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ABSTRACT

This article explores sex bias in curricular materials for elementary and secondary schools. Sex bias is defined as a set of unconscious behaviors that, in themselves, are often trivial and generally favorable. Although these behaviors do not hurt if they happen only once, they can cause a great deal of harm if a pattern develops that serves to reinforce stereotypes of either sex and promote distrust. The article discusses studies of how bias takes root and is perpetuated through schools' curricular materials. A 1975 study showed how sex stereotyping and bias were perpetuated in the text books in use at that time for grades 1 through 6 in the areas of mathematics, science, reading, spelling, and social studies. That study tallied the characters presented by gender, ethnicity, age, by what activities they were involved in, and by how they were depicted. The researchers found that boys were portrayed almost without exception in active, energetic roles. Girls were shown most frequently to be watching and waiting. The study discovered that the percentage of girls and women in texts declined steadily by grade level, resulting in far fewer adult female role models than male. A 1992 study also found rampant gender bias in school texts, presenting 5 model forms that bias can take in instructional materials: (1) invisibility; (2) imbalance/selectivity; (3) unreality; (4) fragmentation/isolation; and (5) linguistic bias. Three basic goals evolved in the quest for gender inequity: (1) equality; (2) the elimination of bias and development of the healthy individual; and (3) the building of trust between the sexes. (DK)

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# Gender Bias: Inequities in the Classroom

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# GENDER BIAS: 'INEQUITIES IN THE CLASSROOM'

One of the most important steps to combatting gender inequity is to understand what it is. Amanda Mackay Smith, former Equal Vocational Opportunity Coordinator for the State of North Carolina and professional consultant, makes an important distinction between sex discrimination and sex bias. Sex discrimination refers to those behaviors that are so "bad" or extreme that

They found that boys were portrayed almost without exception in active, energetic roles; girls were shown most frequently to be "watching and waiting." Illustrations depicted girls watching out a window for someone to return and watching males on television. One little girl was even shown watching clothes spin in an old-fashioned washing machine. While this pro-

**Stereotyping:** Women are assigned traditional and rigid roles and attributes, denying students a knowledge of the diversity, complexity, and variation within the gender. These roles and attributes may be reinforced by teachers' overt or unconscious messages about "appropriate" male and female behavior.

*Reeve Love, M.A.*

only one occurrence can cause damage. Sex discrimination, closely tied to legal issues, refers to the set of behaviors that have resulted in legislation specifically designed to remediate inequities. Sex bias, on the other hand, is a set of "unconscious, well-intended behaviors" that, in themselves, are often trivial and generally favorable. Although these behaviors cannot be claimed to hurt if they happen only once, they can cause a great deal of harm if a pattern develops that serves to reinforce stereotypes of either sex and promote distrust between us.

**Although not  
the only cause,  
one way bias takes root  
and is perpetuated  
is through schools'  
curricular materials.**

## THE CREATION AND TRANSMITTAL OF INEQUITY

Although most of us are familiar with the emotional and socioeconomic bottom lines of sex stereotyping and bias, we may wonder where bias comes from and how it is transmitted. Although not the only cause, one way bias takes root and is perpetuated is through schools' curricular materials. In 1975, Leonore Weitzman and Diane Rizzo of the University of California performed an in-depth study of how sex stereotyping and bias were perpetuated in the text books in use in or on the state-adopted list at that time for grades 1 through 6 in the areas of math, science, reading, spelling, and social studies. They tallied the characters presented by gender, by ethnicity, by age, by what activities they were involved in, and by how they were depicted.

motes a dysfunctional ideal of passivity in young women, it also encourages young men into a positive frenzy of hyperactivity - leading both to a higher incidence of discipline problems for boys and, later in life, stress-related diseases in men. Concomitantly, adult males were shown to hold a wide variety of positions and fulfill numerous social roles, while women were most frequently shown as homemakers, teachers, librarians, and nurses.

The study also discovered that the percentage of girls and women in texts declined steadily by grade level, so that as students progressed there were far fewer adult female role models than male role models. Of the texts examined, the social studies books were the best in terms of sex fairness. In the science texts, boys controlled the action and demonstrated the various scientific principles while girls observed. In math texts, many females were shown to be mathematically incompetent, while the spelling series proved to be blatantly misogynist (e.g. male consonants pushed female vowels out of the picture to form contractions).

In their 1982 *Sex Equity Handbook for Schools*, Myra and David Sadker of the American University in Washington, DC, also found rampant gender bias in school texts. They present the following model of the forms this bias can take in instructional materials:

**Invisibility:** Women are underrepresented in materials' text and/or illustrations. This implies that females have less value, importance, and significance in our society. The tendency toward female invisibility, they discovered, is often underscored by bulletin boards and other displays which frequently omit women entirely.

**Imbalance/Selectivity:** Texts often presented only one interpretation of an issue, situation, or group of people, distorting reality and ignoring differing opinions. Students are given limited perspectives of the contributions, struggles, and participation of women. One classic example: the assertion that "women were given the vote" - hardly the case considering that women fought for years to attain the right to vote.

**Unreality:** Teaching materials were also found to present an unrealistic view of our history and contemporary life experience. Controversial topics are glossed over and discussions of discrimination and bias avoided.

**Fragmentation/Isolation:** Issues relating to women are often separated from the main body of the text, implying that these issues are less important and unrelated to the cultural mainstream.

**Linguistic Bias:** The language of textbooks, and of the classroom, can also serve to exclude women. Masculine terms and masculine pronouns ranging from "our forefathers" to the generic "he" deny the participation of women in our history and society, while occupations such as "policeman" or "chairman" are given masculine labels that deny the legitimacy of women working in certain fields or positions.

## GOALS FOR ELIMINATING INEQUITY

Amanda Mackay Smith outlines three basic goals that evolved in the quest for gender equity. In initial efforts to remedy inequity following the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972,

*GENDER BIAS - continued on page 11*

we assumed *equality* to be the primary goal. Unfortunately, equality does not serve very well; if equality is the primary goal we would have to be satisfied if things are equally bad for everyone. This pits boys against girls and women against men in a game of "Who's hurt worst?" All the evidence indicates that gender bias and sex stereotyping hurt both sexes equally deeply, although in different ways.

The second goal to be adopted was *the elimination of bias and development of the healthy individual*. This is certainly a worthwhile goal, and one that tends to work better than the first. Taken alone, however, it tends to promote selfish individuality and to mitigate against a sense of community.

The third goal, then, must be *the building of trust between the sexes*. This goal is acceptable to even the most conservative - we all like the idea that men and women can and should be partners and friends. This goal, moreover, incorporates the best parts of the first two, for you can only trust your equal and you can allow someone to be independent only if you trust them.

## CONCLUSION

Gender stereotyping, discrimination, and bias show up consistently in our classrooms, hurting boys and girls in different but equally devastating ways. While girls may become passive, suffer from a loss of self esteem, and begin to limit their own occupational potentials, boys may suffer both a loss of personality or individuality and begin to act out as their socioemotional arena is narrowed. It is up to us as teachers, administrators, parents, and concerned members of a biased society to strip away the stereotypes that damage and discourage our children. And it is up to us as adults to model the trusting inter-gender relationships and accepting atmosphere that help all students learn.

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- Reeve Love coordinates educational programs for the Hispanic Culture Foundation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She authored *Sex Stereotyping and Bias: Their Origins and Effects*, a training module developed by IDRA as part of a series by the Desegregation Assistance Center.

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# RESOURCES FOR GENDER EQUITY

## Additional Readings and Information

**Men their rights  
and nothing more;  
women their rights  
and nothing less.**

**- Susan B. Anthony**

**We are still  
in the business of  
changing the world,  
and we need to  
let the world know that.**

**- Kathleen Saadat  
Affirmative Action  
State of Oregon**

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