

**Our Students Listened
But Did Not Hear:
Sexism in Prospective Teachers**

By Janice L. Streitmatter and Alan R. Tom

Gender equity is rarely addressed in initial teacher preparation programs; instead these programs have increasingly emphasized research findings from the literature on effective teaching. Due to this focus, prospective teachers are probably better prepared today than in the past to plan, organize, and manage their classrooms, but text materials on effective teaching tend to omit equity issues or to segregate these issues in a single chapter (e.g., Arends, 1991; Borich, 1992; Kauchak & Eggen, 1989). When issues of gender equity—as well as such other equity topics as multicultural education and social class—are dealt with in teacher education programs, these issues are most often part of the introductory social foundations course, and they may easily be seen as unrelated to the everyday practice of classroom teaching.

In this paper we examine and reflect on our experience with infusing gender equity into a general methods course. In this team-teaching situation, we attempted both to teach about and to model gender equitable relations. However, our students frequently

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seemed to display sexist attitudes, sometimes in striking ways. At best, our efforts at educating prospective teachers about sexism and gender equity seemed to yield superficial awareness and short-term change.

Unit of Study on Gender Equity

Gender equity was the central topic in a unit on equity, one of four major sections in the course of study. During course planning, we, as team instructors with a commitment to feminism, selected course content and devised teaching methods so that we could address gender equity in a variety of ways. Lectures, labs, and field observations for that portion of the course were designed to address this issue directly.

During the two weeks allocated to gender equity, we attempted to include major gender equity issues that normally occur within classrooms. For example, a lecture was devoted to the behavioral and academic problems stemming from the gender biases of teachers. A sampling of gender-based problems for girls and for boys was presented, e.g., teachers tend to discipline boys more often than girls, and to perceive girls in the primary grades as better readers than boys. Another activity focused on the issue of sexist language by having the prospective teachers participate in the well-known “Draw a Caveman” activity. As a culminating class activity, students examined a number of old and current texts for gender bias. In addition, during one of their field observations in a secondary classroom, our students focused on gender equity.

We also took several less obvious steps toward modeling gender equity, outside as well as within our campus classroom. Over the semester of lectures, labs, and discussions, we took care to split lecture time, to direct discussion on a shared basis, to sit together, and to alternate responsibility for grading papers. We carefully tried to avoid using sexist language, and we gently corrected such language when employed by the students. While we did not do so with equity in mind, we did establish concurrent office hours (immediately following the class on both Tuesday and Thursday) so that students could have equal access to the instructors.

Student Reactions

The nine men and 17 women in the class demonstrated a range of sex-sensitive and sexist behaviors, as one might expect in any given class. Our students, for example, did not respond to the gender equity portion of the course by gender groups. In fact, while there was a range of behaviors, that range tended to reflect overall conservative attitudes. The 26 students participated in the activities as required, but without great interest or enthusiasm, and they rarely reflected on their own gender attitudes. While it could be argued that not enough activities were included or that inadequate time was allocated to the subject, we expected acknowledgement from some students about the importance of the issue. However,

none of the students indicated an interest in considering gender equity as an issue for further reflection beyond the parameters of the course.

This lack of reaction was troublesome to the instructors, as was the behavior of some of the students toward the instructors as people. The students often reacted to us on the basis of gender stereotypes, not according to our individual personalities. This pattern may have begun early in the semester but did not get crystallized until mid-term when we administered a feedback sheet. Most of the questions dealt with course content or the use of time in class, but the final question was designed to assess how our teaming was perceived: "You have two instructors team-teaching the class. Is one more dominant? What are your general reactions to teaming?" Of those who responded, eight indicated they liked a balance and that neither instructor was dominant. One student indicated that the female instructor was more dominant; two others said she "lectures more." The latter response probably was related to the female instructor's tendency to develop ideas through a more systematic and detailed presentation of content than used by the discussion-oriented male instructor. One respondent chose to deal with the question in personality terms; this student spoke of the female instructor as more "fun" and the male as more "serious," a distinction of doubtful factual basis.

By the end of the semester, many students often dealt with the instructors in terms of gender stereotypes. In responding to the question on the standardized final course evaluation which asked, "What are your general comments about the instructor(s) in this course?," only three students considered both instructors in the same breath (e.g., "both were well organized and well informed"). Instead, the bulk of the students ascribed what could be considered gender-stereotyped characteristics to the instructors. The male instructor received more comments that described him as what might be considered business-like, while the female instructor received comments that described her according to feminine traits such as "compassionate" or "nice." The male was perceived as the team member who was more likely to deliver important content and ideas, while the female was seen as being responsible for nurturing and encouraging students.

Some Telling Instances of Stereotyping

As the course unfolded, the actual behaviors and interactions of the instructors were frequently at odds with the stereotyped responses of the students described above. One potent incident illustrates this point well. From the beginning, the instructors disagreed about the issue of mandatory attendance for the students. The female instructor felt strongly that the students ought to sign in each class session, with penalties for excessive absence. The male instructor felt equally strongly that the students ought to monitor themselves in this area. For several sessions, the students signed an attendance sheet. During a class discussion about classroom climate in elementary and secondary schools, the direction of the discussion turned

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to the climate in our class. The use of an attendance sheet was proposed by the male instructor as an example of a custodial climate in a teacher-centered classroom. At that point, the class discussion turned from a rather abstract look at elements of classroom climate, to an examination of the climate in our own classroom. The outcome of the class discussion, which was led by the male instructor, was that the practice of using an attendance sheet would be discontinued. The female instructor chose not to participate in the discussion after making a few initial comments regarding her preference for the attendance sheet. While the atmosphere in the classroom during the discussion was relaxed and the issue addressed in a light manner, the implication was that the female instructor possessed an authoritarian streak. Yet, by the end of the course, the students not only failed to view the female instructor as authoritarian, but actually attributed nurturing characteristics to her.

A second telling instance of gender stereotyping by the students concerned the ways we were addressed by the students. At the initial class meeting, we encouraged the students to learn each others' names, our names, and to call us by our first names. One female student asked the female instructor during the course of the discussion how the instructor would like to be addressed. The female instructor's response was "I like to be addressed in the same way my male colleagues are addressed. In this class, we will go by first names." For the duration of the semester, almost all of the students in the class referred to the female instructor by her first name, but most of them referred to the male instructor as "Dr. Tom." On the final course evaluation form, over two-thirds of the students listed the male instructor first when answering the question about instructor performance. It is interesting to note that where the usage of names took on a more formal and conscious form, the students were quite "correct" in the designation of the instructors. On the cover sheets of their papers, all students identified both instructors as Dr., except one female student who left the female instructor's name off the cover sheet altogether!

Less anonymous and more direct examples of sexist attitudes occurred as well. In reflecting upon the individuals in the class, we are unable to refer to any of them as "feminists." In fact, we feel fairly certain that if they had been queried, most would have said the issue of gender equity is a thing of the past, something already "taken care of." Several students made comments to this effect during our discussions. In our opinion, this stance makes them similar to other groups of 21-25 years old we have taught. Nevertheless, most teacher education students are sophisticated enough to realize it is socially inappropriate to appear sexist. However, one of our male students did just that. His statements, which were blatantly sexist during the first few sessions of the class, were corrected on occasion by a class member, but more often were "redirected" by one of us. The male instructor was particularly careful not to pounce on the student, instead giving considerable "wait time" so that another student might catch the remark. By the end of the semester, this male student chose not to participate in class discussion at all. The instructors evidently had not succeeded in engaging him in reflection on his own sexist attitudes but rather had

encouraged him to opt out of classroom exchanges, and thus to keep his sexist ideas intact but private.

Office Hours and Other Patterns

Another interesting pattern was the students' reliance on visiting the female instructor during her office hours. Several factors might have encouraged students to seek out the male instructor rather than the female. For instance, the male was much more available. (It should be pointed out that the male instructor was also the division chair, thereby representing constituted authority. On the one hand students might have sought him out because he could be seen as the one most likely to have "the" answers. Conversely, those who might react negatively to an "authority" might be more likely to avoid him due to the status of the position). The hours the male instructor was present on campus were at least three times that of the female. In addition, he was slightly more visible in the field site schools, visiting several more times than did the female. However, with a single exception, a phone conversation, students came to the female instructor with their questions about the course.

The content of these questions tended to deal with grading. Over half of the students became convinced that the female instructor was a "better or fairer" (read easier) grader than the male. The first of three sets of papers was graded by the female, the second set by the male, and the third and last set by the female. Upon reviewing the grade records, there was no discernable pattern of "softer" grading by the female instructor. While the male instructor gave a lower grade to six students for the second paper than those students had received from the female instructor for the first paper, the grades for the third round of papers showed the female instructor also gave six lower grades compared to the second group of papers. The changes in grading were fairly evenly distributed by gender of the student in both comparisons. While the students did not have the grade records to consider as evidence of their bias, they persevered in their opinions—conveyed a number of times to the female instructor—that the male instructor was the tougher grader.

A final example presented the most vivid evidence of differentiation between the instructors by gender. A female student got to the point where she convinced herself that the male instructor was the personification of evil. She spoke openly with the female instructor of fearing the male instructor and refused to speak with him in private regarding her grades or any other class related questions. No amount of dialogue between this student and the female instructor could convince the student that she had a skewed view of the male instructor. Finally, when the last paper was due and the final exam was to be held in one week, the student became tearful in her requests that the female instructor grade her work. While it is tempting to consider this behavior manipulative on the student's part, we are convinced it was not. Instead we came to interpret her behavior as that of a female who responded to

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males as authority figures regardless of the actual personalities of the males. She was the most extreme example of the many students who took each of us, considered our gender, and often interacted with us according to gender stereotypes.

Commitment Remains Firm

We continue to be firmly committed to gender equity as an essential element in an initial teacher preparation program. While students may study this issue in a social foundations course, it is crucial that it also become integrated into courses which discuss the methods and mechanics of teaching. These courses, particularly if they have a field component, are probably perceived by the students as being more “real” and relevant than the ancillary courses such as developmental psychology or social foundations. And, by including gender equity in general methods classes, students may be more likely to understand the relationship between classroom instruction and organization and the gender dynamics among their students.

We are troubled, however, by the deep-seated and apparently unconscious sexist attitudes brought to our class by the prospective teachers. For the majority of students these attitudes may well be impervious to change through the usual instructional means of addressing the issue of gender equity. In other words, the prospective teachers may understand such issues as having females as well as males represented in text materials on a very superficial level, without realizing the degree to which their own sexist attitudes are interrelated with a wide range of personal and teaching behaviors. Moreover, if their own sexism is unconscious, they cannot deal constructively with the sexist practices of their own elementary and secondary school students.

Finally, we are perplexed about how to challenge and possibly alter teacher education students’ attitudes about gender. Our shared experience with one teacher education class and our past individual teaching efforts suggest that changing adults’ gender stereotypes is quite difficult. Perhaps too few of our prospective teachers had teachers who promoted gender equity among their students due to the increasing emphasis on effective teaching practices during the 1980s. Perhaps they encountered some teachers who demonstrated a commitment to gender equity, but not as a consistent and high priority so that gender “lessons” had no staying power. Or perhaps the efforts of some teachers regarding gender equity were thwarted by an overwhelming societal message in support of inequity.

An Applicable Model

A model addressing the evolution of school desegregation and staff development may be applicable to the issue of gender equity in teacher education. Sleeter (1990) conceptualizes desegregation and integration efforts within a “generational” framework. First generation efforts were those of legally mandated desegregation, in which school populations came to reflect an ethnic/racial mixture by

means of either voluntary or mandatory desegregation. Second generation desegregation entailed the removal of barriers that prevented equal access to programs. In the first two generations of desegregation, the racial attitudes of teachers were addressed. Third generation staff development, the current context, focuses on “school processes specifically intended to provide equal learning outcomes, rather than changed attitudes” (p. 35). Rather than being confronted with their racial attitudes or being required to master multicultural content, teachers in this third generation must focus on the relative academic success of students from varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

This generational conception of multicultural education can be adapted to gender issues in teacher education. The early stages of gender equity training dealt with the legal implications of gender discrimination (Title IX) and with some of the less subtle aspects of gender bias, such as portraying people in teaching materials in non-traditional and non-stereotypical activities. The second generation of gender equity focuses on socially correct beliefs—e.g., addressing males and females in the same fashion—and on such gender stereotypes as the notion that female instructors are compassionate or caring while male instructors provide students with knowledge or intellectual expertise. Such preconceived notions illustrate the subtle and often unconscious sexist attitudes that ultimately may have a more powerful effect on young students than the more overt aspects of sexism.

The third generation of gender equity can be conceived of as the adoption of non-sexist teaching strategies, analogous to the third generation emphasis in multicultural education on equalizing learning outcomes. The decision to use such gender equity teaching strategies may result from changed attitudes on the part of the teacher. Or perhaps not. The teacher may need to be “encouraged” to use these practices, either by having school administrators mandate their use or by having teacher educators introduce and promote these strategies during preservice teacher education.

A Staff Development Rationale

Guskey’s (1986) approach to teacher change through staff development provides a rationale for focusing gender equity efforts directly on teacher behavior. Rather than viewing change in teacher attitudes as a prerequisite for change in teacher strategies (and ultimately in student learning), Guskey argues that “change in teachers’ attitudes takes place primarily **after** [emphasis added] some change in student learning has been evidenced” (p.8). Guskey gives several reasons for believing that behavioral change tends to precede attitudinal change, including the tendency of teachers to institute those classroom practices that work with their students. If Guskey is correct in his hypothesis that attitudinal change is more a result than a cause of new teacher strategies, then focusing gender equity education on teacher attitudes is largely a waste of time.

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We tend to agree with Guskey's (1986) interpretation of the process of teacher change, although the female author does so more than the male author (see Tom, 1986). Based on our experience in teaching this and related courses, we feel Guskey is on the right track regarding the seeming irrelevance of addressing attitudes if the ultimate goal is change in behavior. During our course, we were unable to change the gender attitudes of our students, let alone challenge the practices that those attitudes helped justify.

Strategies and content for approaching the first two generations of gender equity education have been well developed in the literature. The means for getting to the root of sexist attitudes and creating lasting change in teacher behavior, as in the third generation of gender equity, is not yet clear. Is confrontation a viable means of creating behavioral changes? Does a teacher educator have the moral right to confront prospective teachers in their sexist attitudes and behaviors, either publicly or privately? We chose not to do so, since our power position over students could easily have been viewed as attempted indoctrination. If this type of confrontation were to be done, teacher education students might correct the "error" of their ways, or, on the other hand, might deeply resent the perceived invasion of their privacy. Another outcome of such a forceful approach could be such anger on the part of prospective teachers that their existing attitudes and behaviors would be actually reinforced. Yet to fail to confront sexism in future teachers means that they may well perpetuate sexism in their students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The reader may wonder whether we are overreacting to the attitudes and behavior of our teacher education students. Perhaps our own behavior was correctly perceived by the students in our class; to some large extent we may fit the gender stereotypes into which our students placed us. We do grant that it is impossible for us to know whether all of our interpretations are valid, as we were deeply embedded in the very situation that we were studying. And some of the events had to be recreated by us, since we did not enter the general methods class intending to study the differing ways students would react to us. Yet there were patterns of behavior, not mere singular instances of bias. Moreover, the contrast was substantial between our students' "socially correct" attitudes and behavior related to our instructional sessions and their informal and unguarded behavior as they interacted with us. The dynamic that helped reveal their sexist behavior was the teaming of the class, with one team member being female and the other male. In a sense, every day that we taught class was a real life test of their underlying gender attitudes and behavior.

We have come to believe that the overall issue of gender equity is too important to ignore, especially with so little emphasis being placed on it in teacher education programs despite recent confirmation of persisting sexism in the schools (AAUW Report, 1992). Further, just as any indication or evidence of racism in teacher

education students would be confronted and not tolerated, behaviors reflecting sexism must somehow be called to the fore and publicly be declared unacceptable. We conclude that subtle persuasion or superficial instructional treatment of sexism is not adequate for dealing with the issue of gender equity in teacher education. We must develop more substantial measures, but we must also maintain respect for the personhood of each of our students. While uncomfortable, that tension is the proper context for achieving a reasoned rethinking of the gender views of prospective teachers.

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