



Equity Dispatch

Expanding the Conversation
on Gender Equity



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July 2016



"...[T]here is not just one 'right' way to be a boy or a girl..."

-Elizabeth C. Payne & Melissa J. Smith, 2012



Did You Know

Traditional Gender Binaries Hurt ALL Students

Did you know that the traditional way in which gender is conceived and talked

about is harmful? Gender, via a dominant view, has been situated as a way to distinguish between binary views of biological sex (male and female) and is socially regulated through performing aspects of femininity and masculinity, thus creating and reinforcing a reality of what a “boy” is versus what a “girl” is, does, looks like, and how they each behave (Butler, 1990). This performance often occurs via the adoption of dominant views on gender roles (e.g. women cook and clean, men work and provide) and stereotypes (e.g. women are emotional, men are stoic) that are socially re-inscribed in daily interactions, messages, and representations (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

The social construction of gender reinforces a larger social construct called heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is a system that works to normalize behaviors and societal expectations that are tied to the presumption of heterosexuality and an adherence to a strict gender binary (Nelson, 2015). The gender binary is the acknowledgement of the existence of men and women (and boys and girls) – and nothing else. Therefore, educators can present content and learning experiences through a heteronormative lens causing a restriction of access to learning, as well as reinforcing gendered barriers that exclude and/or limit opportunities for meaning making and acquiring new knowledges.

Gender roles dictate so much of the way that life is structured in hetero-dominated societies like ours, thus normalizing them as natural, and by proxy, those who fall outside as unnatural. The system of heteronormativity informs what we expect from men and what we expect from women – and we perpetuate that system when we police those behaviors accordingly in our learning environments reinstalling gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes and prescriptive gender roles pathologize ways of being that do not align with these expected norms, make invisible those persons who may identify outside of the socially constructed binary of “boy” and “girl,” and reinscribes rigid expectations and scripts of gender for those who do identify along gendered lines, including transgendered students

As educators, we often unintentionally communicate unconscious assumptions about gender roles or gender stereotypes through our use of gendered language or role assignments in class (NCTE, 2015). The construct of gender, as well as views that are outside the gender binary, are difficult; therefore educators should be aware and accept the complex endeavor of ensuring inclusive and safe spaces for students by problematizing gender. By problematizing or critically examining how gender binaries produce gender inequity, educators can begin to work toward thoughtfully reconstructing learning spaces and experiences. Together with other stakeholders, educators can redress inequities in how genders are represented in curriculum and supported through instruction, ensuring all students learn in gender inclusive learning environments.

Why It Matters

Troubling Gender Binaries Leads to Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments



Traditional views on gender have led to oppressive practices that have caused students to be marginalized and unprotected from verbal, emotional and physical violence (S. Skelton, personal communication, June, 2016). Historically, there are groups of students who have had to negotiate entrenched marginalization in schools. Women and girls have had to fight significant battles for equal access to opportunities such as inclusion in extracurricular sports/clubs, enrollment in advanced math and science courses, and access to college (Valentin, 1997; GLEC, 2012). Men and boys make up the majority of failing grades, recommendations for retention, suspensions, diagnoses of learning disabilities and emotional disturbance (Gurian, 2005; Slocumb, 2007; Whitmire, 2010). Further, for every 100 girls (18 to 21 years old) in correctional facilities, 1,430 boys are present (Mortenson, 2006).

As articulated in the May 2012 edition of the [Equity Dispatch](#), gender stereotypes about masculinity operate within social contexts in ways that contribute to the disproportionate punishment and expulsion of male students in schools. Research has demonstrated that cultural beliefs about masculinity exacerbate educators' disciplinary practices with male students while at the same time encouraging antisocial and aggressive behavior (Flood, 2000). These occurrences especially impact Latino and Black male students who are often the recipients of discriminatory treatment based on beliefs and assumptions about their race as well as masculinity.

Moreover, gender stereotypes about intelligence impact the ways in which educators interpret ability and ability levels of students along the spectrum of gender (Gunderson, Ramirez, Levine, & Beilock, 2012). For example, although women have gained ground in historically men dominated fields like math, science, law and business (Corbett, Hill, & Rose, 2008), we know that educators still often attribute boys' math successes predominantly to ability, while they attribute girls' math successes equally to ability and effort (Gunderson, Ramirez, Levine, & Beilock, 2012). Educator interpretations of ability for transgender and gender non-conforming youth also continue marginalization. 75% of transgender youth surveyed by GLSEN had significantly lower GPAs, were more likely to miss school out of concern for their safety, and were less likely to plan on continuing their education signaling practices and conditions that are not supporting and centering students who are on the margins (GLESN, 2014).

In addition to marginalization, there are groups of students who have to also negotiate being unprotected from violence. For example, the experiencing of sexual harassment, hate crimes, and discriminatory treatment of girls and women, including those who are pregnant, are still present in schools (The National Women's Law Center, 2007, as cited in King, 2011). In addition, girls and women of color are more likely to be on "the receiving end of punitive, zero-tolerance policies that subject them to violence, arrest, suspension and/or expulsion" (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015, p. 6). Also, "[i]n a review of eight quantitative studies which included a total of 83,042 middle and high school students across the U. S., more LGBTQ youth than those who identified as heterosexual (i.e., "straight") reported that they had been threatened or assaulted at school, were fearful at school to the point of skipping entire days, and were engaging in self-endangering behaviors such as drug use and suicide attempts (Safe Schools, 1999)" (King, 2011). Additionally, 85% of LGBTQ students were verbally harassed and 58% of LGBT students experienced discriminatory school policies and practices (GLESN, 2013).

Educators can begin to trouble gender binaries in their own schools by examining the extent to which current policies and practices reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting students' opportunities to learn in safe and inclusive school environments. Working toward gender equity means ensuring that all students feel represented in their school community regardless of how they enact and identify their gender, and thus, are able to reach their full human potential.



For Equity Now

Create A Safe Gender and Trans Inclusive Learning Environment

Equity minded educators who are interested in disrupting social forces (Aikman, S. & Unterhalter, E., 2005) that contribute to gender disparities can engage in numerous actions to promote gender-equitable learning environments. Particularly, educators can play a key role "in setting the culture of an inclusive school environment by teaching an inclusive curriculum and developing policies and procedures that do not perpetuate the binary gender system" (Margaret Goodhand, 2014, p. 5-6). Consider this **updated list of strategies to create a more gender and trans equitable environment in your school**, from the 2012 May Equity Dispatch Newsletter:

[Gender Equity](#), and then brainstorm others with colleagues:

- Develop a gender expansive environment, one that moves beyond the traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity.
- Use instructional materials that feature men and women in various

occupational, recreational, and familial roles. When images show a gender pattern (e.g., all U.S. presidents are male), initiate a conversation with your students about what they notice and why they believe this is the case.

- Choose resources that outline the current and evolving roles of men and women in society, and portray males and females in non-traditional gender roles (King Thorius, 2011).
- Help students identify gender inequities in what they hear (businessman, mailman, mankind, etc.) (King Thorius, 2011).
- Sadker (2015) [lists 100 specific ideas/ lesson plans for promoting gender equity in schools](#), including: develop 'baseball cards' of famous women; analyze TV, radio, and newspapers for fairness; create a time capsule that promotes equity in the future; analyze greeting cards for stereotypes.
- Encourage students to examine gender patterns within the classroom. Do male and female students work together often? Who answers questions more often? Use this data to launch a discussion about how to create a more gender equitable environment.
- Ensure that your expectations for classroom performance and behavior are equal across sexes.
- Support students in becoming critical consumers of information (e.g. media representation of gender and representations of gender in school curriculum).
- We often unintentionally communicate unconscious assumptions about gender roles or gender stereotypes. Educators should “examine our language and reduce or eliminate word choices that silence, stereotype or constrain others” (NCTE, 2015).
 - Instead of using “he” and “his”, incorporate “she and “her” as well – or use “s/he” as a gender neutral pronoun (NCTE, 2015).
 - When appropriate, substitute gender specific pronouns for other (third person) pronouns such as “we”, or “you” (NCTE, 2015). Immediately address name-calling, derogatory remarks or harassing behaviors related to gender, gender identity or gender expression.

In addition, consider this **updated list of strategies for examining and promoting equitable participation**:

- Leverage [teachable moments](#) when students use harmful language or statements about gender in the classroom (Girard, 2015).
- Set up a school committee to monitor student participation in courses, activities, and disciplinary actions by gender. Where there are discrepancies, investigate to uncover potential gender equity issues.
- Provide needed support and encouragement for both female and male students who have enrolled in courses and activities that are non-traditional for their sex.
- Vary activities and information to ensure that they are relevant to learners' lives and appropriate for different racial, cultural, ethnic, and gender groups (Rose, Meyer, & Hitchcock).
- Hold high expectations for female and male students for cooperation between

genders (King Thorius, 2011).

- Encourage participation from both genders equally, regardless of topic or activity.
- Reconsider seating arrangements that involve boy/girl/boy/girl alternating (Gunderson, Ramirez, Levine, & Beilock, 2012).
- Think of different groupings beyond boys and girls lines to walk in the hallways – even simple categorizations like lining up by the ‘color of your shirt’, etc. (Gunderson, Ramirez, Levine, & Beilock, 2012; Girard, 2012).
- Be sensitive to stereotypical perceptions of gender and activities (during recess or center activities, for example ‘housekeeping’ or ‘jump rope’).
- Hold high expectations for female and male students for cooperation between genders (King Thorius, 2011).

Educators can play a significant role in lifting the constraints of gender expectations by offering non-discriminatory opportunities to all students, monitoring and supporting participation in courses and activities, consistently addressing sex-based bullying behaviors and harassment, and ensuring that representations of gender in everyday practice challenge gender stereotypes. In order for these goals to be achieved, equity-minded educators must first become aware of gender expectations in order to be able to identify them as they play out in the social constructions that either help or hinder a student’s ability to fully engage with opportunities offered in schools. This work requires collaboration and is far too complex an endeavor to embark on alone. Asking others for feedback, perspective, and direction facilitates and values complicated conversations, language, and understandings (S. Skelton, personal communication, July 11, 2016).

Meet the Authors

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