girls in the classroom setting. When making choices about their reading, the girls in the class tended to cross gender boundaries more freely than the boys.

The typical situation in the literature is one in which boys shy away from engaging in or admitting to behavior that is considered feminine (Connell, 1995). Thus, the classroom discussion presented a curious situation. In contrast to the research, some of the boys in Sarah's class were in the unusual position of declaring in a public setting that they <u>do</u> cross gender boundaries.

> Parent/Teacher Educator: The more I thought about the classroom discussion and the contrasts to the research literature, the more convinced I became that Sarah should explore the validity of her claim and the boys' counterclaims. Perhaps the boys in her class did cross gender boundaries in reading choices at rates similar to the girls or perhaps some of them only claimed to do so when provoked by a classmate's contention. Either way, I thought it would be valuable for Sarah to think about collecting evidence as a means of supporting or disconfirming one's views. I proposed an idea: let us talk with the teacher about conducting a small study based on the students' actual reading records for the year.

METHOD

Located in an upper middle class suburban community, the elementary school opened nearly 35 years ago and serves a diverse student population. The school, one of 22 elementary schools in a district of 26,000 students, enrolls approximately 800 students in grades K-6. Approximately 45% of the students are Asian, 33% White, 8% Hispanic, 1% African American, 2% other, and 11% multiple or undeclared. Approximately 8% of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch, and the school receives Title 1 funding. Student performance on standardized achievement tests is typically above state and national norms, and all teachers at the school are fully credentialed.

For students who have been identified for the gifted and talented program, the district offers cluster groups in regular fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade classrooms at all elementary schools. Students also may apply to participate in an alternative gifted and talented program in which students are grouped in a separate class at one of six elementary schools. The alternative program is designed for high-ability students with a strong work ethic, and it includes an academically accelerated curriculum in all subjects throughout the day. Sarah's sixth-grade class consisted of students who had opted to participate in the alternative gifted and talented program. Sarah and most of the other students began the program in the fourth grade; a few entered in the fifth or the sixth grade. The group of 32 students included 18 boys and 14 girls, with approximately 60% Asian, 25% White, and 15% multiple.

As one part of the reading curriculum, the students participated in a computer-based program, Reading Counts, aimed at motivating and measuring student reading. After students completed a book on the school's list of titles, they took a 10-question computerized quiz to measure comprehension. The students received quiz results instantly, and if they failed to answer at least seven of the questions correctly, they could retake the quiz on a later date with a new set of questions. Although the program can track items such as words read, lexile levels, and grade-equivalent reading level of books, this teacher's guideline was the number of books read. His aim was to get students regularly reading books outside of class, and the quizzes served as a means of verifying that they were doing so.

Teachers in this program generally expected that students would complete more independent reading than in a typical class. Consequently, these students made more choices about what to read than many students. This particular teacher requested that, each trimester, students read a minimum of seven books at the sixth-grade level or higher. If students wanted to read a book not included in the program, they could get approval from the teacher and then, instead of a quiz, discuss the book with him. However, given the number of different titles in the computer-based program, students typically selected and read books included in the list. By the time school ended in June, the program could generate a list of books read by each student over the course of the year.

> Student: I liked my mom's idea of actually researching the topic and finding out who was right: me or the boys in my class. But that meant talking to the teacher about it. I thought the meeting would be awkward and uncomfortable, and I was nervous about bringing up the topic again. The discussion in class was enough for me.
>
> Parent/Teacher Educator: Sarah managed to summon up her courage, and we arranged a meeting with the teacher. He recognized that the classroom discussion had been disconcerting for Sarah, and I sensed that he could relate to my concern about her reaction. He readily supported our proposal to conduct a small study. We agreed that the reading lists he provided would be grouped by gender and would not include any identifying student information. Moreover, we also agreed to arrange a follow-up meeting in the fall to share our findings.
>
> Student: The meeting was not as bad as I had imagined it would be. I had thought it would be awkward to readdress the issue and that the meeting might turn into a repeat of the class discussion on a smaller scale. Luckily for me, we focused on how we would respond to the class discussion: by conducting research. We talked about the Reading Counts program and how we could use the class data for our study. I was glad that my teacher agreed to let us do the research because I was excited to actually see how the statistics would line up with my assertion. In addition, I will have to admit, I relished the idea of proving him wrong (about implying that I was wrong), and I felt confident that I would.

From the reading lists, we compiled a database that included a list of all of the titles read by at least one student during the year. Using published summaries of the books and information about authors, we coded each title on two dimensions: author's gender and main character's gender. We ended up with four categories for main character: male, female, combination and other. The combination category included those titles in which there is not a clear cut main character but rather a pair or group of main characters that includes both males and females. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* is an example of a book coded male, *The Blue Sword* a book coded female and *Alan and Naomi* a book coded combination. We used the category "other" for those few titles that did not fit the three primary categories. For example, *Life in the Deserts* is a non-fiction book about plants and *Favorite Greek Myths* is a collection of short works. Going through the individual lists, we then recorded the number of boys and girls in the class who had read each title. Using the database, we examined the gender of main characters and authors for the total pool of books. We next looked for patterns

of book selection for three groups: the entire class, the male students, and the female students. Finally, we compared individual student choices with the group patterns.

Our study focused primarily on analyzing the reading records. However, to describe the incident and the students' and teacher's actions, we drew upon Sarah's recollection of classroom events and our two meetings with the teacher, one in the spring and one the subsequent fall. In the following sections, we present our findings, suggest alternative approaches for the novice teacher, and discuss implications for teacher education programs.

RESULTS

> Parent/Teacher Educator: In most differences of opinion, there are areas of truth on both sides of the argument. In this case, Sarah was right that the boys read primarily books with males as main characters; though I do not know the identities of individual students, I assume the boys who spoke were correct about their own reading. That is, they had read one or more books with females as main characters. But our findings revealed that a third of the boys did not read any books with females as main characters, and no one in the class had read a majority of books with females in the lead roles.

As a group, the 32 students read 605 books, which included 186 different titles with a fairly even distribution of male and female authors. Fifty eight percent of the titles had males as main characters, 27% had females, and 10% had a combination of males and females. Six books were categorized as other. The overall pattern of reading choices was striking: both male and female students read a majority of books with males, or a combination of males and females, as main characters. Seventy eight percent of the books read by the total group had males as main characters, alone or in combination with females. Only 19% of the books read by the total group had females as main characters.

This pattern became more pronounced in the group of boys. The 18 boys read a total of 355 books. Eighty five percent of the books featured males, alone or combined with females; only 12% had female main characters. As a group, the 14 girls read 250 books over the year. The percentages vary from the boy readers, but the pattern is the same: the majority of books read by the girls (69%) had males as main characters, either alone or in combination with females. Less than one third of the books read by the girls (30%) featured females as the only main characters.

The reading choices of individual students further illustrate the predominant patterns. Half of the18 boys read either no books or one book with female main characters. Four boys read either 5 or 6 books, but that constituted only 15% to 27% of their total books read over the year. One might expect that at least some girls read

primarily books about females, but that was not the case. None of the girls read a majority of books with females in lead roles.

The girls clearly crossed gender boundaries more than the boys. Whereas 50% of the books read by the girls featured males as main characters, only 12% of the books read by the boys featured females. Every girl read multiple books with male main characters, but a third of the boys did not read any books with female main characters. Moreover, for the individual boys who did select books with female main characters, these selections constituted a small fraction of the total books they read. In contrast, every girl read mainly books with male characters, alone or in combination with females.

As gifted and talented students, the students in this class read considerably more books in a year than most sixth-grade students. One might predict that increased exposure to books and an increased number of reading choices over a year would prompt students to cross gender boundaries more frequently. Students who are reading numerous books a year may be more inclined to explore different types of books and venture beyond their favored genres or authors. To some extent, this was the case. The two boys who completed over 30 books had read 5 or 6 books with females as main characters, and the one boy who completed fewer than 10 books had not read any books with females as main characters. But the boys who completed between 18 and 22 books had read anywhere from 0 to 6 books with females as main characters. Despite the increased number of reading choices made by students in this sixth-grade class, the prevailing pattern follows gender boundaries: all of the boys read a vast majority of books with males, rather than females, as main characters.

> Student: I was not surprised at all that the findings generally supported my assertion. Looking at the data, I realize that I should have qualified my statement in the "LitN'Life" assignment and said that most boys read few books about girls, rather than "most boys only read books about boys." The qualified statement would have been more correct because more than half of the boys had read at least one book with a female main character.

REFLECTIONS ON ALTERNATE INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES

> Student: Even though time has passed, I still think that my teacher mishandled the situation. Instead of discouraging us from discussing controversial issues, he should have encouraged us to do so. People should not avoid discussing certain topics simply because they disagree about them. My teacher also could have moderated the discussion better and prevented it from becoming too one-sided. Most

> importantly, students should not feel discouraged about contributing to class discussions. My teacher could have made a positive statement about the topic: maybe that it was interesting or worthwhile to discuss. A bit of positive reinforcement about choosing that topic probably would have made me feel less embarrassed and regretful.
>
> Parent/Teacher Educator: When Sarah and I discussed the findings, we also talked about ways that she and her teacher might have reacted differently. As a parent, I thought that a different response by the teacher could have helped Sarah feel more comfortable about explaining her position and spared her embarrassment. As a teacher educator, I knew that teachers could make an important difference in how students respond to gender stereotypes. I suspected that the teacher wanted to reduce gender stereotypes and boundaries, but his actions appeared to have reinforced them instead. Sarah and I talked about our ideas for alternate instructional approaches that the teacher could have used during the class discussion, in selecting novels, and in responding to her assignment.

Researchers propose that teachers make an important difference in how students respond to gender stereotypes. Dutro (2002) suggests that students need "safe spaces in which to experience, play with and begin to challenge the naturalized assumptions about gender that construct and reinforce boundaries in reading" (p. 384). The novice teacher might have considered alternate instructional approaches in three areas: the class discussion, the selection of novels for the curriculum, and his in-class response to Sarah's observation.

Class discussion. According to Sarah and the teacher account of the class discussion, the boys dominated the exchange and positioned themselves in ways that subdued the girls. As the boys became more vocal and emphatic, the girls in the class became quiet, withdrawing from the discussion. This pattern of classroom interaction is not unusual. M. Sadker and D. Sadker (1994) report that male students dominate classroom conversation, with a prevailing pattern of "boys in action" contrasted with "girls' inaction." In fast-paced discussions, "boys call out eight times more often than girls" (p. 43). Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis (1998) observed in classrooms at all levels that "male students captured conversations from the first moment, and females sat patiently awaiting their turn—only to be interrupted and overtaken by males as soon as they spoke" (p.68). Wing (1997) found that ten- and eleven-year-old boys in a British classroom attempted to control discussions in both overt and subtle ways, such as blurting responses or muttering when girls spoke. Researchers report that these male-dominated patterns occur in whole class discussions led by experienced teachers (Guzzetti, 2001), in students' peer-led discussions (Alvermann, 1995), and in small literature-response groups (Evans et al., 1998). Studies on classroom interactions reviewed by the American Association of University Women (1999)

reveal some progress towards equitable participation amid a persistent pattern of male domination in some subject areas.

By calling only on those who volunteered to speak, the novice teacher likely thought he was protecting those who did not feel comfortable participating. But such protective attitudes and approaches often backfire (AAUW, 1999). In this case, he may have unwittingly silenced the girls by letting a few vocal boys prevail. Sarah saw no reason to take part; for her, it appeared less risky to remain quiet and keep her views private. As an alternate approach, the teacher might have carefully moderated the discussion, making sure that fairly equal numbers of boys and girls participated. He might have probed the extent to which other girls shared the perspective presented in Sarah's assignment. He might have asked the boys who were not volunteering if they had read books with girls as main characters. He might have briefly prompted both boys and girls to share titles of books with girls as main characters that they particularly enjoyed. This type of approach would have validated the significance of Sarah's suggestion and countered the tendency for the boys to dominate the discussion.

Selection of novels for the curriculum. As Sarah suggested in her writing assignment, teachers can encourage students to read books about both genders by designing curriculum that includes novels in which girls are main characters. Whaley and Dodge (1999) propose that all students, boys and girls, gain when female-authored texts are included in the curriculum. Yet teachers, when selecting books for novel study, often give preference to books with males as main characters (Cherland, 1994). In this case, the teacher acknowledged during the class discussion, and again in our meeting, that all of the books he had selected for in-depth novel study had boys as main characters. He justified his choices by pointing out that he wanted novels that connected with the social studies curriculum. Sarah interpreted his comments, indicating that he had not considered gender in his selections, as suggesting that gender is not an important consideration. Selecting novels that link with the social studies curriculum does not preclude the possibility of including some novels with girls as main characters. An alternate approach would have been for the teacher to acknowledge the importance for all students to read books about females and to change his choice of novel for the third trimester. This action would have demonstrated a commitment to gender issues and a willingness to consider students' suggestions. It would have shown the students that teachers can change their decisions based on additional information and alternate perspectives. Moreover, it would have offered a potent example of a male in a position of power accepting the recommendation of a girl in a subordinate role.

The teacher also might have used Sarah's observation as an opportunity to examine and discuss gender representation in the social science curriculum. Either that day or in the near future, he might have engaged the class in a discussion about females in history and where they do and do not appear in the sixth-grade social studies curriculum. He might have considered developing a social science classroom project, similar to the one described by Orenstein (1994), that incorporates

biographies about both males and females. These approaches would have suggested that gender concerns are a valid topic of discussion and acknowledged the need for a more balanced representation of males and females in the literature studied by the class.

In-class response to her observation. Sarah took a risk in her assignment by focusing on gender differences, by writing about her teacher's curricular choices and by proposing that the teacher change his novel selections. By the end of the classroom discussion, she felt that she was wrong to express these views. Although the teacher pointed out that her response to the assignment had provoked an interesting and lively discussion in the class, he later concluded the discussion with a caution against assertions that pit boys against girls. Sarah continued to believe that her observations were valid, but she wished she had kept them to herself. Instead of issuing a warning, the teacher might have proposed that the class examine evidence to investigate the students' reading choices. This approach would have affirmed the importance of exploring, rather than avoiding, gender issues and would have based conclusions on data rather than students' verbal dominance. Combined with a discussion that included equal participation by boys and girls, this approach would have supported Sarah's willingness to take a risk in her assignment. Moreover, examining the students' actual reading choices would have revealed that the predominant pattern was indeed what she had suggested.

> Student: I was excited to show my teacher our findings. When we met with him in the fall, he seemed interested in what we had to say. He appreciated being informed of the results, and I had the impression that he would take gender into greater consideration when selecting books for novel study in his future classes. I was satisfied with his reaction and left the meeting pleased that our study was done and that it had made an impact on my teacher.
>
> Parent/Teacher Educator: The teacher was gracious and receptive as we relayed our findings. He appeared genuinely interested in hearing what we had to say and seemed open to the possibility of including more books with females as main characters in the curriculum. He again pointed out that he selected the novels based on connections to the social studies curriculum, acknowledging that he had not thought about the gender implications. As we left the meeting, I was struck by the irony of the situation. The assignment asked students to propose situations that needed to be changed, but the classroom discussion and the teacher's responses served to maintain the status quo. The boys dominated the discussion that day while girls refrained from participating. The novel study books for the year continued to have males, rather than females, as main characters. The boys' independent reading choices likely continued to be centered on books

with males as main characters. Rather than promote change, the teacher unintentionally may have inhibited it. I wished he had taken alternate approaches during the classroom discussion earlier that year, but I did not feel that I could fault him. As a teacher educator, I wondered if he, a second-year teacher, had the preparation or the experience to handle the situation differently.

IMPLICATIONS

Teachers play a critical role in promoting equitable learning; yet researchers propose that they do not enter the profession prepared to teach in an equitable manner. Findings from national surveys in the U.S. suggest that prospective teachers receive little or no training in equity in their teacher preparation programs, perhaps due to competing requirements in the limited time allocated to preservice programs (AAUW, 1999; Campbell & Sanders, 1997). Consequently, they begin teaching often unaware of how their behavior and the educational materials they use may hinder equitable learning in their classrooms (Campbell & Sanders, 1997). Lundeberg (1997) found that although prospective teachers generally recognize blatant types of inequity including sexual harassment or disparities in athletic funds, they often disregard subtle forms such as classroom interaction patterns or noninclusive language. In addition, a common misconception of preservice teachers is that only students, not teachers, are responsible for bias in classroom interactions (Lundeburg, 1997). Novice teachers enter the profession unprepared to make changes in four key areas: school curriculum, interaction patterns, pedagogical strategies, and use of resources (AAUW, 1999).

Sarah's teacher appeared to fit these patterns. A second-year teacher, he seemed unaware of gender issues in curricular decisions, classroom interaction, and instructional methods. He had not considered gender in the selection of novels at the beginning of the year and opted not to change his choice for the last trimester. He seemed uncertain about how to prevent or change the unequal participation of the boys and girls in the discussion. Sensing potential implications of the interactions, he warned the class against making assertions that pit boys against girls, an approach that placed the primary responsibility on the students. As with other beginning teachers, he no doubt had good intentions and a desire to be fair to both male and female students. But he likely had little or no preparation in identifying and addressing subtle forms of inequity. Equitable teaching is not an instinctive element of good teaching. The practice must be learned, and it must be considered more than an implicit feature of effective teacher preparation programs (AAUW, 1999). Campbell and Sanders (1997) argue that much of the responsibility for promoting equitable teaching falls squarely on teacher educators who continually graduate new classroom teachers who simply "do not know any better" (p. 75).

In order to prepare novice teachers to recognize gender issues and promote equitable teaching, researchers highlight four key areas of teacher education programs. First, teacher educators themselves must be committed to teaching their students about gender issues. If the issues are addressed only by one or two personally committed faculty members, only a portion of preservice teachers, particularly in large programs, will learn about gender equity (Sanders, 2002). In addition, if only a few teacher educators address gender issues, preservice teachers receive mixed messages about its importance. Second, the curriculum in teacher education programs and the accompanying instructional materials need to incorporate gender issues. Although making gender equity a required course may seem like a viable approach, Sanders (2002) argues that it is problematic for three reasons: (a) few programs have available space; (b) a separate course may leave important gender dimensions out of educational foundations, methods courses, and field experience; (c) the separation may suggest gender equity is a "sidebar for students to the 'real' work of education" (p. 243). The content of textbooks and instructional materials throughout teacher education courses is critical because of its potential to reduce or, through omission and stereotyping, reinforce biased attitudes and behaviors (Sadker et al., 2007; Zittleman & Sadker, 2002). Third, teacher educators can engage preservice teachers in activities that prompt them to recognize common forms of bias and stereotyping and learn strategies for equitable teaching. For example, teacher educators can engage preservice teachers in evaluating textbooks and other materials for stereotyping, imbalance, or underrepresentation or omission of certain groups. Analysis of video records of teaching, particularly of one's own teaching, offers opportunities to examine specific actions and interactions rather than vague or incomplete recollections of what happened. In addition, video excerpts can prompt productive discussions stemming from actual classroom events. Action research projects provide another method for analyzing and detecting inequities in classroom interactions (Lundeberg, 1997). Fourth, teacher educators can promote gender equity by modeling behaviors and instructional strategies in their own teaching. Through example, teacher educators acknowledge and demonstrate their commitment to equitable teaching.

> Student: Looking back at the whole process (discussion, meetings, and research), I think it was a unique educational experience, especially for a sixth-grade student. Although I did not realize it at the time, I was lucky to have the opportunity to take an active role in researching a topic relevant to my own classroom. I wish that I had found the courage to defend myself better during the class discussion, and I also wish that the other girls from my small group had backed me up.
>
> After meeting with my teacher both before and after our study, I had the impression that he would be more aware of gender issues and

perhaps would make some changes in his teaching and book selections. However, from talking with some of his later students, I learned that the teacher was using the same novel study books. Finding out that he did not make any changes in the novels made me think that my teacher did not care as much as I had thought. I understand that he may not have been prepared to handle the situation differently at the time, but I am disappointed that, even though he had plenty of time to do so, he did not make changes. But, fortunately, I discovered that the novels and short stories assigned in my later English classes had a better balance between male and female main characters.

REFERENCES

Alvermann, D. (1995). Peer-led discussions: Whose interests are served? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *39*(4), 282–289.

American Association of University Women (1999). *Gender gaps: Where our schools still fail our children*. New York: Marlowe & Co.

Applebee, A. (1989). A study of book-length works taught in high school English courses. ERIC Document Reproduction Service no. ED309453. Retrieved from the ERIC database.

Baker, L. (1990). *Life in the deserts.* London: Franklin Watts.

Benjamin, B., & Irwin-DeVitis, L. (1998). Censoring girls' choices: Continued gender bias in English language arts classrooms. *English Journal*, *87*(2), 64–71.

Campbell, P. B., & Sanders, J. (1997). Uninformed but interested: Findings of a national survey on gender equity in preservice teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *48*(1), 69–75.

Cherland, M. R. (1994). *Private practices: Girls reading fiction and constructing identity.* London: Taylor & Francis.

Cleary, B. A., & Whittemore, M. C. (1999). Gender study enriches students' lives. *English Journal*, *88*(3), 86–90.

Connell, R. (1995). *Masculinities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Czaplinski, S. M. (1972). *Sexism in award winning picture books*. Pittsburgh, PA: Know.

Davis, A., & McDaniel, T. (1999). You've come a long way, baby – or have you? Research evaluating gender portrayal in recent Caldecott-winning books. *The Reading Teacher*, *52*(5), 532–536.

Dutro, E. (2002). "But that's a girls' book!" Exploring gender boundaries in children's reading practices. *The Reading Teacher*, *55*(4), 376–384.

Engel, R. E. (1981). Is unequal treatment of females diminishing in children's picture books? *The Reading Teacher*, *34*(6), 647–652.

Evans, K., Alvermann, D., & Anders, P. (1998). Literature discussion groups: An examination of gender roles, *Reading Research and Instruction*, *37*(2), 107–122.

Goss, G. (1996). *Weaving girls into the curriculum.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Chicago, IL. ERIC Document Reproduction Service no. ED394931. Retrieved from the ERIC database.

Grossman, H., & Grossman, S. (1994). *Gender issues in education.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Guzzetti, B. (2001). Texts and talk: The role of gender in learning physics. In E. B. Moje & D. O'Brien (Eds.), *Constructions of literacy: Studies of teaching and learning literacy in secondary classrooms* (pp. 125–146). New Jersey: Erlbaum.

Guzzetti, B., Young, J., Gritsavage, M., Fyfe, L., & Hardenbrook,M. (2002). *Reading, writing, and talking gender in literacy learning.* Delaware: International Reading Association.

Levoy, M. (1977). *Alan and Naomi.* New York: HarperCollins.

Lundeberg, M. A. (1997). You guys are overreacting: Teaching prospective teachers about subtle gender bias. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *48*(1), 55–61.

McKinley, R. (1982). *The blue sword.* New York: Greenwillow.

Narahara, M. (1998). Gender bias in children's picture books: A look at teachers' choice of literature. ERIC Document Reproduction Service no. ED419247. Retrieved from the ERIC database.

Orenstein, P. (1994). *Schoolgirls: Young women, self esteem, and the confidence gap.* New York: Doubleday.

Osborne, M. P. (1988). *Favorite Greek myths.* New York: Scholastic.

Pipher, M. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls.* New York: Ballentine Books.

Poarch, R., & Monk-Turner, E. (2001). Gender roles in children's literature: A review of non-award winning "easy-to-read" books. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *16*(1), 70–76.

Rowling, J. K. (1999). *Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets.* New York: Arthur A. Levine Books.

Sadker, D., Zittleman, K., Earley, P., McCormick, T., Strawn, C., & Preston, J. (2007). The treatment of gender equity in teacher education. In S. Klein (Ed.), *The handbook for achieving gender equity through education* (2nd ed) (pp. 131–150). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (1994). *Failing at fairness: How America's schools cheat girls.* New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.

Sanders, J. (2002). Something is missing from teacher education: Attention to two genders. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *84*(3), 241–244.

Shannon, P., & Goodman, K. (1994). *Basal readers: A second look*. New York: Owen.

Sleeter, C., & Grant, C. (1991). Race, class, gender, and disability in current textbooks. In M. Apple, & L. Christian-Smith (Eds.), *The politics of the textbook* (pp. 78–101). New York: Routledge.

Whaley, L., & Dodge, L. (1999). *Weaving in the women*. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook.

Wing, A. (1997). How can children be taught to read differently? *Bill's New Frock and the "hidden curriculum," Gender and Education*, *9*(4), 491–504.

Zittleman, K., & Sadker, D. (2002). Gender bias in teacher education texts: New (and old) lessons. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *53*(2), 168–80.