

Part
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OVERVIEW: GENDER EQUITY STRATEGIES IN THE CONTENT AREAS

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When the 1985 *Handbook* was published, the interest in gender equity in education in the United States was increasing in most content areas, and many of us working in gender studies thought that, with dedicated additional committed and innovative work, we would soon see dramatic, and lasting, changes and choices in education. We *have* seen some improvements, as documented in these chapters. Some of these improvements come from the work of the many people who now agree that hierarchies such as those ascribed to gender, race, and class are damaging and unwarranted in the education system. Yet, to change the effects of long-established power differentials is a large task. In addition, the problems facing society and education continue to change, altering some primary concerns and solutions; thus, the importance of the current assessment that this book constitutes.

The authors in this section of the *Handbook* have done research and extensive literature reviews for their overviews of specific areas of study, providing new energy, information, and recommendations to all who seek more effective gender equity strategies.

As the authors point out, research into the classroom experiences of girls and women continues to reveal curriculum, expectations, and classroom interaction that make clear that girls and women are not as likely as are boys and men to be considered innately bright and deserving of attention, resources, and opportunities. In general, boys and men continue to take up more space in the classroom and in the curriculum, while girls' and women's preferences, interests, and achievements are often ignored or devalued. Studies of hiring practices and promotions document the skewed, damaging treatments that many female teachers, as well as students, receive. One of the contributions of this *Handbook* is a comparison of the conditions and issues of gender equity in disciplines in 1985 and now, an assessment critical for any plans for sustained educational reforms.

Another major contribution has been the knowledge authors have gained from the debates, leading them to rethink gender equity problems and policies. New research and perspectives can better inform us about the causes, impact, and resolutions of gender equity in each content area. For example, while in the 1980s and 1990s much of the focus in education settings was on obtaining equal educational opportunities and resources, we now see more clearly that attempts to integrate and treat women and men equally do not achieve the restructuring necessary for gender equity. "Gender-blindness" is not a prime virtue or goal in the education setting today.

While most of the following chapters include information on the theories of researchers and policy analysts in the content areas, the foci are primarily on assessment and needs of students, faculty, and administrators, and on recommendations for change. Addressed here are the benefits of increased gender equity for students, the development of each field of study, and the health of institutions and the nation. Given that education is based in community, national, and global networks of beliefs and practices, the cultural norms of masculinity and femininity that place women at a disadvantage in schools, homes, and workplaces have, of course, deep, interconnected roots. Many of the authors place the individual disciplines in (a) their context (within their institutions), (b) their national political and economic settings, and (c) changing global circumstances.

Another important contribution of the chapters is the gathering in one section the work from several subjects and fields of study. Even such interdisciplinary fields as gender studies, second-language acquisition, and communication tend to be self-referential. Reading across the chapters provides valuable links and comparisons. While there are many differences in what has happened to gender equity in fields such as, say, arts, dance, and mathematics, we can see some critical similarities.

THEMES ACROSS THE CHAPTERS IN THIS SECTION

These chapters indicate that, in reference to research of gender equity in many fields of study, we have learned the following:

- Gender is not primarily a matter of sameness or difference; gender is a social hierarchy that many use as an excuse for disparities in treatment and judgments. Therefore, correcting the effects of this hierarchy for girls and boys, and women and men, in education settings requires not so much the pinpointing of sameness and differences but, primarily, the (a) highlighting of the types of inequalities, (b) search for remedies, and (c) determination to achieve equity. Yet much research in the content areas is still rooted in the paradigm of sex-based differences. (See, for example, the discussion in *Gender Equity in Social Studies*.)
- Equity is often confused with equality, which deals with equal access to resources, a necessary but not sufficient condition for equity. Advocates for equity point out that what is considered equal (a) does not necessarily remove barriers to access for girls and women, (b) does not address imbalanced treatment once they are provided access, (c) does not acknowledge diversity in each category (female/male), and (d) does not establish a way of restructuring the existing education culture. Equity involves questions about gender, race, class, and sexual orientation within a system of education, including hiring practices, policies, language, curricula, and everyday practices. The action recommendations included in each chapter provide help with ways in which the needed restructuring can be assisted.
- The sex/gender system is not binary. Race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and disabilities are other ways that women and men have been grouped. When research findings that disaggregate sex, race, and ethnic differences in education are available or can be deciphered, the authors of the following chapters have tried to include that information. Concern in these chapters about oppression, missed opportunities, and disenfranchisement, and about suggestions for change is not intended to work toward a loss for some students and teachers in order to benefit others, but toward the benefit of all. As the authors of several of the chapters in this part attest, the students' learning practices are affected by a variety of factors ranging from their learning preferences, interests, sex, age, and childhood culture.
- "Letting in" more girls and women to courses designed primarily by and for males quite clearly will not solve equity problems, or change the basic structures that have put the inequities into effect. The education curriculum and culture need to be changed in fundamental ways. For example, in engineering and science fields, this may mean (a) providing innovative summer programs for high school girls, (b) designing courses to even up experience gaps, (c) hiring more women faculty at the university level and more men at the grade school level, and (d) providing explicit training in effective classroom discussions that respect the contributions of students with differing experiences. (See *Gender Equity in Science, Engineering, and Technology*.)
- In the fields where girls and women tend to receive better scores and grades, such as literacy and modern languages, their academic success does not necessarily correspond to their workforce participation, managerial positions, or salaries. The relative underachievement in these areas by boys and men does not seem to translate into inferior jobs and salaries, nor does it seem to diminish their self-confidence. Boys tend to explain their underachievement through external factors such as inadequacy of their teachers or the format of the exam, or through a perception of reading as feminine and, thus, an activity to be avoided. (See "Gender Equity in Communication Skills," and "Gender Equity in Foreign and Second Language Learning and Instruction.")
- Yet, boys' "underachievement" in communication skills (at least, according to test scores) should be a concern, since any construction of areas of learning and expression as sex-linked can lead to educational restrictions for both boys and girls. The chapters in this section investigate explanations for sex differences on test scores and grades, including a review of arguments that these are caused by biological differences. The fact that girls, once considered less skilled at learning math and science, are now doing equally well at in elementary classes seems to demonstrate how social factors have played a very important part in gender and achievement scores. (See, especially, "Gender Equity in Mathematics.")
- Equal opportunity initiatives to help correct the dominant cultural expectations and inequalities in the content areas are often small-scale, sporadic, and under-funded, even for relatively well-funded areas such as science, engineering, and technology. The authors in this section document inequalities and make many recommendations for sustained changes to raise the achievement of females and males in these highlighted disciplines. As these chapters illustrate, the disruption of conventional gender discourses and assumptions can stimulate the skills and opportunities of both females and males. Equity policies need to have built-in reviews and accountability. Each chapter provides recommendations.
- People need professional development and opportunities throughout their lives and careers. Welfare cutbacks that restrict recipients' participation in education systems make special difficulties for single parents on low incomes. The education systems of the nation must (a) attend to the needs of individuals with varying levels of work experience and education, (b) end cycles of poverty, and (c) meet the demands of the local and global job market. (See "Gender Equity in Career and Technical Education.") More research is needed on the needs of those with barriers to educational achievement, and on the effectiveness of new technologies that can be used for new methods of instruction and learning.
- Our challenge as administrators and teachers, whatever the discipline, is to create girl- and woman-friendly—indeed, student-friendly—classrooms. This includes raising awareness of the impact of gender on classroom dynamics, for example, not ignoring students' sexist and homophobic remarks made in class, but, rather, consider them as teaching moments. A variety of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) issues are present on every level of education, from the harassing of LGBT teachers and students, to anti- LGBT-

themed classroom materials (Blount, 2006). The chapters in this section provide many specific examples of classroom interaction problems, and some possible actions to deal with them. “The Role of Women’s and Gender Studies in Advancing Gender Equity” chapter on the women’s and gender studies documents how Gay and Lesbian Studies scholars, especially, are examining the ways heterosexual privilege works alongside other forms of privilege and oppression in the formal education system. (Also, see “Gender Equity for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Students” chapter in Part V)

- Where discussions of gender and of sexuality are involved, the media often have a large impact on what is considered acceptable academic practices and research. See, for example, the discussion, in “Gender Equity in Physical Education and Athletics,” of the critical impact that the media has had on problems of inequity in those fields. Dominant public discussions about sexuality have led to political battles about sexuality classes in the schools that have had detrimental impact on what information is available to students. (See “Gender Equity in Formal Sexuality Education.”)
- While each discipline has its own approaches to research design, data collection, and methods of data analysis, the mixed research methods, and the analyses of different types of related evidence in the syntheses reported in these chapters, help provide more complete information than is often available in other reference works.

FIELDS OF STUDY INCLUDED IN THIS SECTION OF THE HANDBOOK

Since the 1985 edition of the *Handbook* was published, there has been a great deal of additional research on gender equity in education. Yet, while there have been many impressive, discrete projects—many of them reported here—the chapters in this current volume make clear that gender equity research has not yet been well integrated into the K–12 and postsecondary education plans. For just one example, while the authors of many of the chapters in this section and in other sections describe Title IX, and while many educators and authors of textbooks acknowledge the existence of Title IX, its breadth is seldom acknowledged and utilized by educators. The law applies not only to physical education and athletics, but also to educational programs, course offerings and access, financial aid, scholarships, and sexual harassment problems, as well as many other aspects of the public education system.

These chapters also make clear that the discussion of the costs (economic, developmental, and psychological) of discriminatory gender assumptions and treatment is not yet firmly built into policies and practices regarding teacher recruitment, administration development, textbook writing, curriculum planning, classroom interaction, and testing.

The chapters in this part on curriculum content should provide a great deal of assistance for those working on the goal of gender equity. For comparison purposes, the organization and topics of this part of the *Handbook* are related to those of the 1985 *Handbook*, with a few changes. While coverage of relevant

research is greatly expanded in this volume, not all the chapters deal with all levels of education or all related topics. For example, if the social studies chapter had also been able to deal with social sciences in postsecondary education, we might have more insights about the gender equity issues in the entire field. If the formal sexuality education chapter had also covered health education, we might have touched on more sexuality issues related to body image, mental health, and violence. What all the chapters all do accomplish, however, is to provide a great deal of information about gender equity and inequity in each content area, along with strategies to counter the gender bias still so prevalent.

Other important fields of study are not dealt with explicitly in these chapters. Here, I mention just a few examples of the many that could have been included had space allowed.

Nursing, home management, and nutrition. For more than 150 years, women have worked to have the productive and educational value of these fields recognized by school systems and governments. Within grade schools, high schools, and universities, work associated with family and caring for others has been assumed all too often by many administrators to be primarily women’s fields and, thus, in no need for gender equity assessments.

Urban planning and geography. The work of feminists who have studied issues of housing, public policy, and economic development—including the roles of women in the study of transportation, domestic architecture, urban segregation, housing, daycare, and land use—has provided graphic illustrations of the ways in which women used to be almost invisible to planners and urban planning teachers. Seeing city planning research through gender lenses can lead to rethinking the basic methodology and questions used in the field (Fainstein & Servon, 2005), illustrating how the history of women and minorities can be restored to the urban landscape and to the urban planning and geography disciplines on all education levels. Community safety, public transport, and location of childcare facilities and shops all have (differing) implications for educational opportunities for women and men. Women in particular are identifying these issues. Yet Kathryn Anthony’s (2001) study of architecture reports gender and racial discrimination still runs rampant in the architectural education system and practice.

Sociology. For the past three decades, feminist sociologists and other social-mobility researchers have documented the dramatic changes in household and family structures and in women’s economic roles, and the increases in the percentage of family households with low incomes during that time. The changes in family structure, women’s economic roles, and income inequality are closely connected to inequality among U.S. children in their educational attainment and employment (Sorensen, 2005, pp. 119, 123).

With much more space, we would want to include equity assessments and recommendations in many other fields, including other medical fields, peace studies, ethnic studies, literary studies, religious studies, cultural studies, anthropology, philos-

ophy, political science, history, law, library science, linguistics, music, and psychology. Adrienne Rich wrote in the early 1970s, “There is no discipline that does not obscure and devalue the history and experience of women as a group” (Rich, 1980, pp. 134–135). We need to keep testing her assessment, and working toward making it only an historical statement about our education system.

As the chapters in this section and the rest of the *Handbook* make clear, each of us in her or his field of study and education

level is responsible, every day, for the formulation of gender equity policies and practices. Many of us might claim that we try to never differentiate on the basis of sex; however, even our attempts at “equal treatment” often impose discrimination and do not eliminate gender gaps; claims of “gender-blindness” can result in the continual marginalization of girls’ and women’s interests. These chapters help us understand that gender discrimination needs to be *addressed* in order for gender equity to be achieved.

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