Exploring “The Hidden Curriculum”
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Abstract

The challenges, problems, and ramifications of gender stereotyping, and its significance in the classroom, are examined in this work. The problems associated, along with potential societal causes, are addressed and discussed. The effects that gender stereotyping have on its victims, as well as its perpetrators, are also discussed. Finally, some creative methods of addressing the problem are illustrated, in an effort to engender thoughtful introspection and meaningful change in attitudes and policies.

Overcoming Gender Stereotypes in Education

As the next question is asked, Emily's hand is up before everyone else's. And, as is often the case, Emily blurts out the answer before anyone else can respond. The boys in the room are incensed, visibly perturbed at the young woman's insolence. "Who does she think she is, just shouting out the answer without even being called on?" asks Eric to no one in particular. "Yeah, she never waits her turn," interjects Jim. "She thinks she's so smart, she doesn't have to wait!" adds Todd. Coming from these young men, the three most boisterous members of the class, their critiques resound with hypocritical irony. Waiting one's turn has never been a concept any of them have understood very well, and their dominance of classroom discussions has gone virtually unchallenged, at least until now. Many of the girls seem equally disturbed at Emily's exuberance, frowning, shaking their heads back and forth, and whispering amongst each other. Even less imposing than the milder-mannered boys in the class, they wouldn't dream of blurtling out an answer, even if they were certain of its correctness.

But, besides being an excellent student, Emily is the only child of Margaret Wilson, a divorce-ravaged high school dropout who fought her way out of poverty, overcame sexual stereotyping, and is simultaneously working on her M.B.A. and being groomed by her company for the executive fast track. Emily, like her mother, is an anomaly who tends to intimidate males and alienate females with her presence, yet steadfastly refuses to succumb to the stereotypical roles that society has allotted to women, many of which begin in the classroom. Researcher and author Peggy Orenstein (1994) refers to this phenomenon as the "hidden curriculum" (p. 5), and "the running subtext through which teachers communicate behavioral norms and individual status in the school culture, the process of socialization that cues children into their place in the hierarchy of larger society" (p. 5). She points out that via the "hidden curriculum," "schools help reinforce gender roles, whether they intend to or not" (p. 5). For the group learning strategy the class is about to embark upon, this undercurrent of hostility and divisiveness will be a real deterrent to meaningful learning, and therefore, must be dealt with now, through the acquisition of knowledge, experience, and understanding, key tools in the building of individual tolerance of diversity. As the teacher, it is my job to insure that these gender stereotypes are addressed and that the tools for better understanding, tolerance, and positive change are adequately provided.
Problems of Gender Stereotyping

Gender stereotyping in the classroom encourages erratic, insensitive behavior, and, at the same time, it discourages thoughtful inclusion. Boys, if their assertiveness is tolerated, will often try to dominate classroom interaction, even at the cost of becoming a real distraction from legitimate learning. Now, this is not to say that all males in a classroom would strive to disrupt the curriculum, but even a few can still be a real hindrance to learning. Girls, in most cases, tend to be more subdued, raising their hands to be called upon, and following a stricter code of classroom etiquette. These modes of classroom interaction seem to be ingrained in us from an early age, in most cases conceived and reinforced through our individual home socialization. And while parents and teachers only wish the best for their children and students, the parents' and teachers' adherence to society's norms and customs tends to effectively separate expectations along gender lines, serving to empower males and simultaneously disenfranchise females.

In the classroom, everyone needs to enjoy an equal forum, but oftentimes this does not happen. Other researchers, Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2000), point out these stereotypical inferences by society, indicating that "sex role stereotypes include the belief that boys and men are aggressive, independent, strong, logical, direct, adventurous, self-confident, ambitious, and not particularly emotional" (p. 230). However, society portrays women in conversely negative connotations, calling them: "passive, weak, illogical, indirect, gentle, and very emotional" (p. 230). Hence, the personality illustrated by the fictitious Emily in the introduction would serve as a threat to the perceived notions of the status quo. Essayist Marilyn Schiel (1999) writes of the gender inequities she encountered in 1950s America and the perceptions of gender etiquette pervasive in that era. Her desire was to enjoy the same freedoms afforded her brother, including the right to dress in a manner consistent with her personality. She says: "I wanted to wear blue jeans. But little girls in my 1950 world didn't wear blue jeans. Big girls didn't wear them either" (p. 46). Referring to her mother's strict adherence to society's norms, she alludes, "By the 1960's June Cleaver may have been an anachronism, but in the early 1950's she lived at my house" (p. 46).

Today, it would seem the anachronism is still alive and well. Orenstein (1994) reports on a young girl, Lindsay, whose behavior is closely scrutinized by her parents, who reprimand her for merely cheering when a soccer teammate scores a goal; while at the same time, they barely notice her brother's loud, obnoxious banter, taking for granted that that is just his nature, while Lindsay is expected to act like a young lady at all times (pp. 46-47). It seems that these roles are equally pervasive in the classroom, and their effects have damaging consequences. In another excerpt, Orenstein (1994) illustrates the gender stereotyping of a math teacher and the effects it has on a young girl, Dawn, who dares to be impetuous in her classroom participation. Her teacher, Mrs. Richter, assigns her a citizenship assessment of "disruptive" (p. 16). At the same time, she awards Dawn's classmate, Nate, with the "disruptive" label, but makes excuses for his frequent outbursts and obnoxiously disruptive behavior, even rewarding him with "an indulgent smile," (p. 16) because, as the author concludes, "There is a tacit acceptance of a disruptive boy, because boys are disruptive" (p. 16). Orenstein laments, "by adolescence, girls have learned to get along, while boys have learned to get ahead" (p. 36).

While it is not clear why rational, responsible, caring teachers seemingly absentmindedly fail to recognize their own biases in gender stereotyping, much less understand them, there are not legitimate excuses for their existence or for this pedagogical ineptitude. Perhaps, to some degree, we are victims of the parameters society gives us to succeed within. But as educators, we must strive to assess our own inclinations and modify them if they serve to debilitating and squelch another's chances at success.

Possible Solutions

In her research, Orenstein (1994) reports on a unique classroom experience wherein the entire class is centered on the importance of women in history. The classroom is plastered with images of women who have made notable contributions despite incredible adversity. The classroom, detailed in the section entitled "Through the Looking Glass" (pp. 243-274), is virtually the antithesis of most other classrooms, with their images of men abundantly displayed on every available wall space. The teacher in the class, Ms. Logan, makes it a point to call on girls a little more than boys, ignoring their madly-waving hands to solicit the input of one of the girls instead. Initially, this treatment frustrates the boys, and the
author concedes, "boys perceive equality as a loss" (p. 255). The class even researches prominent women and then enacts monologues of their contributions, portraying the women themselves. For young men accustomed to running roughshod over their classmates, especially the females, playing the part of a woman provides a daunting, humbling task, but they make it through it and, for the most part, are better people for the experience.

Conclusion

These ideas and their relevance are not, necessarily, a cure-all for the woes of gender stereotyping, but they would be a positive step in the process of building equity between the sexes, even if only in my classroom. Young people need to value their own genders, yet still be responsive to the inclusion of those different from them. While this type of project will not insure life-long adherence to the principles of gender equality, it will at least give the young people enrolled an alternative perspective to reflect upon and value. As Ms. Logan, whose class is making an interactive quilt of their discoveries, says: "This is how you teach about gender...you do it one stitch at a time" (Orenstein, 1994, p. 274).

References

