Gender Equity And Education: Examining Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions

Dr. Meg M. Monaghan

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Abstract: This article reports on a study which examined the perceptions of preservice teachers in regards to gender equity. Research on gender equity in the field of education has stalled in recent years, while existing literature often hinges on the assumption that teachers recognize gender equity as a relevant issue and are willing to initiate remedies to inequities in classrooms and content. This is an interesting assumption given the fact that young, American educators have been raised during an era in which gender equity is largely assumed to have been achieved, despite the fact that a significant gender gap still exists. Specifically, this study asked the following questions: How do preservice teachers perceive gender equity? How have these perceptions been informed by the participants’ individual life experiences? Findings suggest that participants do not perceive gender and/or issues of gender equity to be particularly relevant to their personal or professional lives; however, all of the participants acknowledged influences of gender in the classroom and in their professional practice.
Introduction

“I can’t believe it was a girl who chose this book!” Those were the incredulous words of a fifteen-year-old young man sitting in a summer reading discussion group being held in my classroom. Perhaps even more incredulous was the look on my face when I suddenly realized I was the “girl” he was referring to. It was the fall of my fourth year as a high school teacher, and I had submitted the book Flags of Our Fathers by James Bradley to the school-wide summer reading program. The school’s program required each teacher to submit a title to a master list from which students selected their own books to read in the summer. Students chose by title alone and learned the teacher’s identity in the fall during specially scheduled discussion groups. While Flags of Our Fathers has since been made into a major motion picture, at the time, the title was a bit obscure for most high school students. Despite this, well over twenty students had opted to read the book, and, as they entered my room chatting excitedly about the plot lines, I could tell they had enjoyed it. As the room steadily became more and more crowded, I realized that I was, indeed, the only female in the group. I also sensed a certain disappointment on the part of the students, as if my presence was somehow an intrusion. Unlike the “there is a teacher in the room” feeling so typical in secondary classrooms, this was a sense of awkwardness I had never encountered professionally.

After recovering from the initial shock of being called a girl by a 15-year-old student, I began to wonder why I was the only female in the room; why had only males opted to read this book, and why were they so surprised that the choice had come from me? Were the males enticed by a narrative about war, camaraderie, and a father/son relationship? Did these same topics dissuade female students? I had never really considered it odd that I was a woman who loved history, nor had I noticed the gendered nature of my assigned curriculum. Suddenly, I began to pay attention.

While brief, this classroom moment was very powerful for me in many ways. There was no attack, no harassment, or intolerance; rather a quick comment suddenly brought gender into the foreground. The result was a feeling of tension and discomfort, powerful enough to cause me to pause. As a professional adult who possessed a developing feminist consciousness, I was able to deconstruct the situation and identify the source of my unease as outside of myself. If I had not possessed this ability, I could have easily internalized the situation and “blamed” my feeling of discomfort on my own self-consciousness or insecurity. In this way, such a subtle gender bias is no less powerful than blatant discrimination.

This situation also made me begin to wonder how gender might influence my students’ classroom experiences. How would a female student have reacted in a similar situation? Certainly, her participation in the class discussion would have required additional effort to overcome any feelings of discomfort. It is easy to imagine such a student could have chosen to remain silent, even if her grade in the class was to suffer.

Finally, this experience drew my attention to the relationship between the curriculum and gender. Examining curriculum through a gendered lens reveals a very masculine nature of many of the disciplines. The male experience is often reflected in the dominant narrative. In social studies textbooks, for example, a male perspective is standard, while the female experience is either presented as supplementary knowledge or is ignored (Bernard-Powers, 1997; Clark, Ayton, Frechette & Keller, 2005; Levstik, 1997/1998; Noddings, 1991/1992, 1992; Wineburg, 2001; Woyshner, 2006). This fact suggests that additional effort by the classroom teacher is needed to present a more balanced curriculum.

Deconstructing this brief classroom interaction provides an opportunity to reflect on contemporary gender equity issues and gender equity in the classroom. However, such deconstruction hinges upon an individual’s consciousness in regards to these issues. Determining how an individual perceives these issues in his/her own life is necessary in order to understand the status of these issues on a larger level. To explore this notion more deeply, I began a qualitative study that was to become my dissertation. This study examined the perceptions of a sample of pre-service teachers in regards to gender equity in their personal and professional lives. It is my intention in this article to report on the findings of this study and make practical suggestions for the improvement of school curriculum in regards to gender equity.
Statement Of The Problem

For at least the past two decades, a discourse suggesting gender equity has been achieved, and has surrounded young Americans. These young Americans are constantly reminded “Girls can be anything boys can be!” Americans of these generations have been raised to believe that gender equity is a birthright (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). This notion has been supported by a variety of trends geared toward female empowerment, such as “Girl Power!” and Take Our Daughters to Work Day. These trends have been so visible and mainstreamed that some scholars believe the mid-1980’s marked the dawning of a “girl’s movement” in the United States (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). In many ways, the constant barrage of empowering messages may be viewed positively as an effort to steep young women in a belief of their own limitless potential. However, such discourse must also be viewed with caution, given the reality that gender inequities endure. The obvious danger lurks in encouraging young women and men to become accustomed to seeing equity where inequity exists. Such a perspective might prevent an individual from recognizing and combating oppression, essentially halting progress towards equity.

While the rhetoric of gender equity has become louder and more powerful, contemporary American feminism has simultaneously become less visible and less mainstream (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). According to Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Susan Faludi, the quieting of the American women’s movement has largely been the result of a conservative “backlash” against issues of equity in the 1980s and early 1990s (Faludi, 1991). Susan Faludi (1991) cites several examples of feminism being systematically tempered by the media, the government, and other vehicles of popular culture. From more subtle examples, such as movies and books that present the American feminist as a bitter, man-hating radical, to more overt attacks, such as Pat Robertson’s assertion that, “feminists encourage women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, become lesbians, and destroy capitalism” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p.61). Feminism has, quite simply, become a bad word. This negative connotation is clearly demonstrated by women’s general endorsement of feminist ideals- but widespread rejection of the “feminist” label (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). This backlash is also reflected in American education (Middleton, 1993; Sadker & Sadker, 1994), where the topic of gender equity in the schools and in the classroom seems to have fallen into a period of neglect (Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007), despite the persistence of gender inequities in American classrooms (Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

While considerable progress towards gender equity has been made in the United States over the course of the last century, the goal has yet to be met. Contemporary gender inequities persist and are often subtle, personal, and deeply entrenched. The most powerful national institutions continue to operate in the public sector (political, economic, and military) and are dominated by male citizens and supportive of traditionally male attributes, such as aggression, competition, and strength (Lerner, 1986; Noddings, 1991/1992). While American women have made significant gains over the past century in their struggle to have their perspectives and experiences recognized, their progress has largely been measured through increased inclusion into traditional social structures, rather than by the reshaping of American life into a gender balanced society (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Schuster & Van Dyne, 1998). Sectors traditionally dominated by female Americans, namely social and private institutions, continue to endure a secondary and more marginal status (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Noddings, 1991/1992; Schuster & Van Dyne, 1998). While females are increasingly represented in positions of power and prestige in the American government, economy, and military, their presence is not indicative of the greater American populace and is still considered an exceptional accomplishment.

Many subject areas have been heavily critiqued for a slow reaction to issues of gender equity in regards to curriculum, classroom materials, and teacher practices over the twenty years (Bernard-Powers, 1995; Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woyshner, 2007). According to Carole Hahn, Jane Bernard-Powers, Margaret Crocco, and Christine Woyshner (2007), gender equity and other gender issues in the social studies, for example, now exist in a “holding pattern” (p.350). This is especially disturbing given the potential that exists within the curriculum to
address issues of injustice and to question oppressive societal structures (Crocco, 2001). As Margaret Crocco (2001) states, “…Educators are in a unique position to consider gender…because of their defining interest in citizenship education” (p.66). Research has demonstrated that students’ gender consciousness can be raised in classrooms where gender-related topics have been given explicit attention (Levstik, 2001; Tetreault, 1986b). Women’s studies courses, in particular, have been shown to be powerful agents to combat sexism and the acceptance of unfair gender roles (Harris, Melaas, & Rodacker, 2007; Stake, Rhoades, Rose, Eliis, & West, 1994; Stake & Rose, 1994). Unfortunately, these classes are rarely offered in American middle or high schools, which is why the vast majority of existing research has been conducted at the post-secondary level.

Given the evidence of persistent gender bias in curricular materials, such as textbooks, the responsibility for addressing issues of gender and gender equity falls heavily on the teacher. Unfortunately, research has shown that teachers overwhelmingly favor textbook based instruction (Hahn, Bernard-Powers, Crocco, & Woysner, 2007) and often fail to adapt their curriculum to include gender equity (Hahn, 1996; Tetreault, 1986a). Explanations for this phenomenon are difficult to identify. Is this pattern simply a matter of convenience or time? Do teachers defer to the textbook’s authority? Do teachers lack the pedagogical knowledge needed to address such issues? Or is it that teachers fail to recognize gender equity as a significant issue? This situation is made even more complicated by the fact that existing research has largely been conducted with teacher participants who were witnesses to the Women’s Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s. One might assume that gender equity issues could be “on their radar” so to speak. In contrast, teachers who are currently emerging from teacher education programs were largely born in the late 1980s, a time in which teacher education had also “quieted” in its approach to gender equity. Contemporary research suggests that gender equity is given only marginal status in most programs (Brown, 2000; Campbell & Sanders, 1997; Sanders, 2002). Thus, while the responsibility for addressing gender inequities hinges on the classroom teacher, these young educators have never known a life without feminism- its challenges and victories- nor have many of them been formally confronted with these issues. It is essential to examine how they perceive gender equity issues, before assuming that they will work to amend gender inequities in their classrooms. This is the purpose of this study. This study examined the perceptions of a sample of pre-service teachers in regards to gender equity in their personal and professional lives. Specifically, this study asked the following primary question,

- How do pre-service teachers perceive gender equity?

Additionally, the following secondary research question was examined:

- How have these perceptions been informed by the participants’ individual life experiences?

Research Methodology And Design

A basic or generic approach was used to design this study (Merriam, 1998). North Atlantic University, a large public university located on the east coast, was selected as the site of this research study. This university was chosen due to its convenient location and the researcher’s ability to gain access to an appropriate sample.

A purposeful sample was generated for this study (Patton, 2002). Insight about these participants’ perceptions is useful in conjunction with existing research and in designing future research projects; however, it is not the intention of this study to generalize findings across all preservice teachers or all content areas.

Participants were identified and selected based on three criteria:

- **Post-Secondary Education.** All of the participants were required to have maintained consistent enrollment in the Teacher Education Program (TEP) at North Atlantic University
- **Age, Professional Experience.** All participants were required to be “traditional” fifth year, master’s students, meaning that they had enrolled in college directly after their high school graduation and had entered the TEP program during their junior year of college.
- **Professional Aspirations.** All participants were required to be preservice, secondary teachers intending to begin a career as a full-time teacher in the fall following their graduation.

A total of nine students were identified as eligible for this study (five females, four males). Six individuals volunteered to participate (three females, three males). All six completed the interview protocol.

**Data Collection And Analysis**

Each of the six participants (three females, three males) was interviewed three times (each interview lasted sixty to ninety minutes) using Irving Seidman’s (2006) in-depth, phenomenological interviewing model. Each round had its own purpose, but the interviews also built cumulatively on one another as the participants were encouraged to reflect on ideas they had put forth and develop them further. Participants were aware that the researcher was examining how personal experiences impacted professional practice but were not told that gender equity was the focus of the study.

Amy Suzanne Johnson’s (2007) work demonstrates the power of using life history interviewing with preservice teachers in order to understand how they view the world. Amy Suzanne Johnson’s (2007) life history interview protocol was used as the foundation for the protocol in this study. The final protocol was semi-structured (Merriam, 1998), which enabled the interviews to feel more conversational, while providing a structure that allowed for comparison amongst participants (Merriam, 1998).

**Findings**

To articulate the participants’ perceptions of gender equity, I will highlight their beliefs on three key topics, namely, gender equity in society, perceptions of feminism, and gender and professional practice.

**Gender Equity In Society**

During the final round of interviews, each participant was asked directly whether or not he/she felt men and women were equal in contemporary American society. All of the participants responded negatively to that question.

When asked to give an example of this inequity, the responses were again very similar and all placed women at an inferior position to men. Unequal wages (Sonia, Michelle, Arthur, Patrick), “glass ceilings” in the workplace (Kristen, Arthur, Patrick), female objectification (Arthur, Kristen), and male dominated school administrations (Kristen, Sonia, Patrick) were common responses.

However, a closer examination of the female participants’ comments reveals a more complicated situation. Each believed that inequity exists, but denied having experienced inequity personally. For example, Michelle talked about her aunt who she said was “dying” because she was “just so exhausted” trying to balance her job, children, and “responsibility to take care of the home”. Michelle’s example was personal, but not germane to her own life experience. Likewise, Sonia and Kristen identified inequity as something outside of their own lives and experiences. Sonia believed that inequity had never affected her life directly, but she admitted, “I am kind of oblivious to that stuff (laughing) I would never be like, ‘Oh, I was discriminated against!’ Like, I don’t know, I don’t really see things that way.”

Kristen believed that women face discrimination, but insisted that she was different because “I always feel accepted by guys…I’m like always friends with them…they see me differently than other girls.” Thus, she maintained that she “...can’t really pinpoint a time where I was like, ‘Hmmm, that’s because I was a girl... I am just not cognizant of like that kind of stuff.” I reminded her of a story she told during an earlier interview about having to petition the national headquarters of the Little League in order to play on an all boy’s team, only to face negative comments from other players and coaches. When I asked if she felt that was an example of gender discrimination, Kristen replied, “Not really, though.”

Thus, while Michelle, Sonia, and Kristen quickly deny the idea that men and women are equal in society, they seem to believe it is other women who experience oppression. Kristen’s denial is particularly interesting given the fact that I presented her with an example from her own life that she had talked about earlier. This disconnect between the lives of women, in general, and the female participants’ own lives is...
perhaps more understandable when the participants’ views on “feminism” are examined.

Perceptions Of Feminism

While all of the participants believed that men and women are not equal in American society, four participants (two men, two women) rejected the feminist label. Participants were asked what they think of when they hear the word “feminist” and if they identified themselves as a “feminist.” A representative sample of responses is below,

- Brian: I think feminism is kind of taboo and if you are admitting that you’re a feminist, then the assumption is that, you know, you hate men and, you know, men are the cause of all of your problems...so, I could see women being less willing to show their interest in...subjects in history, like suffrage, because they might be afraid of being labeled as that.

- Michelle: Most people think lesbian, don’t they? Well, you know, they think crazy, you know, equal rights. I think people think protesting and talking about abortion rights and all that stuff, um...I think it’s negative! [I am not a feminist] because deep down I really wish I didn’t have to work and could just be taken care of by some really rich guy.

- Kristen: See, the problem is, I don’t like that word. I don’t know why. I always associate it with like crazy people for some reason, which is probably bad. I just always associate it with people who go like way over the top about stuff and that annoys me...it’s not like my nature to be over the top about issues. So, no [I would not call myself a feminist].

Together, these individuals described feminists as crazy, annoying, polarizing, radical, lesbian, man-haters. It is easy to see why someone would be “afraid” to “admit” an allegiance to such a label. Additionally, Michelle sees herself as excluded from the feminist movement given her “secret” goals.

Kristen’s comments struck me as particularly interesting given a story she related to me during our first interview about how her mother had handcuffed herself to her high school math teacher’s desk to protest the fact that she thought he was a sexist. At the time, Kristen had described her mother’s actions as “crazy”. During our final interview, I asked Kristen if she felt her mother was a feminist. She said,

I think she’s like a secret one. I think she’s not like all out there with it, but deep down...My mom, she definitely has like, she’s a strong woman. That’s what I would call my mom. [She is] a strong female.

It was surprising to me that Kristen did not consider handcuffing oneself to a teacher’s desk to be “all out there” with one’s beliefs; however, Kristen’s distinction between “a strong woman” and a “feminist” are very telling. The negative connotations of the feminist label are clear.

The final two participants, Arthur and Sonia, hesitantly accepted the feminist label, however, each possessed negative stereotypes of “a feminist.” They responded,

- Arthur: [I think of] someone who thinks men and women should be equal. Also, bra burners... Yeah, see I don’t have a like strongly formulated idea other than arguing that women and men should be at least equal...I don’t know if I am an incredibly active feminist. But, I mean my day-to-day behavior is that I don’t distinguish or I try not to behave in sexist ways.

- Sonia: I know this is wrong, but I automatically think of like revolutionaries, crazy activists. Like people that kind of annoy me. BUT, then I take a step back...then I think of someone who advocates for equity between genders...I would not call myself an active feminist, but like I am.

Arthur and Sonia accept the feminist label when the definition of a feminist is on their terms and is not based on the stereotypes of “bra burners” or “crazy revolutionaries.” Neither feel strongly about their feminism, but both recognize that they are in agreement with what they see as the goals of the larger movement.

The extent to which the participants’ beliefs about feminism would transfer into their classroom is unclear. However, it is difficult to imagine any of the
participants initiating an in-depth examination of feminism in their classroom lessons.

**Gender And Professional Practice**

The participants’ insights on how their own gender has influenced their professional practice also contribute to a more complete understanding of their perceptions of gender equity. In this case, the differences between the male and female responses are notable. While all of the males said that their gender was a factor in their professional practice, all also explained that this was because of behavioral norms that governed their one-to-one interactions with students of the opposite sex. Their gender was significant because it made them more cautious around students, females, in particular. The female participants, on the other hand, all initially said that they did not think that their gender impacted their professional practice, but when urged to elaborate all offered powerful, even unsettling, ways in which their lives as teachers might be different if they were male.

Initially Sonia offered no possibilities for the influence of gender on her professional practice. She then reconsidered and sheepishly said, “The students might listen to me more…Um, I don’t know, like I could see myself maybe being higher up in education as a male. Like an administrator.”

At first, Kristen also responded negatively to this question. When prompted to consider how gender might impact a female teacher’s professional practice, Kristen offered, “I actually do think it’s a little bit harder to get the respect right off the bat from your kids when you are a girl.”

Perhaps most powerful was Michelle’s response. She said,

I don’t know if I would have been a teacher if I was a guy…I think I would be a little bit more concerned about things like making more money…more about my image than I am. I don’t know why, but for some reason teachers aren’t valued too high, so I would want to do something a little bit more, especially if I hadn’t been a girl.

Compared to the male participants, the female participants’ responses reflect a far more fundamental impact of gender on their professional practice. Being a male dictates more stringent norms for social behavior with students, while being a female changes the level of respect or professional advancement the teacher might expect. These are powerful consequences.

**Discussion**

Overall, these findings have led me to conclude that the preservice teachers who participated in this study do not consciously perceive gender equity to be an issue relevant to their own lives or their professional practice; however, tremendous potential exists for this consciousness to be developed.

First, in order for gender equity to be seriously considered in schools and in classrooms the notion that feminist issues are ideological needs to be overcome. Those who resist the incorporation of feminism(s) into the secondary classroom based on the assumption that they are promoting a radical agenda have missed the point. As Florence Howe (in Schuster & Van Dyne, 1998) noted,

> Teaching is a political act: some person is choosing, for whatever reasons, to teach a set of values, ideas, assumptions and pieces of information, and in so doing, to omit other[s]…If all those choices form a pattern excluding half of the human race, that is a political act one can hardly help noticing…To include women with seriousness and vision, and with some attention to the perspective of women as a subordinate group, is simply another kind of political act (p.84).

To avoid serious and thoughtful discussions of gender equity and gender relations based on a fear of “pushing” a feminist agenda (or the fear of being perceived a feminist) is, in fact, to be promoting the dominant, patriarchal ideology.

Next, it is important to clarify what an incorporation of gender, gender equity, and gendered perspectives looks like in the classroom. Without exception, the participants in this study interpreted questions about the incorporation of “gender” in the classroom to be asking about women and women’s history. When asked about “gender,” they responded with comments about suffrage, Sojourner Truth, and Rosa Parks. “Gender” was synonymous with “women.”
I will admit that I shared this tendency in the beginning of this research project. Speaking for myself, I believed that the need to talk about gender equity really was a need to include more women in the curriculum. I believed (and still do!) that learning about the lives of women, both ordinary and extraordinary, was empowering for students, especially young women. In my mind, the most school curriculum already represented the male experience and women were underrepresented, therefore, the addition of women’s perspectives was necessary. I suspect that the participants might share similar conceptions.

What I have come to realize, however, is that a broader conception of gender is needed. If one accepts that gender is socially constructed as individuals interact with their environment and that gender identity is not merely a product of biological sex, then gender becomes a dynamic component of the human experience. It is the filter through which both women and men view the world (Hahn, 1996; Levstik, 2001). Conceptualizing gender in this central way makes a careful and continuous examination of changing gender roles and gender relations over time seem obvious. Part of this examination would naturally include a greater infusion of women into the curriculum, but simply mentioning more women would not be enough. Instead themes, such as gender relations, gender equity, and gender norms, would be revisited throughout the curriculum in order to develop a consciousness of gender that could be applied to both past and present issues. As Linda Levstik (2001) noted, this type of “regular and systematic” study of the influence of gender across time could help prepare students to function in a “decidedly gendered public” (p. 191).

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