

Challenging Gender Bias in Fifth Grade

By: Catherine E. Matthews, Wendy Binkley, Amanda Crisp, and Kimberly Gregg

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

At a university seminar in elementary education, seniors discussing the book *Failing at Fairness* (Sadker and Sadker 1994) disagreed about the importance of gender bias in elementary schools. Some argued that gender equity was not a problem for elementary children. Others contended that gender equity was a significant issue that could affect both the academic and personal success of elementary children. Though some in the group wanted to discuss what teachers could do to avoid gender bias, a fair number of other participants were ready to discount the whole issue as "no big deal."

A class of 5th graders echoed this sentiment when we asked them to engage in a serious, year-long consideration of gender equity. "What's the big deal?" they responded. They soon discovered their own answers to that question. After practicing how to recognize gender inequities--and learning ways to resolve such situations--these same 5th graders were quick to point out incidents of unfair treatment in their classroom and to offer possible solutions.

AN ELEMENTARY SEX EQUITY PROJECT

As part of a senior research project, we began a year-long study to test interventions designed to make elementary students and teachers more aware of gender equity issues and to give them tools to resolve these situations. We agreed with Sadker and Sadker that "Gender equity should not be a secret goal but one shared with students" (1994, p. 270).

We decided to work with 5th graders in a new school in Guilford County, North Carolina. The school is located in an upper-middle-class area. Most of the children are from the surrounding neighborhood, though a few are bused from nearby government housing.

The teacher in this 5th grade classroom had recently completed several graduate-level projects on gender equity and readily agreed to host our study. She also agreed she would not address gender equity issues with students herself.

The class had 22 children: 11 boys and 11 girls. Four of the students were black (2 girls and 2 boys), and 18 were white (including 1 student from Sweden). We began our study in September by observing the classroom and taking notes. We conducted observations once a month for four months.

Before we began the study, we read countless articles about how gender bias could affect children. Many articles pointed to the following issues:

- * Teachers call on boys more frequently than girls;
- * Teachers give boys more extensive feedback;
- * Teachers punish boys more severely than girls for the same infractions; and
- * In mixed-sex groups, boys take leadership roles and girls defer to their decisions.

We also had seen these expectations and stereotypes emerge in our own school internship experiences.

FIRST OBSERVATIONS

Our initial observations were not surprising. We saw many instances of inequitable interactions. For example, during our first observation period, a guest speaker on drug prevention conducted a small-group activity with students. Reporters came to the front of the room to share each group's findings. Of six small groups, one girl and five boys gave reports. We stayed for lunch that day and observed a sex-segregated 5th grade in the school cafeteria: boys at one table and girls at another. At recess, boys played kickball, and girls hung around the sidewalk and talked with one another. But as the American Association of University Women pointed out in 1992, most of these students didn't show dissatisfaction with the way things were.

On our second visit, the school guidance counselor worked with the class. Students again formed small groups. The counselor asked each group to create a machine that would produce both sounds and actions. In one group of three girls and a boy, the boy was sullen and not engaged. When the counselor asked why he wasn't participating, he told her that the girls had excluded him. She quickly told the girls to include the boy. At that point, he grabbed a pencil from a girl's hand and erased what she had written because he'd thought of something else. When the small groups demonstrated their machines, they were asked to call on other students to name the machines. Boys were called on 31 times, and girls were called on 13 times.

After two days of classroom observation, we knew three boys' names and only one girl's name in the class. Boys would shout out answers more frequently than girls. Boys' names were always on the behavioral chart, and some teachers referred to all students as "guys."

GENDER EQUITY FOR KIDS

We began our interventions with the class in February. Each month we introduced an activity, followed by written responses and then a discussion. Also in February, we asked students to answer a 10-item questionnaire (see fig. 1). Then we spent an hour reviewing with them a program called "Gender Equity for Kids," included on a CD-ROM entitled *Gender Equity in the Elementary School* (Hodgin et al. 1997; see also Levin and Matthews 1997). This multimedia program includes cartoons, video clips, a job match, and open-ended responses to various vignettes on gender equity. The class especially enjoyed the video clips depicting fair and unfair interactions in the classroom.

For example, one scene shows boys and girls looking through a microscope. Boys have the equipment. When a girl asks to see, too, a boy replies that science is for boys. When that same scene is replayed--with shared equipment--a girl says to the group, "Look what I found," and a boy in the group says, "Science is cool."

In a vignette called "Gender Jumping," a boy approaches girls jumping rope and asks to jump, too. The girls say, "No! Jumping rope is for girls." In the following scene, when the boy approaches the group and asks to jump, the girls say, "Sure. Just get in line."

POWERFUL CASE STUDIES

In March and April, students read and discussed one case study per visit. We decided to use case studies because we had enjoyed their rich basis for discussion and their open-ended nature in our own university classes. We thought elementary children might enjoy them, too, and that they could be an effective vehicle for considering gender equity.

We offered students short stories about fictional characters, but the stories depicted events that had really occurred. Students silently read each case, then joined one of three small groups. Each of us facilitated a small-group discussion about the case, and some of the most insightful comments about gender equity came from these conversations, which we audiotaped.

The first case study involves a 5th grade girl named Jenny and her teacher, Mrs. Hill. Mrs. Hill asked a question during class, and Jenny knew the answer. Waiting patiently with her hand raised, Jenny watched while a boy shouted out the answer, which Mrs. Hill then accepted. Jenny approached Mrs. Hill later, near tears, pointing

out that the teacher had unfairly ignored her raised hand. The teacher said it was impossible to call on every student during a lesson. Jenny insisted that it was unfair to accept the boy's shouted answer out of turn. Mrs. Hill tried to comfort Jenny. She pointed out that it didn't matter that the answer was shouted out, and she also observed, "Boys will be boys."

In the second case study, a kindergarten boy is afraid to return to school the day after having his picture taken. The school photographer had asked the class to repeat after him: "One, two, fleas." Then, as he snapped the photograph he added, "All boys have fleas." When the boy's mother called to complain to the principal, she revealed that her son had been up all night crying because other students picked on him about having fleas. He did not want to go back to school because of the "mean photographer."

Following the first case study, we held open-ended discussions. After the second case study, we gave students a set of guide questions, such as, What would you do if you were the parent? What would you do if you were the principal or teacher? What should have been done differently? Have you ever seen something like this before?

Both case studies generated considerable interest and response among the students. They were particularly struck by the statement, "Boys will be boys." They had heard the phrase used before, but now they wanted to know more about it and to explore its hidden meanings.

In one group, a boy noted, "Boys just act a certain way ... different than girls." A girl replied, "What does that mean, anyway? Why should a boy act a certain way and a girl another?" A researcher then asked, "Do boys and girls act differently?" A boy replied, "Yes. Boys run around and get in trouble. We are loud. Girls don't do that stuff. They get upset a lot." A girl noted, "Yeah. If I do boy stuff I am called a tomboy. Just because I like to play ball, I'm considered to be a tomboy." Another girl chimed in, "It shouldn't matter what you are. You should be able to do what you want."

In another small group, a boy said, "That quote means boys do things like climb trees. Girls wouldn't do that or they would break a nail." A girl interjected, "That's not true because I am a girl, and I climb trees."

In yet another small group, a girl commented, "Mrs. Hill is trying to say that boys that shout out will be boys, and girls that shout out are not girls; they get into trouble. Jenny is mad because she's saying that when boys shout out, they don't get into trouble, but when girls shout out it's very awkward. So, when boys shout out, it's okay; and when girls shout out, it's not."

WHAT STUDENTS LEARNED

We completed our project by asking students to fill out the same questionnaire they answered in February. We also discussed our visits, gathering some interesting information from the students.

For example, during and immediately after working with the "Gender Equity for Kids" program, few students related the incidents to their own lives. Yet during discussions on our last day, a girl in one of the small groups said that she especially liked the CD-ROM because you could see what was happening. Another student said, "It showed how boys and girls were treated differently in the same situation."

Students remembered details of the scene from the science classroom and related it to their personal experiences in the science lab. One girl said, "We were weighing stuff and comparing the weights and the boys kept saying that it was wrong." Another girl chimed in, "The boys didn't want us to touch anything." A boy added, "We thought your hands were too wobbly." Yet another girl replied, "They said we had better handwriting." It was clear that these 5th graders had applied lessons from the CD-ROM to their own lives.

One part of the pretest-post-test questionnaire asked the 5th graders to name the best students in their class in science, math, social studies, and English. Boys were more likely to name a boy as the best student in mathematics and science while they were just as likely to name either a boy or a girl as the best student in

English or social studies. Girls, on the other hand, named girls as best in English and both boys and girls nearly equally as best in math, science, and social studies. Sound familiar? The researchers would say so!

Boys overwhelmingly named other boys as students who most contributed to class discussions while girls were more likely to name both boys and girls as students who contributed most to class discussions. Both boys and girls thought that their teachers called on more of their same-sex classmates. Both sexes preferred to work in groups with members of the same sex. All students stated that they liked to answer questions in class. Most students preferred working in groups to working alone. Boys preferred jobs as doctors and scientists while girls wanted jobs as teachers.

The students had some advice for teachers to help them be fair: "When you're calling on people, call on a girl, then a boy, then a girl, then a boy next." Or, "Call on everybody, even the ones not raising their hand." Another student suggested, "A way you can be fair to both boys and girls is to always have an open mind. Don't let just girls run errands and don't let just boys run errands."

At the conclusion of the study, we began to see that just as members of our senior seminar had struggled to understand gender equity issues, so had the 5th graders who tried to decide for themselves what fairness meant. It is difficult for both college students and 5th graders to observe and understand gender inequity--because gender inequity is so common and familiar, it doesn't always grab our attention.

Elementary teachers often unwittingly play a part in creating inequitable environments for the children in their classes. But our senior project made us more aware of both the problems and the possibilities when it comes to fairness for both boys and girls. We felt especially rewarded when one girl told us, "I really like the fact that teachers care about us participating."

We believe it is important to share what we know about gender equity with children in the classroom. Teachers are important role models, and nothing is more important to elementary school students than a sense of fairness. Fair teachers help students recognize individual, painful emotions for what they are. Fair teachers help create fair classrooms.

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FIGURE 1 GENDER EQUITY QUESTIONNAIRE--SAMPLE ITEMS

1. Is your teacher fair? (Yes or No.) Give an example.
2. Are boys or girls the best students in your class in these subjects: English...Math...Science...Social Studies...
3. Are there certain jobs that only girls do in your class? Are there certain jobs that only boys do?
4. What do you want to be when you grow up? (Rate from 1 to 5.)
Doctor...Homemaker...Lawyer...Scientist...Teacher ...
5. Do you like to answer questions in class?