

Boys Will Be Boys?

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Awareness of gender inequities in education has been with us for the past two decades, yet inequities still remain between girls and boys in the education they receive in schools. This is the fourth in a series of articles which examines gender inequities as they occur and may be changed in home economics classrooms.

Just like a typical grade eight boy!" or "Boys will be boys!" we often hear from home economics teachers when we wonder about boy-student behaviour. In such expressions, we convey recognition and acceptance of what we regard as "natural" boy behaviour. At the same time, teachers often readily accept the quietness and silence of girls in their classes. Both the silence of the girls and the loud, uncensored, over-exuberance of boys are learned gendered behaviours and as teachers, we often reinforce these behaviours. Consider research in classrooms which indicates that boys tend to dominate interactions with the teacher. When girls receive equal amounts of interaction in a class, both the boys and girls perceive the girls as getting more of the attention. Although the ways we respond to girls and boys have a certain naturalness to us as teachers, our expectations and perceptions are often as thoroughly gendered as our students. Gender inequities are easily perpetuated within the normal discussions of the classroom and the interactions between students and the teacher, without the teacher being aware of a problem.

Before inequities in the classroom can be addressed, we need to become aware of the occurrences. Some questions to think about as a teacher might be: Would I expect the same of this student if she were a boy? If he were a girl? Did I accept that because he was a boy (and not a girl)? Am I changing what (or how) I am going to teach because I am concerned with the ways the boys will react? Did he respond in that way to my question (or request) because he is a boy and I am a woman teacher? Would he respond the same way to a male science (or physical education) teacher?

These questions cause us to stand back from our lessons and relations with students to analyze social dynamics. The "naturalness" of gendered behaviour makes it very difficult for students to be aware of what they are experiencing and the effects it may be having on them. If we ask girls, they may not feel they are being derided, harassed, or silenced, because these experiences are a "natural" part of being a girl. When asked if they are harassed and called offensive names in the hallways, they may claim that it doesn't bother them and they just give it back" (see Eyre, 1992 a & b). However, Sue Lees (1986) has

shown that girls do not have available to them the extensive number of words that boys have with which to retaliate verbally. Boys, on the other hand, have a wealth of negative terms to use against girls which simultaneously condemn their character and sexuality: pig, slut cow, bitch, whore, lessie, etc.

Becoming aware of gender inequities and deciding what should be done about them can be a legitimate and on-going focus of all home economics classes. We teach about communication, cooperation, and human relationships, and we also expect students to act according to what is right and just. Students as well as teachers would benefit from thinking about gender. Inequities exist throughout schools and can become a focus for study and analysis. Questions regarding work and wages, roles and authority can be asked about the numbers of women versus men teachers in various subject areas and whether the cleaners, cooks, and administrators are women or men. Questions regarding stereotypes can be asked about the numbers of girls and boys enrolled in science classes versus fine arts or technology studies versus home economics. An awareness activity to open discussion on stereotyping and discrimination can begin with having the boys and girls in your class imagine they wake up one morning and their sex has been changed; the girls wake up as boys, the boys wake up as girls. Have them write about all the advantages and disadvantages they can imagine about being the "other". Analyze the writings and discuss in the large group who considers who the most advantaged and why. Besides the questions we can ask ourselves as we reflect on daily classroom interactions, we can also use a colleague or students to observe and tally the number of interactions in the classroom (see accompanying observation tool by Marian Dodds).

Awareness about roles, gender inequities, and stereotypes has a place in discussion and analysis in any foods, clothing, or family class because home economics has been and still is so thoroughly identified with "women's" work. Questions in clothing classes could include: Who does the sewing and mending in your home? Why? Who should? Who does the factory sewing of clothing? At what wages and under what conditions? Are most factory owners women or men? Are most designers women or men? Why do you think men and women take the roles they do in clothing manufacture and merchandising? Questions in foods classes could include: Who does the food preparation in your family? The shopping? When and under what conditions? Why? Who do you think should? Who does most commercial cooking and food service? In what kinds of institutions? Under what conditions and at what wages? Are most food managers women or men? Why do you think men and women take the roles they do in food production, manufacture, preparation, and service? Questions in family classes could include: Who talks and who listens most in girl/boy conversations? What does each contribute to a conversation? Why? Who does most of the emotional and physical nurturing and caring in your family? Why? Who should? Who does most of the emotional and nurturing/caring in social institutions? At what wages and under what conditions? Who do you think should? In this way, gender awareness and analysis could become a basic introductory lesson in each of our courses right along with measuring, kitchen organization, sewing machine parts, and communication skills.

If we make the awareness and analysis of gender relations a part of all courses, we would then, as Linda Eyre recommends, place “gender relations on the agenda in the classroom” (1992b, p. 270). Gender relations would be part of the lessons as well as a consciousness and concern to be addressed throughout all courses. Let's consider a couple of other examples where action could be taken. Linda Eyre (1992 a S b) found in her research (and many of us have observed) girls dominating boys in group work or preparations when they are more skilled or have the "power" which comes with more experience and familiarity. Girls may make boys clean up but not let them prepare a particular food product, or girls may do all the measuring and mixing while the boys stand aside and watch. Such occurrences are occasions for discussing with students who should do what and why. Is the purpose of a lab preparation for the least skilled individuals to learn new skills or the most skilled to demonstrate their higher proficiency? How can girls and boys cooperate in a just and equitable manner when they bring to situations unequal skills and identifications with the tasks at hand? This is a question which can be discussed with students once the awareness of such occurrences are recognized, and students will be able to decide on ways of working more equitably together.

One other instance in a classroom comes to mind. The teacher is taking up a questionnaire with grade eight students, probing what influences the reasons for the students' wearing or not wearing a particular item of clothing. Repeatedly, one boy answers "If, Janice has seen you in it" and giggles derisively. Some of the other students look puzzled, some join in the giggling. It becomes apparent that the derision is directed at Janice. Several possible equity questions arise. Is this a form of gender harassment when the object of the harassment is not present even to defend herself? Is this boy not taking the question and task seriously thereby also diminishing the value of the lesson the woman teacher is attempting to develop? The teacher challenges the student on not giving serious answers but not on making hostile and hurtful comments about a girl student. A serious attempt at putting gender relations on the agenda would require the teacher to address such student responses as gender, issues on the spot when they arise.

A serious attempt at putting gender relations on the classroom agenda will require us to increase our awareness, to involve students in becoming aware and conscious of gender inequities in their own experiences, and to move from awareness to analysis, critique and taking action to make changes in creating more equitable environments and lessons for all students.

References

- Eyre, Linda (1992a). Re-visiting the coeducational classroom. In L. Peterat & E. Vaines (Eds.) *Lives and plans. Signs for transforming practice* (pp. 125-150). Mission Hill, CA: Glencoe.
- Eyre, Linda (1992b). *The social construction of gender in the practical arts*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.
- Lees, Sue (1986). *Losing out, Sexuality and adolescent girls*. Dover, NH: Hutchinson.

Looking In On Your Classroom: Tools For Observation

By Marian Dodds

Note: the following observation tool has been revised. If clarification is required, please see the original article.

Have a colleague sit in on a class and gather data using one of the observation tools below:

EXAMPLE A - Keep a tally of male / female interactions. The following are sample data.

a. Class composition: M: 15 - 50%: F: 15 - 50%

b. Discipline/control statements directed to:

Males: ||||| (12) Females: ||| (3)

c. Student volunteered responses:

Males: ||||| (11) Females: |||| (4)

d. Students asking for assistance:

Males: ||||| (6) Females: | (1)

e. Students asking questions of teacher:

Males: ||||| (6) Females: |||| (4)

f. Teacher questions directed at individual students:

Males: ||||| (7) Females: ||||| (8)

EXAMPLE B - Prepare a diagram of the classroom with a box for the teacher and each student.

Keep track of specific questions with symbols:

- undirected teacher initiated questions (i.e. to the whole group)

- teacher initiated ↓

- student initiated ↑

- draw a line across for additional interactions

After The Observation

Analyze the data to determine whether both male and female students have received a fair share of time and attention. For Example A: Although the class had an equal number of male and female students, the males had 40 out of 60 or two thirds of the contacts with the teacher. The teacher had directed more questions at females (8/15 in f), but the males volunteered more responses, asked for more assistance, and required more discipline/control statements. For Example B: While this example provides less detail, it does help pinpoint who specifically is and is not getting the attention. This model is also useful when examining attention to students of various ethnic backgrounds. For both examples, it is important to be clear on the teaching strategy being used before deciding on an observation method. Both of these examples would be most appropriate when some level of student participation is desired.