

Understanding Gender: In Society, Schools, and the Artroom

“From culture to culture, the male-female distinction has been assigned meanings and significance that have implications for work, family, leisure, and ritual—virtually all aspects of social life. Yet, it is only within fairly recent history that we have begun to stand back from and question the meanings that cultures have placed on femaleness and maleness, femininity and masculinity.”

—Hilary M. Lips, *Sex and Gender: An Introduction* (1997).¹

You may think that gender is the clearest and most obvious concept one can imagine. After all, there are boys and girls. In the words of the old cliché: “What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and all things nice. What are little boys made of? Snips and snails and puppy dog tails.” Although most people today understand the absurdity of this rhyme, people and society often treat boys and girls as opposites. To the superficial observer, boys and girls don’t seem to look alike, act alike, think the same thoughts, or possess the same abilities.

How true and how widespread are these apparent differences? Where meaningful differences seem to exist between the sexes, how much of this difference is biological? How much is a product of a socialization process that begins at birth?

Socialization is the lifelong process by which society defines what is expected of us as individuals. Why do people focus so much on differences between boys and girls, rather than looking at individual differences among boys, or among girls, and at similarities that cross gender lines? How much of society's belief that there are fundamental differences between boys and girls is simply a matter of self-fulfilling expectations? In other words, do people exaggerate differences and ignore similarities because they accept the basic idea that boys and girls are very different kinds of people? These are the kinds of questions psychologists and others have begun to ask, particularly over the past thirty years. And these are important questions for all teachers because their assumptions

about gender can affect not only how they teach a subject, but also how they treat boys and girls in the classroom.

Gender Expectations: How We Treat Boys and Girls

People begin to treat boys and girls differently at birth. One of the first questions parents are asked when they are expecting the birth of a child is: "Do you want a boy or a girl?" One of the first facts people confirm after a birth is the sex of the child. Studies have also shown that parents have differing expectations and practice differing treatment of male or female babies. Other experiments have shown that when the identical infant is presented to strangers as a boy, and then to others as a girl, the child is treated entirely differently.² Think about what an impact this different treatment of boys and girls has, particularly when it happens every day. Think about the powerful effect the classroom has in the gender socialization process. Teachers may question whether this differential treatment is healthy

1.1 Stereotypical boys' toys.
Photo: Frances Thurber.



1.2 Stereotypical girls' toys. Photo: Frances Thurber.

for girls, for boys, and for society as a whole. Current research maintains that it is not.

A mounting body of evidence demonstrates that the differing treatment and socialization of girls and boys limits the possibilities for both. Many studies support the notion that the socialization process, a major portion of which occurs in schools, has an extremely detrimental effect on girls in terms of fulfilling their full potential. In fact, what teachers often describe as girls' strengths in the classroom—good behavior, desire to please teachers, and general attention to assigned tasks—actually work against them in terms of obtaining equal, quality attention from the teacher. At the same time, boys' poor behavior often works in their favor, as they monopolize much of the teacher's attention and time.³ Research also indicates, however, that we may have strapped our male children into an emotionally repressive "boy code" which often dooms them to failure in certain academic skills such as reading and writing, and lack of success in their emotional and behavioral growth.⁴ Conscientious teachers can actively participate in efforts to reduce gender inequality. How do they begin? Sorting out some key concepts about gender issues will provide a common base for discussion.

Gender vs. Sex: A Critical Distinction for Teachers

Although people may think of "sex" and "gender" as interchangeable, these concepts are very different.⁵ "Sex," a biological concept, refers to an individual's maleness or femaleness, determined by his or her sex chromosomes. "Gender," on the other



Gender Matters

"In almost every society and culture, boys are preferred and privileged over girls. Son preference is a form of gender discrimination that begins at birth—or even before. It may be subtle, as when boys, but not girls, are encouraged to pursue advanced education . . . It may be pronounced, as when girl children are physically neglected, or given smaller shares of food, health care, or resources."

Source: Joni Seager, *The State of Women in the World Atlas, 2nd ed.* (London: Penguin Books), 1997, 34.

This may seem to be a statement that applies to other cultures, but can you think of common, though perhaps less severe, forms of gender discrimination in our society? For example, do girls receive the same level of encouragement to enter the professions or to pursue careers in business or government?

Try This: With your students, make a list of roles that adults are expected to play in society, such as: working full-time, taking care of children, cooking, serving in public office, taking care of the sick, etc. For each role, ask students to write down whether a man, a woman, or either might most likely fill that role. Ask students to give reasons for their answers and discuss their conclusions. You are likely to find that, as is common with most people, your students have very different expectations of males and females.