GENDER ISSUES IN AMERICA’S SCHOOLS

From the beginning of life, even before birth, the actions of parents can begin to perpetuate gender roles. Young children are biologically and sociologically made aware of the differences between boys and girls, males and females. Children are bombarded with images of femininity and masculinity through television, actions of peers, family, literature, and teachers. These images may be intentional or unintentional. Society often puts strict definitions of masculine and feminine roles and actions. This in turn fosters strict expectations for children, according to their sex; males are socialized to be masculine and females are socialized to be feminine. The purpose of this presentation is to instruct future educators how to properly handle gender issues in the classroom. It is important that educators recognize where gender issues develop, how they are perceived, and the responsibility they have in addressing these issues in the classroom.

At birth, and even during pregnancy, gender plays an intricate part in a child’s development. Parents, family members and complete strangers treat children according to their perceived gender role. When visiting newborns, a male baby is not as likely to be described as "beautiful" as a female baby. Newborns are often taken home to a nursery of colors and themes according to their gender. Boys will most likely grow up in a bright colored, sports themed room while girls will be exposed to soft pastel colors, cartoon characters, and frilly lace. And so it begins, the act of teaching children what is expected of their sex in society.

Parents play the first major role in determining a child’s complete development. Who spends the most time with the infant? Does a stay at home mother guide a male toward more feminine qualities or is the infant treated more like a boy? If a toddler is given gender-neutral toys to play with, how will that child respond? Are young children more likely to gravitate towards toys that could in the stereotype of their gender? Siblings, caretakers, relatives and even the conversations and expectations of strangers influence a child’s actions and behaviors. If little girls are supposed to be made of sugar and spice, generally they will be treated with kindness and grace. If it is so that little boys are made of snails and puppy dog tails, the occurrences they encounter will be of a different manner. So, how do parents, caretakers, relatives, and teachers allow a child to determine their own gender identity?

When discussing gender issues it is imperative to realize the difference between the terms "sex" and "gender". Sex is a biological term, dependent on the individual's chromosomes and hormones. On the other hand, gender is a psychological and social term depending on the individual’s feelings of maleness or femaleness. There are some individuals who do not fall neatly into one category of male/female or boy/girl. Transsexuals have the sex of one gender but identify with the other. Intersexuals or hermaphrodites are born with the sexual organs of both sexes, and they may identify with either gender. In looking at studies of these sexually anomalous individuals, it appears that the most important variable in the development of gender identity is the sex of assignment. That is the sex that one’s parents raise one to be.

This influence can override the influence of genes, hormones, and even external organs. It is obvious then to realize the power that parents and society have on an individual's sexual identity. Educators have power to influence students, to educate them to be individuals, free from the bias of gender.

While educators have a great deal of influence pertaining to gender identity, so does mass media. The media tends to portray males as being dominant, aggressive, and as protectors. Females are often portrayed as submissive, passive, and sexual objects. Images of males and females can also carry racial and ethnic stereotypes. For example, Black males are often portrayed as thugs or criminals. Asian men are shown as martial arts experts. Asian women are often shown as submissive, pleasing, and of the “mail-order bride” type.

While these racial stereotypes are distressing, another detrimental consequence of media is its categorization of males as aggressive. Men are bombarded with images of other males being aggressive and violent. However, violence is not usually discussed as a gender issue. In the educational film
“Tough Guise” Jason Katz notes that males commit approximately 90% of the violence in our society (1999). There are many examples in media ranging from the news to movies that show males being violent and aggressive. In “Tough Guise”, high school boys tell the audience that to be masculine or a “real man” is to be tough. If a man does not show he is tough, he is often labeled as a homosexual.

Gender is often perceived as a male or female issue dealing with masculine or feminine traits. Should the aspect of sexual orientation be included when considering one’s gender, and if so, how does this change the issue? Adolescent males who show feminine traits may be labeled as a homosexual. This term brings labels such as ‘faggot’, ‘homo’, and ‘gay’, which are used loosely to put down another person. Females illustrating masculine traits may also cause others to label them as a ‘lesbian’, ‘dike’ or ‘butch’. Associating these labels broadens the gender issues from two (male and female) to four (male, female, homosexual male, homosexual female). The fifth and sixth types of gender include bisexual male and bisexual female. Even if one disagrees with associating sexual orientation with gender, one cannot deny that in American society sexual orientation is closely related to gender.

Young students may use words associated with one’s sexual orientation without fully understanding the meanings and labels associated with them. They learn to use these words from media such television, movies, and radio. Their peers, family members, and even strangers may also influence their views and directly or indirectly show children how these labels and terms are used. As educators an important message is to teach respect and tolerance. Sexual orientation as it applies to gender must be addressed in order to educate students to enable them to understand and respect others’ differences. This should start at an early age to prepare students for these issues before stereotypes can be developed.

Stereotypes can also be developed in the classroom with literature. Children’s literature is permeated with stereotypically male and female roles. Girls are often portrayed as dainty and in need of rescue. Males on the other hand are often portrayed as strong, in control, and not needing assistance. By allowing children to read such material, teachers and parents are perpetuating the stereotypes that lead children to fall into the trap of living under prescribed gender roles. These gender roles are not only detrimental to girls, but to boys as well as “both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical terms” (Singh, 1). Because children identify with the characters they read about, their opinions of males and females are often solidified in their reading. If negative or inappropriate characterizations are represented, they identify with them. Literature impacts children’s views of gender and in the same respect their teachers also influence these views.

Teacher bias impacts students more than they may realize. Research indicates "teachers do have a different set of expectations, behaviors standards, rewards, and punishments for female and male students, minority and non-minority students, high and low achievers" (Sadker, 19). Not only do these biases affect the teacher, but they also impact the student. One study showed that "if teachers believe that first-grade boys will do as well in reading as girls do, then this will happen. Conversely, if teachers do not expect boys to do as well as girls, then their reading performance will be lower” (Sadker, 19,20). This is an example of Pygmalion in the Classroom, where a teacher’s expectations lead a child to achieve what his or her teacher expects (Sadker, 98). These expectations, when forced upon a child, often lead to pressure on the child to conform. In essence, children behave in the way their teachers expect them to behave. This behavior "reinforces the teacher’s expectations all the more, and the self-regeneration vicious circle is established" (Sadker, 98). If a teacher expects a student to be a tough male and good at math, he is likely to portray that image and work on his math skills, thereby improving them. Therefore, a teacher’s expectations can impact a student’s performance in the classroom.

Educators must be cognizant of the fact that students come from a variety of backgrounds and beliefs. Their gender roles are often assigned by parents and society and are perpetuated at school. It is not a simple task to break out of the patterns of behavior and an educator’s own gender stereotypes. For the sake of students, however, it is imperative that teachers learn to recognize their own biases and make attempts to provide an equal education for all students.
References


