

Gender bias in education



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At the heart of the gender bias conundrum are questions of male marginalization, stereotypes and gender identity and female subordination. These concepts will be explored throughout this paper as the basis for gender dialogue. At one end of the spectrum is a gendered curricula and at the other end teaching. Studies on gender in the Caribbean has focused largely on issues surrounding “ gender differential curricula and access(on students more than teachers)This paper focuses is an attempt at both sides.

Gender can be defined as set of behaviours, roles and positions which can be socially and culturally attributed to men and women. “ Gender is constantly shaped through social and cultural experiences which are expressed through the attitudes, value and behavioural characteristic of interpersonal interreaction.(2002, Leo-Rhynie and Pencle).” The gender process is a difficult one which commences at birth and is continuously reinforced throughout life. The idiosyncracies demonstrated by gendered groups in society has implications for the identities adolescents develop and to a large extent determine the careers and lifestyles chosen. Gender bias implies some form of preference, inclination and prejudice for one sex over another. Education (that is access, enrolment, participation, performance and achievement) emerges as the arena in which both academic analyses and popular perception locate male marginalization.(2003, Barriteau, p. 326).

Feminist theorists like Sadker (1994) believe that whilst girls and boys sit in the same classrooms, using the same books, listening to the same teacher, they receive different education. In fact, upon entering school, girls perform equal to or better than boys on nearly every measure of achievement, but by <https://assignbuster.com/gender-bias-in-education/>

the time they graduate high school or college, they have fallen behind.

(Sadker, 1994) However, discrepancies between the performance of girls and the performance of boys in elementary education leads some critics to argue that boys are being neglected within the education system:

It is no wonder Errol Miller posited his marginalization thesis indicating the biases that existed in education and gender socialization. However, if it is that males are marginalized leading to fewer graduates from secondary and tertiary institutions; how is it possible that they are the ones selected for executive positions? Central to this discourse is the concern that men are missing from the higher echelons of the family, classroom and laborforce. (2006, Lindsay).

Schools serve as an important agent of socialization in society. There are gendered rules and regulations that are reinforced in schools. Teachers play a pivotal role in accepting behavior that are socially appropriate and rejecting the inappropriate ones. Their roles serve as models in creating gender identity. In a study of British schools (1988, Mahoney) noted that girls had already started practicing their secretarial role for their male counterparts, as they were expected by the boys to provide eraser, ruler and writing materials. In one classroom a boy left his seat and walked across the room to have his bandage fixed by a girl. This provided practice for boys to dominate and the girls to find strategies of resistance.

Pencle(1994) observed the sexual division of labour in one Jamaican classroom where girls were assigned indoor duties of sweeping and dusting while boys ran errands outside and lifted furniture. From an early age gender

stereotypes were instituted in children's lives by the various agents of socialization(church, family and school responsible for educating boys and girls.

Literature is another area where the reinforcement of stereotypical views are orchestrated and administered. According to Pencle & Leo-Rhynie (2003), "textbooks ...provides an inaccurate view of society to young people, a view which devalues the role of women."(p. 204). They further cited research done by King and Morrissey(1988) whose examination of contemporary text history, geography and social studies utilized by teachers and students in preparation of the Caribbean Council Examinations(CXC); concluded that these books reinforced conventional societal views of patriarchy and male domination. The language in the books did not include women and exhibited them as playing passive, subordinate and menial roles. Additionally, Whitely(1994) analysed Integrated science books used in lower grades of Jamaican schools. He discovered that considerable male bias in these texts and questioned the influence it had on girls' choice of studying science.

Pencle and Leo-Rhynie asserted that " the programmes pursued by girls reveal and obvious attraction to the helping professions such as teaching and nursing."

Education has been considered as the key vehicle of mobility and social change in the Caribbean. Thus, education is a tool of persuasion and has been instrumental in gender role socialization and thus gender identity.

Teachers have played an enormous role in the process so much so that the historiography over the last 30 years have given much attention to what is

coined as the “ feminization of the teaching profession” (Downes, 2003, p. 303). Errol Miller’s *Marginalisation of the Black Male* and later *Men At Risk* was an empirical analysis of schools teachers in Jamaica in the period 1837 to 1990. Miller’s underlying thesis is that men have a right to the resources of the state and society over and above women. Many theorists have labeled Miller’s thesis as flawed as male marginality has stemmed from gender biased methodology rather than from reality. Lindsay, 1997). She believes that the marginalization thesis is a reinforcement of the age old patriarchal mandate that women are an inferior and lesser being. Barriteau (2003, p350) cites Chevannes, whose work on coeducation and performance contradicts many of Miller’s assertions of male performance, underachievement and education. Chevannes conclude that there are biases operating ‘ in the selection of certain subjects as opposed to others, and there is no evidence to suggest that girls routinely out perform boys, but ample evidence of gender performance both ways in specific subject areas.

At very early ages, girls begin defining their femininities in relation to boys. One study of a third grade classroom examined four self-sorted groups of girls within the classroom: the nice girls, the girlies, the spice girls and the tomboys. Through interviews researcher Diane Reay found that ‘ nice girls’ was considered a derogatory term indicating, “...an absence of toughness and attitude.” (Reay, 2001) Furthermore, the girlies were a group of girls who focused their time on flirting with and writing love letters to boys, the tomboys were girls who played sports with the boys, and the spice girls espoused girl-power and played ‘ rate-the-boy’ on the playground. Reay’s

research shows that each of the groups of girls defined their own femininities in relation to boys. (2001)

The Reay study further demonstrates how socialization of girls occurs at the school level by tolerating different behaviors from boys than from girls.

Assertive behavior from girls is often seen as disruptive and may be viewed more negatively by adults. In Reay's study, the fact that the spice girls asserted themselves in ways contrary to traditional femininity caused them to be labeled by teachers as "real bitches". (2001) This reinforces the notion that "...girls' misbehavior to be looked upon as a character defect, whilst boys' misbehavior is viewed as a desire to assert themselves." (Reay, 2001)

Clearly the socialization of gender is reinforced at school, "Because classrooms are microcosms of society, mirroring its strengths and ills alike, it follows that the normal socialization patterns of young children that often lead to distorted perceptions of gender roles are reflected in the classrooms." (Marshall, 1997) Yet gender bias in education reaches beyond socialization patterns, bias is embedded in textbooks, lessons, and teacher interactions with students. This type of gender bias is part of the hidden curriculum of lessons taught implicitly to students through the every day functioning of their classroom.

In Myra and David Sadker's research, they noted four types of teacher responses to students: teacher praises, providing positive feedback for a response; teacher remediates, encouraging a student to correct or expand their answer; teacher criticizes, explicitly stating that the answer is incorrect; teacher accepts, acknowledging that a student has responded. The Sadkers

found that boys were far more likely to receive praise or remediation from a teacher than were girls. The girls were most likely to receive an acknowledgement response from their teacher. (Sadker, 1994) These findings are confirmed by a 1990 study by Good and Brophy that "...noted that teachers give boys greater opportunity to expand ideas and be animated than they do girls and that they reinforce boys more for general responses than they do for girls." (Marshall, 1997)

Gender bias is also taught implicitly through the resources chosen for classroom use. Using texts that omit contributions of women, that tokenize the experiences of women, or that stereotype gender roles, further compounds gender bias in schools' curriculum. While research shows that the use of gender-equitable materials allows students to have more gender-balanced knowledge, to develop more flexible attitudes towards gender roles, and to imitate role behaviors contained in the materials (Klein, 1985) schools continue to use gender-biased texts:

Once teachers have recognized their gender-biased behaviors, they need to be provided with resources to help them change. In their study focusing on how the effects of a gender resource model would affect gender-biased teaching behaviors, Jones, Evans, Burns, and Campbell (2000) provided teachers with a self-directed module aimed at reducing gender bias in the classroom. The module contained research on gender equity in the classroom, specific activities to reduce stereotypical thinking in students, and self-evaluation worksheets for teachers. The findings from this study support the hypothesis that "...female students would move from a position of relative deficiency toward more equity in total interactions...." (Jones, <https://assignbuster.com/gender-bias-in-education/>)

2000) This demonstrates that teachers who are made aware of their gender-biased teaching behaviors and then provided with strategies and resources to combat bias are better able to promote gender equity in their classrooms.

However, beyond changing their own teaching behaviors, teachers need to be aware of the gender bias imbedded in many educational materials and texts and need to take steps to combat this bias. Curriculum researchers have established six attributes that need to be considered when trying to establish a gender-equitable curriculum. Gender-fair materials need to acknowledge and affirm variation. They need to be inclusive, accurate, affirmative, representative, and integrated, weaving together the experiences, needs, and interests of both males and females. (Bailey, 1992)

“ We need to look at the stories we are telling our students and children. Far too many of our classroom examples, storybooks, and texts describe a world in which boys and men are bright, curious, brave, inventive, and powerful, but girls and women are silent, passive, and invisible.” (McCormick, 1995)

Furthermore, teachers can help students identify gender-bias in texts and facilitate critical discussions as to why that bias exists.

Departments of education should be providing mandatory gender-equity resource modules to in-service teachers, and gender bias needs to be addressed with all pre-service teachers. Educators need to be made aware of the bias they are reinforcing in their students through socialization messages, inequitable division of special education services, sexist texts and materials, and unbalanced time and types of attention spent on boys and girls in the classroom. “ Until educational sexism is eradicated, more than half our children will be shortchanged and their gifts lost to society.” (Sadker, <https://assignbuster.com/gender-bias-in-education/>)

1994). With the emergence of feminist movements and human rights groups, steps have been taken to address gender bias, a historical bias that has pervaded humanity for centuries. The creation and utilization of gender neutral terms and the entrance of men in traditionally females roles and women in male roles has been greeted with mixed feelings. There is still much to be done to correct the imbalance, a step which will require the merging and coming together of many social groups that have defiantly kept the barriers.

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