

# Gender Discrimination in the Classroom: How Teaching Policies Can Help Close the Gap

By Olivia Wycoff

**ABSTRACT.** This paper analyzes gender inequality in elementary school classrooms and proposes large-scale policy changes and small-scale teaching practices to combat the issue. To assess this problem, research is presented examining the existence of performance and confidence gaps between male and female students, most significantly in STEM subjects. Significant connections between these inequalities and discriminatory teaching practices can be traced by through contemporary research, a problem which is presented as grounds for mandatory reform of the teacher credentialing process. The goal of this reform would be to create classrooms that are more gender equitable and empower academic achievement separate of gendered expectations. If properly implemented, such policies could both promote equality in the sphere of education and create positive repercussions in the equality movement beyond schools.

As the institution that shapes and teaches the next generation, the education system is incredibly important in building a society free from gender inequalities. Rather than seeing classrooms that nurture confident and well-educated children, we see a number of disturbing trends in American classrooms where children are receiving inferior educations on the basis of their gender. In order to achieve true societal gender equity, we need to address the educational gap in the treatment of boys and girls in schools. With many specific teaching strategies to combat this inequality already being discussed, I encourage the implementation of mandated gender-bias education in the

teacher credentialing process. This paper will explore the need to reduce gender discrimination in the classroom, the implementation of such a policy, and the outlook for positive effects that this program could create.

## **Current Research on Educational Inequalities**

An overwhelming number of studies show that teachers favor boys over girls in the classroom setting. Though they do not usually intend to, teachers unfairly distribute educational time, attention, and resources among students based on implicit biases that they may not even realize they have. Research in Illinois funded by the National Science Foundation found that teachers spent 39 percent more class time giving direct attention to boys than girls (Shumow & Schmidt, 2013). This trend could lead girls to believe their engagement is not appreciated, thus making them less motivated to participate in the future. In an interview, the same researchers also said girls were more likely to receive help from teachers at times when they didn't actually need it (Heitin, 2014). This could cause the girls to feel like the teachers weren't listening to them or appreciating their achievements, thus undermining the importance of their success and making them less motivated to set themselves up for success in the future.

Some argue that the inequitable distribution of class time and resources is irrelevant, given that boys and girls are now performing at about the same level in math and science (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Where the real deficit lies, however, is not in performance, but in interest and confidence. Studies show that girls struggle significantly more than boys do with math anxiety, or "feelings of tension and anxiety that interfere with ... the solving of mathematical problems in a wide variety of ordinary life and academic situations" (Tobias, 1993). Additionally, research has found that this discrepancy increases more in classrooms that promote the traditional gender stereotypes that STEM skills are "for

boys” (Bieg, Goetz, Wolter, & Hall, 2015). This shows the pervasiveness of sexist stereotypes in classroom practices is preventing young girls from feeling confident and competent in traditionally male academic fields, despite their innate ability to perform just as well as their male counterparts.

The repercussions of this failure to nourish the minds of young girls are clear when examining their response to being given a more difficult problem in class. For boys in science classes, “engagement levels rose when they felt challenged, as did their concentration and effort”; having had their intellectual abilities in these subjects constantly reinforced by teachers, they gladly rose to the challenge of more difficult problems. For girls, however, more challenging material brought a drop in efforts and focus; feeling that they simply were not skilled enough to complete the tasks, they shied away from more difficult subjects that they could have excelled in given the right encouragement (Heitin, 2014). Simply put, young girls are not being given the academic resources to feel engaged and excited by math, science, and other academic fields, and are coming out of class feeling less competent and less inspired to succeed. Because early education quality serves as the building blocks for later success, discriminating against young students on the basis of gender disadvantages them for life.

### **Teaching Credential Programs**

To combat the unfair gender-based discrimination that is handicapping young girls in their educations, it is vitally important to begin educating current and future teachers on the existence of their implicit gender biases and how to specifically combat them in order to empower young students. As said by American Association of University Women sponsored teacher Colleen Briner-Schmidt, “No one gets up and says, 'I'm going to be unequal today. No one says, 'I'm only going to teach to white male boys today.' . . .

It's just the way it's done" (Hong, 1998). In this way, a large-scale reform of the programs that educate the teachers themselves would give them the real knowledge and tools to combat gender discrimination in their own classrooms without calling out any one teacher or school as maliciously sexist. Specific and comprehensive courses need to be mandated in the teacher credentialing process that educates prospective teachers on how to reduce their gender biases, create more equitable classrooms, and empower students to excel in subjects where those of their gender are typically discouraged, discriminated against, or oppressed.

Such suggestions are not without precedent; previously, policies focusing on gender equity training for future teachers have been introduced into legislation but outcomes have been limited. In California, for example, one state bill proposed "[revising] standards relating to the inclusion of gender equity training for teacher credentials" (Official California Legislative Information, 1999). However, this 'reformation' was completed in 2001, with no substantial revisions or additions having been made to these policies since, despite copious amounts of new and relevant research done by both educational psychologists and feminists. Additionally, such efforts have not spread to other states in order to create a nationwide effort for change, with many other states leaving gender equity out of their credentialing process entirely. Without a targeted focus on gender-based discrimination in these programs, gender equity is likely to fall by the wayside as just another buzzword lost in teachers' education.

The insufficiency of current policies is especially clear when examining one study on teacher's expectations, exemplifying how educator's attitudes even as early as during the credentialing process detrimentally affect their students. This study examines the expectations of pre-service elementary school teachers for their future classrooms, and found that these educators in training already had lower confidence in the mathematic ability of

girls than boys (Mizala, Martínez, & Martínez, 2015). Given that additional research has shown teacher expectations to have a strong effect on the resulting performance of their students, these results are a concerning indicator of the toxic classroom climate credential programs are failing to eradicate (Jimenez-Morales, Lopez-Zafra, 2013). The persistence of such problematic attitudes is a clear indicator of the need to reexamine the credentialing process for elementary school teachers and introduce new legislation that will mandate additional, modernized classes that will more comprehensively educate teachers through an intersectional feminist lens. By simply mandating the completion of such a course and regulating its contents, teachers will receive the same level of education regarding gender equity regardless of what teaching credential program they have chosen.

The suggested course content would ideally synthesize current research and suggestions for creating a gender equitable classroom to create a comprehensive course. Specific instructions in the course could begin with individual suggestions for the teacher. For example, prospective teachers could be educated about the concept of implicit biases in regards to gender and be encouraged to explore and reflect on their own biases. This ongoing discussion could segue into further education on personal policies, such as the use of inclusive language in the classroom (such as saying “you all” instead of the exclusionary “you guys” or the polarizing and binary “boys and girls”), making a point of giving equal focus to both boys and girls when calling on raised hands, focusing on personal attitudes when grading, and other strategies to help teachers continuously check whether their biases are infiltrating the classroom setting (Hong, 1998). Educating teachers on how to identify and address these biases would ideally give them the skills and experience to identify and address new gender biases as they come up as well as other existing biases they may have based on race, class, nationality, etc.

Additionally, the course should focus on educating teachers in how to ensure that the educational content of their own future classrooms reduces discrimination. This can be achieved in a number of ways. For one, teachers can be encouraged to avoid gender stereotyping in their lessons or creating gendered content that perpetuates the binary myth that ranks boys over girls. This could include avoiding lessons, posters, textbooks, or class content that portray women and men in exclusively feminine or masculine roles and jobs, and providing ample examples of role models that break gender norms and stereotypes (Plous, 2016). This could also extend to giving teachers resources to bring the concept of gender equity into their own curriculum.

### **Short and Long Term Benefits**

Creating classroom policies that emphasize gender equity will do more than to just empower girls: it will foster a classroom environment where students of all genders internalize important feminist ideals. To teach young girls that there is no subject or field that they cannot excel in just as well as anyone else is to send the same message to all students that gender should never be grounds for determining someone's abilities, potential, or worth. Additionally, having more gender equitable classrooms will open the door for important teacher-student conversations about the role of gender in other aspects of their lives beyond school. Demystifying feminism, discussing societal inequalities, and promoting strategies for change are all more possible in classrooms where students are equal partners in the educational process, something which is only possible if teachers are shown how to make genuine and specific efforts to put their students on a more equal playing field.

Because early education can be considered the core foundation of a child's development that they will take into adulthood, reformations of this system would have momentous implications for the bigger picture of gender

inequality in the United States and beyond. A significant potential effect of these efforts is the issue of workplace inequality. While the problem of the pay gap for women is a very complex issue with a number of interdependent causes, it is possible that improving the quality of the education we give to young girls could have a positive effect in promoting equality in their later spheres of life. By making strides to empower young girls in the classroom and give them the equal academic opportunities that discriminatory teaching policies are robbing from them, we not only be sending women out into the workforce with better prospects, higher confidence, and more well-rounded schooling, but sending the message that discriminatory policies on any scale will no longer be tolerated.

Achieving such equity would not only positively affect young girls and women, but also the country as a whole. A cross-country analysis found that “gender gaps in education and employment considerably reduce economic growth” (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009). Improving education for women and empowering their free choice of careers beyond stereotypical constraints will bring new talent and ideas into fields typically dominated by men. By investing in their education, we are investing in a more equitable work force and more prosperous country. While economic growth is not the main goal of a policy on classroom inequities or of feminism in general, analysis of the additional benefits stemming from efforts to eradicate gender equality is always important in garnering additional support for such causes.

## **Conclusion**

The implementation of this policy would be an important step in eliminating classroom and even societal gender inequality, but it is only the first step. In order to see truly significant results, this policy and others like it need to see a cultural change surrounding sexism, discrimination, and

implicit biases. Hopefully the creation of a mandate for gender-based education classes for in order to become a credentialed teacher will spark reform in the education system and spread the agenda of gender equity across the country. Ideally, schools will also incorporate the message of this policy into the professional development courses each individual school requires its employees to attend in order to include current teachers rather than just new ones. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that while this policy has had an initial focus on problems facing young girls in education, success would allow it to broaden its reach to gender-specific issues of disparity faced by both young boys, gender-nonconforming students, and others. Though such classes won't entirely solve the problem of gender inequity, hopefully this policy will spark the series of changes that we need to combat and eliminate institutional sexism and empower students to realize their potential regardless of their gender.

**Olivia Wycoff** is a second year student at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo. As a Psychology and Child Development major she hopes to someday work in an elementary school setting. Olivia has always been interested in how gender inequality manifests itself in the education system, and what we can do to combat the incredibly detrimental effects this problem can have on young children. She hopes that with an intersection between the fields of psychology and feminist studies, we can come up with new and innovative ways to educate a new generation free from the restrictions of gendered inequality.

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