Collaborating for Gender Equity in Christian Education

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Abstract

This essay addresses the importance of teachers promoting gender equity. It explores potential causes for gender discrimination in Christian institutions including double standards, unequal representation, organizational culture and similarity attraction. Strategies to promote gender equity are described such as including positive role models, intentional group formation and linking social issues to the lack of women's voices; gender education, resource selection, nurturing confidence and efficacy and fostering a non-stereotypical view of women's leadership styles.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Gender Equity, Women, Leadership

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Introduction

One of the underrepresented curricular areas in preservice education is preparing teachers to promote gender equity. This may be influenced by reluctance to disrupt the potential sociological and cultural status quo in Christian organizational and social structures, a lack of awareness of gender-biased education policy and practice, and gender disparities in leadership positions. What is at stake is long-term gender inclusion or exclusion from society, as well as more equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Although evidence supports the idea that women are gaining equality in the areas of work in the household, caring for children, and even in the workforce in general, there are still barriers to equality in other areas, particularly to positions of leadership (Lau Chin, 2011). In a comparative study of evangelical nonprofits--including institutions to their secular counterparts, "the representation of women on boards and in senior leadership roles in evangelical organizations was found to be about half of that found in secular

nonprofit" (Longman & Anderson, 2016, p. 28). The situation may be more pronounced in the Catholic Church where the hierarchy is entirely male, while the vast majority that participate in lay ministry are women. What is the role of educators in changing the culture in this regard? The challenge before us is to change the discourse and practices in classrooms, staff rooms and board rooms so that all educators will have a level playing field and be able to realize a future where the gifts of men and women are employed equally. Families and educators working together toward a change in attitude and behavior will eventually shift the paradigm of expectation and possibility so that capable women are given equal opportunities in Christian education and female students can envision and realize equal opportunities for their future in any field. The potential of large-scale social change can be accomplished through daily interactions in the home and classroom as the psychologist JoAnn Deak (2003) pointed out in her book, *Girls will be Girls*: "Every interaction a child has in the course of the day influences the adult the child will become."

Potential Causes of Gender Inequity

Christian educational institutions exhibit many of the same obstacles for women as secular

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educational institutions. In addition, theology can be an influential factor in the advancement of women in leadership, and "gender persists as a central, salient and effective element of the boundary work that maintains evangelical subculture and identity" (Longman, Daniels, Lamm-Bray, & Liddell, 2018, p. 6). However, rather than arguing various interpretations, it may be best to concede theological differences in regards to understanding of gender roles.

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Gender Inequity

The reality that men and women are different, and therefore experience life differently, is the premise behind gender inequality. Women face a variety of issues including a double standard in their behavior and presentation and the undervaluing of their skills, thus creating obstacles in their path to leadership. Because men have never experienced these obstacles women consistently face, "they therefore do not identify gender as an interpretive lens because they presuppose that their perspective transcends what they might identify as the localized contingency of gender" (Joeckel & Chesnes, 2009, p. 120). This inability to identify the variances in treatment due to gender unconsciously obstructs women's attempts to bring the inequalities to light.

Double Standards

Despite the challenges that women face, some do navigate the labyrinth and move into positions of leadership in higher education. Once there, however, women leaders can find themselves facing a double standard in terms of how they are expected to act and the roles they are expected to play. They are stuck between being asked to follow the direct leadership styles of men of the past--very formal and top-down--and being considered too harsh or unladylike when executing these behaviors. This was evident in a

Harvard Business school study completed by McGinn (2000) when two groups of graduate students were asked to evaluate the same case study with the only difference being the gender of the main business leader. Bohnet (2016) discussed how the researcher compared how students felt about the role of a male leader and a female leader. The McGinn study, referenced in Bohnet concluded, "What is celebrated as entrepreneurship, self-confidence, and vision in a man is perceived as arrogance and self-promotion in a woman." In one case concerning the University of Virginia, the sitting board chair--another woman--orchestrated the removal of Teresa Sullivan, UVA's first-ever female president, citing her lack of strategy and her clothing choices as part of the rationale for removal (Eddy & Ward, 2015, pp. 9-10). Sullivan's perspective was "that her consensus-building, incremental approach to change was at odds with the board leadership's desire for faster responses to financial and other pressures" (Eddy & Ward, 2015, p. 10). Examples such as these demonstrate the double standards women face, based on standards developed by what male leaders have done. Women who do not conform to these standards in terms of speech, presence, or dress can be perceived as weak or soft (Lau Chin, 2011). Yet women who try to overcome this stereotype by presenting themselves as stronger through dress, voice, and carriage can also be deemed too domineering (Hewlett, 2014; Lau Chin, 2011).

Unequal Representation

In addition to gender inequity and double standards in place for women, the simple issue of representation of women in leadership positions in education still lags behind. Women are completing degrees at a higher rate than men, developing leadership skills needed for higher level positions and providing evidence of taking on the responsibilities in senior leadership positions. A study of the gender balance of 105 CCCU institutions reported that in 2009 there were 60% women in undergraduate populations and 61% women for all students, that is undergraduate and graduate combined (Longman & Lafreniere, 2012, p. 48). Despite this, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership across the areas of Christian education and in executive leadership positions. This is a problem

because the women that represent the majority of the student population in these schools still see "only six of 110 presidents were female, with the two most recent additions only in the 2009-2010 academic year" (Longman & Lafreniere, 2012, p. 48). This unequal representation continues to lead to the silent cultural belief that women can contribute to the higher Christian education framework, but not in leadership roles.

Young men and women in these institutions come to see this misrepresentation as a norm, and perhaps expect it, thus contributing to the cycle of inequality in the roles of women. In a study regarding the experiences of women working in faith-based universities in the U.S., Longman, Daniels, Bray and Liddell (2018) found there is "confusion regarding the appropriate roles for women in leadership" (p. 11), with various factors contributing to this perplexity.

Organizational Culture

There are also organizational cultures, some based on underlying theological assumptions, that contribute to unequal perceptions of the roles of men and women and "may inhibit women's access to leadership roles" (Reynolds, 2014, p. 4). Although the current evolving work and learning environment needs leaders who are transformational, collaborative, people-oriented, team-based, and servant-driven, qualities often found in women, institutions continue to hire men more than women to fill these roles. Many researchers, in fact, suggest an "ideal worker" concept contributes to this. An ideal worker is one who "has characteristics that are more often found in men than in women; in particular, a spouse who has responsibility for managing a household and raising children" (Broido, Brown, Stygles, & Bronkema, 2015, p. 596). There is less focus on the actual capabilities such as collaboration and servant leadership skills actually needed by these organizations. Some organizations may also have a cultural assumption that women have primary care for their families and thus may not be able to focus entirely on their work. Although many women are now part of two-income families, a lack of in-house support systems means fewer women are viewed as this ideal worker to fill those top positions.

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As Eddy and Ward (2015) found, "Choices such as opting out of full-time positions to care for children or choosing not to go up for promotion in the interest of maintaining greater balance between work and home can have long-term consequences for academic career advancement" (p. 7). Women who make these choices find themselves falling behind and unable to catch up. While some would say it is the woman's choice whether or not to take the risks associated with working toward advancement in her career and that she needs to just do it, it may not be her choice. The advancement of women into the highest levels of leadership is not merely a matter of trying harder, or making hard choices. The infrastructure of support and historic hierarchies must be challenged in order for women to be better able to pursue leadership roles.

Similarity Attraction

Similarity attraction is another idea worth considering regarding lack of gender equity in educational environments. It is the concept that those in positions of leadership are most likely to replace themselves with someone most like themselves (Orpen, 1984). If current leadership and hiring teams are mostly composed of white males who adhere to the past structures and ideals, they will be more likely to replace leadership positions with people with whom they identify. Ballenger (2010) found evidence to support the idea of a "good old boy network" and "found that most men managers tended to sponsor other men because they were attracted to and tended to prefer those similar to themselves" (p. 12). This good old boy network is a limitation often mentioned by women who have attempted to break the glass ceiling of leadership in

education. Although women could be a part of the leadership circle in these environments, they are not welcoming and/or inviting to women, e.g., "going out for drinks, golfing, hunting, fishing, etc." (p. 12), which are often activities to which women are not invited. Even if women are invited, participation may involve "unwanted physical contact, and expectations to fulfill traditional gender roles and perform lower status work" (Broido et al., 2015, p. 608). Even so, sometimes women make a conscious choice to participate in these unofficial interactive activities because they lead to networking opportunities and business discussions.

Reasons for gender inequity that have been explored include double standards, unequal representation, organizational culture, and similarity attraction. Identifying and understanding potential causes is important in order to determine how to mitigate these situations. The next section discusses what teachers need to understand in order to create a more equitable classroom and overall organizational culture.

How Teachers Can Promote Gender Equity

Gardner (2006) has identified several factors that aid in creating change. One of these factors relates to the affective component of the idea to be learned and alludes to the way something is taught and may be strategically leveraged in the educator-student and parent-child relationship. Teachers need to be intentional about presenting positive role models of women in leadership and other traditionally male-dominated positions. This creates expectations and possibilities in the minds of young people who seek to be like those they admire. The role models can come in the form of human relationships or in literature that portrays characters who represent aspirational possibilities.

Teachers can model intentional group formation and choice of student leaders and be explicit that they are doing so and why. Who leads student teams makes a statement about who can be a leader. These leadership choices should be related to character qualities that are not implicitly tied to gender, and the process for this should be

verbalized. Through these and other ways of teaching, we are informing the social imaginaries of students. We teach what we value whether we are explicit about it or not. We are always teaching and transmitting into a way of imagining the world and how to interact. Teachers have an immense responsibility as contributors to the social imaginaries of our students (Castellon, 2019; Smith, 2011; Smith, 2018; Taylor, 2003).

Part of creating a social imaginary of gender equity is linking social issues to the lack of women's voices in power structures in church and government. Teachers can encourage students in any discipline to consider poverty, racism, access to health care, family leave and healthy family life, human trafficking, sexual assault, and domestic violence and how they are influenced by the gender imbalance that shapes our global culture. Internalized misogyny is also at issue and can be challenged by teachers. Wathen (2018) defined it as "the pattern by which women come to accept and believe the broader cultural messages about the lesser worth of women" (p. 27).

How Teacher Educators Can Promote Gender Equity

In pre-service classes, there is an opportunity to equip students with respect to gender equity. A concentrated focus through a course about gender and education is recommended in conjunction with an integrated and embedded approach in other classes (Esen, 2013). Considering courses offered at Trinity Western University, the Gender and Education course "considers the experiences of people in their roles of students, classmates, teachers and in positions of leadership…and current lived realities of girls and boys in schools" (Trinity Western University Academic Calendar, p. 239). In addition, teaching other courses with consideration of gender is an intentional and strategic way to shift mindsets and effect social change in the long view. For example, methods courses in language arts and social studies can include literature, history, and contemporary issues that either consider the roles of women and men explicitly, or can be analyzed with the lens of gender to make the implications of gender stereotypes more evident. Similarly, mathematics, science, human kinetics, and information

technology classes should include models of both male and female mathematicians, scientists, and athletes as well as direct instruction about the capacity of both males and females to succeed in these areas and the support systems required along the way. When pre-service teachers are preparing to teach English as a second language, teacher educators can foster an awareness of the varying roles of men and women worldwide to increase sensitivity to the challenges of female students coming from other countries and give them appropriate ways to assist students who will encounter differences.

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In addition to embedding gender in curricular content of courses, teacher educators can equip pre-service teachers by being conscious of the resources they choose and the disciplinary experts they use. A recent episode of 60 Minutes: Closing the Gender Gap in the Tech Industry (March 3, 2019) illustrated the importance of including the female voice. The episode was criticized for having a male spokesman instead of a female:

> We are culturally conditioned to consider men authoritative…even when it comes to discussing issues that only women experience … they thought spokespeople were interchangeable; they are not. Who gets put on national television matters. Who tells their story matters. Who talks about their experience matters. (Livni, 2019)

As this controversy demonstrates, expertise selection is of primary importance and contemporary educators committed to incorporating a gender equitable view know that

textbooks have long underrepresented the female voice. Tetreault's study (1986) revealed that in one history textbook of 819 pages:

> The text allotted to references to women added up to less than one page. A closer look at another publisher's offering showed that in more than 1,000 pages, there were four illustrations of men for every one of women, and that less than three percent of the text was about women. (p. 130)

Furthermore, McCabe et al. (2011) found that children's books are dominated by central characters who are male, delivering the message that women and girls occupy a less important role in society than men or boys. While curricular content and resources are important to keep in mind, teacher educators also need to foster certain dispositions for gender equity. Edwards (2019) argued, "How you view women influences how you teach them" (p. 7). For example, in her practice she noticed "women often underestimate their abilities, while many [of my] male students tend to overestimate theirs" (p.7), a finding that is supported in the research (Haynes & Heilman, 2013; Neff, 1991, p. 13). For a woman who underestimates her abilities, a respected professor's influence carries a lot of weight either as a role model of a confident woman or as a male who helps her feel valued. Making students feel valued can initiate a more formal mentoring relationship, shown in research to be especially important for women (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Apospori, Nikandrous, & Panayotopoulou, 2006).

Two meta-analyses in leadership literature support the view that not all women are dependent feelers and responders, more interpersonal and less task-oriented than men, but rather women equally demonstrate qualities such as being independent thinkers and initiators, directive and task-oriented (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Twenge, 2001). Falsely held beliefs about the roles and qualities of men and women can lead students to erroneous and unconscious expectations about women's capacity for success (Appel, Kronberger, & Aronson, 2011; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly, 2013; Heilman, 2012; Johns, Inzlicht & Schmader, 2008; Jones, Peddie,

Gilrane, King, & Gray, 2013). Teacher educators who foster dispositions that are inclusive of equal and non-stereotypical expectations for men and women students are more likely to improve classroom climate such that all students learn, are willing to share in discussions and express opposing viewpoints. Furthermore, these favorable dispositions among teacher educators are more likely to enhance fairness, leverage talent, and foster a supportive learning environment where all students can thrive.

Working respectfully through differences to create a society of gender justice for women and men will take mobilization of workplaces, communities, schools, places of worship, homes, and governments. This essay has identified potential reasons for gender inequity and explored many practical approaches that teachers and teacher educators can take to make the necessary changes to what Michael Kaufman (2019) called "eight-thousand-year-old social structures, relations of power, and cultural practices."

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