

Consideration of the future prospects for sex equity in education fosters a challenge to create a vision of excellence in education for all.

Beneath the Veneer of Sex Equity in Education

by Nancy J. Smith
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The recent calls for excellence in education have resulted in numerous recommendations of strategies for improvement. Too infrequently these suggestions address the unlikely achievement of excellence without equity. Is this omission justified? An examination of the status of sex equity in education reveals a promising, deceptive veneer of improvements in the educational experiences of girls and women which must be considered in the quest for excellence.

In 1972, the lack of equity in education for males and females was recognized as a serious enough problem to warrant the enactment of a law by the United States Congress requiring sex equity in all educational institutions receiving federal assistance. Since Title IX's beginning just over twelve years ago, observable changes have occurred in the educational opportunities and roles available to males and females with the primary concern being the lack of educational equity for girls and women. A review of sex equity in education in a range of educational institutions reveals a veneer of change, some for the better, some for the worse, and some areas where change is still lacking. A brief historical examination illustrates why equitable education for all sexes has been a struggle. Consideration of the future prospects for sex equity in education fosters a challenge to create a vision for excellence in education for all.

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There have been marked observable improvements in educational opportunities available to women in the last decade. It is these changes that are simultaneously sources of hope and cause for concern about continued inequities. For example, the proportion of women enrolled in traditionally male vocational education courses has doubled since 1972; however, the percentage remains below 15 percent. In fact, the percent of female high school students enrolled in electrical and mechanical vocational education courses is less than 2 percent. Women are 98 percent of the graduates of dental assistant training programs, but less than 5 percent of those graduating from dental school are women (Equals, 1983). Women now represent approximately half of the students enrolled in four-year college programs, but only one-fourth of those earning professional degrees. For example, the U.S. engineering force is only 12 percent female. Just one-third of the doctoral degrees earned were by women. Even this figure is somewhat misrepresentative of change if it is remembered that the graduate level degrees include the traditionally female-dominated fields, such as teaching, in which approximately half of the advanced degrees are earned by women. Despite this, however, the roles and treatment of women employed in education is discouraging—one of the changes for the worse. There are fewer women elementary school principals today than there were in 1928, a change from 55 percent to 18 percent. In the '80s women make up less than 5 percent of high school principals and less than 1 percent of the approximately 16,000 district superintendents in the United States despite the fact that 85 percent of all teachers are women. The salaries of women faculty in higher education "lag behind men's and their earnings relative to men's have declined in recent years" (Sandler, 1984).

Few would argue that males and females are equally capable of acquiring the skills and knowledge to become mathematicians, computer programmers, engineers, scientists and physicians. However, there is a phenomenon called the critical filter that is operating to prevent equal representation by males and females in the educational programs for those professions and, thereby, contributing to the continued disparity between men's and women's salaries. According to findings of the College Entrance Examination Board as late as 1981, 43 percent of college-bound females had taken four or more years of math and science as compared to 63 percent of the college-bound males. The Outstanding Paper for 1983 of The Association for Education of Teachers in Science by Dr. Jean Butler Kahle addresses this issue. In her abstract of the paper titled, "The Disadvantaged Majority: Science Education for Women," she says:

Although women comprise the majority of our population, fewer than 9 percent are employed as scientists and engineers. As the nation addresses the need for improved scientific literacy, as well as for increased

numbers of scientists, technicians and engineers, the role of women can no longer be ignored. Research indicates that girls have poorer attitudes toward science, enroll less often in science courses, demonstrate lower achievement levels in science, and have fewer experiences with the instruments or materials of science. Many factors have been identified as contributing to the dearth of girls and women in science courses and careers . . . However, the critical difference in the science education of boys and girls occurs within the science classrooms. Research shows that girls have fewer experiences with the instruments, materials, or techniques of science. This difference must be addressed by every science teacher in every science classroom to eliminate inequities in science education. As long as the majority of our citizens have fewer opportunities to observe natural phenomena, to use scientific instruments to perform science experiments, or to go on science-related field trips, they are disadvantaged in terms of their science education.

An area which was one of the first to receive scrutiny and in which some of the earliest changes have occurred is textbooks. A description by Sharryl Davis-Hawkes in *Choices* explains the present situation in the '80s.

Today in children's reading texts and in children's trade books, we find girls in leading character roles but the stories are still male oriented. In fact, one suspects that the stories might have once had males as main characters but have been "updated" by substituting female lead characters. Aside from a leading female character, the rest of the stories focus on males who do more action oriented and, therefore, more "interesting" things than the females. The female main character is suspended in a cast of males in a male world.

And what about history texts? When the questions of sexism in history texts was first raised, there were traditionalists who proclaimed that to give women equal space with men in history texts would be to "distort" history because women have not played an equal role. One solution which seems both equitable and accurate is to focus U.S. history books on social history—a history of all the people—rather than relating only the more traditional history of military/political events. This has been done in some textbooks, but a more common approach has been "equity by biography." Just as publishers attempted to remedy racism in earlier textbook editions by

adding biographies of famous ethnic persons, history books today prominently feature biographies (often at the end of chapters or units) of famous women or women made famous by the need to add a biography to that chapter. This approach suggests that the only women worth writing about in history text are "famous" women, and it also sets women apart from men, visually as well as contextually . . . Textbooks have improved in terms of their portrayal of men and women, but respect for, and an attitude of equity is not yet present (p. 2).

To this point, the focus of this article has been on the countable, easily observable issues related to women and sex equity in education. There is another area of growing concern that is also countable and observable but not nearly so easily. It is being perpetrated unconsciously by teachers and it is indicative of a type of oppression of females in educational settings that is debilitating. It is the frequency and type of teacher-pupil interactions. Teachers ask boys more questions than girls and more of the questions the boys are asked require more thoughtful answers than the literal responses sought from the girls. Is this a limited occurrence? According to research spanning four decades it is typical. Boys receive more academically oriented feedback from teachers than girls, as well as more stimulation, support, praise and reward (Sadker, 1982).

How does this impact on the quality of the education girls receive? One of the major consequences is referred to as **learned helplessness**. Through such interactions teachers and families teach girls that they are not expected to solve problems, depend on themselves, or be as capable in serious matters as their male peers. They learn that they are valued for turning in neat work, for not challenging authority and for not taking risks that boys take in the world, whether it is on the playground or in the science lab. This is not all bad. It is desirable for people to be neat, cooperative, and dependable, but not at the expense of assertiveness, mental acuity, and independence.

Two recent research studies demonstrate other behaviors which contribute to educational inequities for girls: teacher grading and modeling of attitudes. There has been a series of studies conducted in the last 15 years that have come to be known as the Goldberg studies. In these studies, male and female names are credited with such things as the same piece of art work or professional resumes. Consistently, those who evaluate the item bearing the female name rate it significantly lower than the same item bearing the male name. A recent study by Kiefer (1983) tested this phenomena in an educational setting. Teachers were asked to grade student essays. The same essays with male names or no names were consistently rated better than those with female names. Again, this behavior is unconscious but not a quirk of individuals. It illustrates the saying that a woman

must be twice as good as a man to receive the same credit!

The second behavior is the modeling of attitudes. In a recent survey of senior pre-service teachers in a major teacher training program, Smith and Bailey (1982) found some startling information. For example, contrary to fact these future teachers believed that women have equal opportunity to assume leadership roles in public education, they believe that men are more dedicated teachers than women and 78 percent believe that students prefer men teachers. Ninety-eight percent of those surveyed were women. A possible interpretation of such attitudes is that women have internalized the idea that men are better. It is likely that they will unconsciously model this attitude as teachers. Another study of several thousand elementary school children conducted in 1983 indicated clearly that both boys and girls believe that it is better to be male (Tavris & Baumgartner, 1983). When asked what it would be like to wake up and be the opposite sex the next day, their responses consisted of remarks like, "I'd rather be dead than be a girl," and "If I became a boy my Daddy might like me better." The authors note that the children's perceptions are realistic reflections of the society in which they live. Their perceptions are not likely to change due to the influence of teachers with negative views of females.

One might wonder why educational equity for women remains such an issue? Why is it seemingly so difficult to achieve? Smith's (1981) historical review of the thoughts of some of western civilization's well-known minds reveals the deep-seated nature of the problem. As he reported, the classical Greek attitude toward women is embedded in our knowledge of Plato and Aristotle. They considered women morally, intellectually, and physically weaker than men. Aristotle mistook the inferior status of women in the culture as natural law and proclaimed women to be deformed, males. Mary Anne Warren (1980) credits him with the "first known scientific and philosophical defense in the Western tradition," of patriarchy and male supremacy. The situation was not better in Roman society, even though girls were educated in their elementary schools. Cato's thoughts about women suggest why girls' education may have been limited to elementary school. He said, "Woman is a violent and uncontrolled animal . . . Women want total freedom . . . If you allow them to achieve complete equality with men, do you think they will be easier to live with?"

The monastic system of the Medieval church provided women with some educational opportunities, as well as an escape from constant pregnancy. However, the church was certainly antifeminist. From the Renaissance and Reformation periods we know of the thinking of several interesting individuals. Thomas Aquinas considered woman to be defensive and misbegotten and that her role was only to aid, passively, in reproduction. That attitude didn't leave room for many thoughts about educating women. Those who did think about women's education, like Erasmus, be-

lieved that the purpose of educating women was to produce modest, quiet, retiring wives and mothers. One of the more interesting and puzzling explanations about the reason for denying education to women was made by Martin Luther. He said, "Men have broad shoulders and narrow hips, and accordingly they possess intelligence. Women have narrow shoulders and broad hips" (O'Faolain & Martines, 1973, p. 196). That notion sure simplifies intelligence testing!

One of the most influential thinkers of the 18th century seems particularly unenlightened in regard to women's education. Rousseau said, "Women's entire education should be planned in relation to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to win their love and respect, to raise them as children, care for them as adults, counsel and console them, make their lives sweet and pleasant: these are what they should be taught from childhood on" (O'Faolain & Martines, 1973, p. 247). In his footsteps, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche all saw women as inferior and whose only purpose is to serve men. Modern times have seen science used to keep women in their place. Darwin thought men and women had evolved differently and men have more inventive genius. It was even claimed that women's health would be ruined if they studied college subjects because they would not have sufficient oxygen to both think and reproduce.

Have there been Western thinkers who believed that women should be allowed equitable educations? Yes, but their ideas seemed to have been ignored or drowned out by the clamor and prevailing attitudes of antifeminists. In modern times, John Stuart Mill, Lewis Henry Morgan, Frederiech Engels, Lester Frank Ward, and Alfred Adler asserted that the differences in the achievements of men and women are culturally imposed.

According to Ward (1939) from the beginning of this century women have wrested from a reluctant male world many rights and definitely greater educational opportunities. As we approach the end of this century what indications are there about the future of women's education? Three aspects of today's educational, political and economic world need to be considered in relation to educational equity.

First, an important report prepared by the Association of American Colleges in 1982, characterized the college classroom climate as a chilly one for women and there is growing evidence that the college campus is not safe for women in other ways. What makes a college classroom chilly for women? For example, several studies indicate that men faculty tend to affirm male students more than female students and they "often perceive women students primarily as sexual beings who are less capable and less serious than men students.

"Some professors may habitually use classroom examples in which the man is always the professional and the woman always the client, thus making it more difficult for women to imagine themselves in profes-

sional roles. Men and women faculty alike may ask questions and then look at men students only—as if no women were expected to respond. Some faculty may tend to ask women 'lower order' factual questions and reserve 'higher order' critical questions for men. Some professors may be unaware that they interrupt women more often than men students. Other comments may include sexist humor or demeaning sexual allusions. Whether overt or subtle, differential treatment based on sex is far from innocuous. Its cumulative effects can be damaging not only to individual women and men students, but also to the education process itself" (p. 4).

The second aspect of campus life that is disturbing involves rape. One study conducted at Auburn University (1983) reported that out of 200 students questioned, one of every six male college students questioned admitted forcing women to have sex with them and 20 percent of the female students said they had been forced to have sex even though they objected. This kind of rape is referred to as date or acquaintance rape. The female college student must worry about her safety in typical social settings more than in walks across campus at night. The presence of this fear creates a detrimental dimension in the educational process for females that males do not experience.

The second issue is educational and economic. The computer age, up to this point, belongs to men. An article in the March 1983 issue of **Psychology Today** dramatically describes the problem. "The culture of computing is overwhelming male. With few exceptions, men design the video games, write the software, sell the machines, and teach the courses. Most games, according to Dan Gutman, editor of *Video Games Player*, are 'designed by boys for other boys.' Until recently, boys outnumbered girls in programming courses and in computer camps by as much as eight to one. If this bias leads to an equivalent gap in competence and confidence, the girls of today will undoubtedly become second-class citizens."

Lack of education is one of the primary reasons that two-thirds of America's poor are female and indications are that this statistic may go higher. Too often the jobs that women are educated for are those at the low end of the pay scale. We must not allow a generation of young women to grow up without sufficient knowledge of computers and other technology to survive in tomorrow's economy.

Finally, the political climate is having direct impact on women's education. President Reagan's budget proposals have eliminated or minimized funding for women's educational programming. His policies include undermining Title IX, the only federal statute that specifically addresses the issue of sex discrimination in education, and undermining the amendments to the Vocational Education Act intended to overcome sex discrimination in vocational education (Lewis, 1984). He actually appointed the director of Phyllis Schlafly's Illinois Eagle Forum Chap-

ter to head the National Advisory Council on Women's Education Programs. Yet the president still insists he is for equal rights for women.

As education has come under scrutiny in recent years, the reaction of many educators has been that this ultimately is in the best interest of the educational process in general. However, two issues must not be overlooked. Sex equity was not considered important enough to be addressed in but few of the recent reports on education. This seems highly indicative of the support that educational equity will receive in the political arena. Secondly much of the criticism of education has been focused at the classroom level. It is widely documented that the effectiveness of educational programs is determined by the leadership of those programs. The decisions regarding allocation of resources and policies are made by administrators who as we have seen are male. One must challenge reports that seem to focus the blame for problems in education today on classroom teachers, and thus primarily on women, when they have not been in the positions of power, authority, and leadership.

The current political climate promises a dismal future for the improvement of educational opportunities for women. Eventually, the power sources and the decision-making processes will have to be examined from a feminist perspective before institutions of education are capable of achieving excellence for all students.

We must develop a vision of an equitable education and commit our energies to achieving that vision. The greatest hope for the quality of the future and perhaps the existence of a future is an education that challenges patriarchal assumptions and instead sees strength in diversity. We need the talent of every girl and boy to create an educational climate in which this can occur. Considering answers to these questions will help us develop the vision we need. When will we have achieved sex equity in education?

- When females and males are not inhibited in their pursuit of knowledge on the basis of their gender?
- When the knowledge base female and male students learn incorporates women's perspective, history, and concerns?
- When the roles men and women have in education is based on competence for the job not gender expectations?
- When the work of classroom teachers is no longer devalued because it has become women's work?
- When predominately male college faculty who teach predominately female teachers model non-sexist teaching behaviors?
- When classrooms are organized and instruction delivered in ways which respect, even promote, individual differences?
- When girls and women do not have to do what it is men do to be considered successful?
- When education is not used as a political tool at the expense of women and women's programming?
- When girls and women can feel safe in learning envi-

ronments?

- When equal dollars are allocated for educational programs for both sexes?
- When girls, boys, men and women enjoy the lifelong pursuit of learning that allows individuals the privilege and responsibility of determining the quality of their lives?

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