Gender and the Problem of Diversity: Action Research in Physical Education

Robyn S. Lock, Leslie T. Minarik, and Joyce Omata

This purpose of this paper is to explore the intersection of gender, equity and the discourse of diversity. The authors argue that while the goal of diversity in a democratic society is an admirable one, its advocacy could limit any real educational change. To explore the differences between the discourse of diversity and language of equity, they draw upon two action research studies conducted by two elementary school teachers who were not elementary physical education specialists. Through their action research projects, which included direct instruction as a way to confront the gender discrimination that was occurring in the physical education component of their classrooms, these teachers found that they had to abandon the discourse of diversity and embrace the language of equity for meaningful educational change to occur.

Introduction

This is a paper about two teachers from two different elementary schools in the San Francisco Bay area. As a university teacher and researcher, I (Robyn) became interested in the work these two teachers (Leslie and Joyce) were doing in their classrooms because their teaching promoted social change and social justice. The three of us, as coauthors of this paper, will argue that the language these teachers used to describe their political activity with their students, as well as their methodological approaches, contributed to their successful attempts to rearrange the power structure embedded in the gendered relationships among their students.

The second purpose of this paper is to explore the intersection of diversity, equity and gender and their impact on meaningful educational change. We will

Robyn S. Lock is with the Department of Kinesiology at San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA 94132. Leslie T. Minarik is an elementary school teacher in El Cerrito, CA. Joyce Omata is an elementary school teacher in San Jose, CA.
argue that, while the goal of diversity in a democratic society is an admirable one, the rhetoric of diversity alone could limit any real personal or institutional change. Personally, many of us can and do actively participate in dialogues that encourage and promote the concept of diversity. However, within educational institutions, little change in policy or practice is derived from faculty discussions about making the environment more diverse.

To explore the intersection of diversity, equity, and gender, we will draw upon the two elementary teachers’ action research studies in the context of physical education. Specifically, we will explore how they approached issues of gender, diversity, and equity in the teaching of physical education through action research projects conducted on their own teaching practice. We use these examples for two very specific reasons. First, physical education remains a rather conservative (Dewar, 1989) and marginal content area in institutions. In this context, physical education can also be a valuable resource when examining the larger domain of educational change. Second, because of its marginal status, few classroom teachers pay close attention to the ways in which they and their students engage in the practice of physical education. Yet examining such an exploration can provide insight into how teachers consciously and subconsciously exist as gendered beings in the classroom. These two research studies also provide a strong argument for the necessity of using direct teaching approaches to solving problems of gender difference in the classroom.

Gender remains a contested terrain in schools despite the rhetoric of diversity. There is a taken for granted view within schools that gender differences between boys and girls are natural and expected (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). The assumption of natural difference is legitimized by school practice. Gender continues to be a convenient line of difference and division that is ongoing in schools. Although gender itself is confounded by race, class, and other differences, depending on the individual situation, the fact is that students still separate by gender first (Thorne, 1993). This practice is reinforced via the language as forms of address used by teachers and administrators (“boys and girls”), via teaming for sports during recess or physical education, or via when moving students into or out of a building by lines. These practices merely reinforce children’s experience of gender difference as natural. And within the context of high school physical education, Nilges (1998) found gender to be a dominant force in shaping and defining the lives of both girls and boys.

We also focus on gender because gender is still the most likely category to be ignored or under researched in teacher education (Hollingsworth, 1994a). And as Stromquist (1997) stated, “the problem of gender in education has been reduced to the academic performance of women in certain disciplines and delinked from contestation of ideological messages sustained by schooling”(p. 69). Gender equity is no longer considered a priority in educational dialogue or change despite ample evidence that suggests blatant inequities still exist (Gender Gaps, 1998; Nilges, 1998). In fact, the current educational climate promoting diversity contributes little to solving many of the problems in classrooms related to gender equity.

We make two important points at the outset. First, it is important for teachers to consider the power of language. Language is essential to social interactions. Classroom language requires the sort of interaction that can result in dissent or argument, often resulting in a power struggle between teacher and students or among students regarding who will control talk and discourse.
The second point relates to the discourse of diversity. We will suggest in the following paragraphs that the discourse of diversity is a safe discourse. In many ways it has come to dominate discussions of educational change and reform, pushing to the background other discourses concerning equity and social justice — feminist discourse for example — rendering those marginal discourses less important and subsequently less effective. By focusing on the concept of diversity as an agent of reform, any discord that results from change gets pushed aside. The language of diversity is problematic in that it does not provide space for debates on power that are instrumental to educational reform. The discourse of diversity is full of rhetorical statements that “proclaim” and highlight “embracing” difference yet do little to encourage examination of power structures that might ultimately result in institutional or personal discomfort and change.

In this paper we will first describe the purposes of the two teachers’ action research studies and the procedures they followed to collect and analyze the data. A narrative will follow that describes more fully the interactions among the teachers and their students during the study. Finally, we will link the language of diversity to the language used by these two teachers in their action research studies and argue that the language of diversity is limiting any real and meaningful educational reform.

Two Action Research Studies

Through action research projects on their own teaching practice, Joyce, a second grade teacher and Leslie, a second/third grade teacher, faced the dilemma of dealing with diversity and equity. During these projects, both teachers made a transition from using indirect teaching methods to effect change to recognizing the need for a stronger and a more direct approach to creating equitable relationships among the girls and boys within their respective second and third grade classrooms.

Methods

The cogenerative action research model (Greenwood & Levin, 1998) was used in these projects. This model includes the practitioners (Leslie and Joyce) and a professor (Robyn) in the knowledge production process. Cogenerative action research consists of two distinct phases: (a) the clarification of initial action research and (b) the initiation and continuation of social change. Two groups are involved in this process: the insiders who owned the problem, Leslie and Joyce, and an outsider, Robyn, who facilitated the action research process.

In the first phase of the cogenerative model, the action research problem was made clear so that the problem could be solved. Insider knowledge was clarified in relation to outsider knowledge through a democratic dialogue characterized by openness and mutual support. Through numerous conversations, both as in-service classroom discussions and as discussions apart from the classroom, the outsider helped the insiders to focus on the nature of the problem and move toward possible solutions. This process also created new experiences for the insiders and for the outsider because the outsider had to direct the developmental process while the insiders designed and managed the research process. This resulted in a transfer of knowledge from the professional as outsider to the practitioners as insiders and a transfer of information from the practitioners to the professional. The main thrust
of the cogenerative model was toward increasing the insiders' control over knowledge production and subsequent action within their classrooms.

In this cogenerative model, the insiders and outsider are considered to be equal because both are expected to behave in accordance with their background and knowledge base. In this way, the insiders and outsider can create the ground for new learning while maintaining their differences. This model is not just participatory but also research based. This research process is systematic and oriented around posing questions with answers that require gathering data, analyzing the data, and then formulating interpretations of that data. This cooperative research concludes with the production of knowledge that communicates the insights beyond the coresearchers immediate surroundings. This paper is an example of the concluding production of knowledge.

Leslie teaches at ABC Elementary School located in an urban, residential community in the North Bay. With 553 students in kindergarten through sixth grade and 23 credentialed teachers, the school is committed to providing the collaborative education of teachers that will support and enrich the basic program, particularly in language arts. The students who attend the elementary school reflect six ethnic groups: 47% are Black, 10% are Caucasians, 25% are Hispanic, 12% are Asian, less than 1% are Pacific Islander, Filipino, and Native American. Thirty-eight percent of the families within the school community are on Aid for Dependent Children. Eighty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches. Class sizes average 30 students. In addition, students at all grade levels score below other schools in the district on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (W.C.C.U.S.D. Schools Report, 1994-95).

For the past 13 years, Leslie has participated in monthly conversations with a small group of colleagues and peers who support each other in action research and related school projects. This group has spent these years together as teacher researchers, learning to teach and to conduct research on their own teaching. Over a period of time in conversations with the group, Leslie demonstrated a concern for equitable teaching practices. She stated, "It appears that once I finally realized that the class environment was not equitable, I began to look at new ways to make the situation more equitable and successful for kids" (Hollingsworth, 1994b, p.119). Grounded in this commitment to equity and a deep sense of the ethic of caring (Noddings, 1984), Leslie identified the problem of gender inequality, specifically in class sports activities. This helped her to frame an action research project to correct the problem.

Leslie taught a second/third grade class of 10 girls and 20 boys. Reflecting the whole school demographics, approximately 80% of these 30 students qualified for the free or reduced breakfast/lunch program. The class was designated as sheltered English with 15 students classified as limited English speaking. Two-thirds of the third grade students were in Leslie's class the previous year as second graders.

Since Leslie was not a stranger to action research methods, she followed the approach she had used previously. First, she observed her students and conducted baseline interviews to explore their attitudes and experiences concerning sport and physical activity. These interviews showed strong traditional views of gender roles. She then made attempts to change student attitudes and behavior by using indirect teaching methods. The indirect methods included consciously choosing girls for leadership roles, increasing calling on girls during question sessions, and providing
more praise for their scholarly work. When the indirect method did not change the students’ behaviors in the physical education segment of her class, she moved to a more direct style of teaching that focused on two very specific variables. She conducted direct conversations with the students about the meaning of discrimination, and she organized skill-building sessions during physical education time. She then conducted more interviews with the students and observed their interactions throughout the school day.

Joyce teaches at XYZ Elementary School in the South Bay. Although the school does not qualify for additional money from the federal government for Title I programs, the school has come very close to being eligible for those funds. The school population is very diverse; there is at least one bilingual class in Kindergarten through third grade. The faculty is a committed group of professionals who work well together on the many difficult issues facing schools in California. After reading one of Leslie’s papers dealing with gendered issues that she wrote while she was taking a research methods course as part of a master’s degree program, Joyce identified the issue of gender equity in her own classroom as the topic for the action research project.

Although smaller in number, Joyce’s class was quite similar to Leslie’s class in many respects. Joyce’s second class included 10 girls and 9 boys from diverse backgrounds; 7 students were Hispanic, 7 were white, 4 were Asian and 1 student was Black.

Joyce conducted her action research project in much the same way as Leslie had. To define the problem, Joyce conducted individual baseline interviews with the children to explore their attitudes and opinions about gender. These interviews were videotaped. Joyce then moved to a direct teaching method by conducting whole class discussions concerning the meaning of discrimination and how it was occurring in the classroom. She also organized skill building and practice periods during the children’s physical education class time in collaboration with the physical education consultant who was a soccer coach at a local university, not a physical education specialist. These practice sessions were also videotaped. After skill building practice, Joyce led the class in debriefing sessions. The intent of these debriefing or discussion sessions was to give the students positive comments about their interactions and to talk about any problems they might be having. Furthermore, Joyce asked the students to reflect in their personal journals as to their feelings about the decision to try to play sports together (boys and girls) and also to write their feelings about the opposite sex. Second interviews were conducted individually at the end of the project to revisit their attitudes and opinions about gender.

It should be noted that the time line for these two projects varied dramatically. Joyce’s project lasted over a period of eight lessons during the spring of the school year, while Leslie’s research was conducted over an entire school year. Although the time length differed, the teachers came to the same conclusions, implying that the length of the study alone does not indicate either validity or utility. The veracity of both studies caused the teachers to change their beliefs about their abilities to effect change in their respective classrooms.

The following narrative of the action research process in which the two teachers as insiders engaged is a detailed discussion of the processes of their individual knowledge production around their research questions and elaborates their feelings, discoveries, and revelations concerning the action research projects.
Narrative

Both of these teachers had to confront the reality that diversity as a concept often meant accepting the differences in behavior between the boys and girls as though the perceived differences were natural. Initially, Joyce did not question gender equity in her classroom nor ponder her role in contributing to the inequitable behavior among the students; rather, she recognized and acknowledged the differences in the girls’ and boys’ behaviors as natural and to be expected. For example, she noticed but did not question the selection of playground equipment by the children (boys chose balls, girls chose jump ropes) nor the ways the girls and boys selected playing space on the playground (the boys occupied the larger playing area and the girls played near the building). Leslie saw the same patterns of behavior concerning equipment selection and playing area choices among her own students.

To begin the research projects both teachers interviewed the students about their views of gender. Joyce interviewed all students individually in the classroom while the other students were working on other class activities. The opinions expressed by the students were then shared anonymously with the entire class during the direct conversations. Questions in the interview focused on how the students felt about playing with members of the opposite sex, if they liked sports, and which sports they played. Leslie audiotaped and transcribed whole class discussions during which students expressed their views on gender roles, sports, and the appropriateness of sports for boys and girls.

Joyce and Leslie were surprised and puzzled by the gender specific and stereotypical responses of the children. In both classrooms the boys indicated that they believed that they (boys) were naturally better in sports, that the girls did not know how to play, and that the girls were easily scared or hurt when playing. In a segment from the first videotaped interview in Joyce’s class, a boy stated, “We don’t like to play with the girls cuz they don’t know how to play.” Another said, “Boys are better in sports than girls are.” The girls stated they did not like to play with the boys because they (boys) were too rough, kept the ball to themselves, and were verbally abusive. One girl remarked that the boys “said mean things and laughed at us.” These differences were seen as natural among the boys and the girls. Each teacher then recorded these responses in their field notes as a way of getting a complete picture of what was taking place with their students.

Leslie’s initial attempts to change the stereotypical views of the children centered around indirect teaching methods. She dealt with the boy/girl issue by making sure that a girl was always chosen as a team captain during physical education time or recess. She gave the girls leadership responsibilities in the classroom and also increased efforts to call on girls more frequently during class discussions and to carefully praise them for their scholastic efforts. Leslie noted in her field notes that it was hard to notice any shift in the girls’ or boys’ behavior after these attempts.

Direct Teaching Approach

To promote social change and create more equitable relationships, both teachers adopted a direct teaching approach that included three specific steps: (a) having direct conversations with the children, (b) implementing a skill building component during physical education instruction, and (c) focusing on the process of
playing rather than the outcome of winning. Both left the safe discourse of diversity (one of acknowledging or celebrating “natural” differences) and moved to establishing more equitable relationships among the girls and boys by directly intervening in the very ways their students interacted.

*Direct conversations.* After the initial interviews with the children and after Leslie had tried using an indirect approach to change, both teachers had direct conversations with members of their classes on the meaning of discrimination and how it was occurring in the classroom, specifically on the playground and in sport (physical education) situations. Ironically, in both classes, the girls indicated that they were engaged in sport experiences after school or at home, but were not getting involved at school — partly because of the negative reactions of the boys and partly because of their own inhibitions. For example, a female student in Joyce’s class stated, “They (boys) say mean stuff to us.” Another said, “They (boys) laugh at us.” Many of the girls in Joyce’s class, however, participated in sports outside of school: seven in karate, one in swimming, one in wrestling, and one in gymnastics and dance.

The teachers talked openly and honestly with the children about equitable relationships and what being supportive meant. The goal of these conversations was to increase awareness among the children as to the ramifications for both boys and girls of engaging in discriminatory behavior. Leslie wrote in her field notes after one of the conversations,

> The obvious, yet not so obvious idea of directly teaching against discrimination and gender inequity can have a profound impact on how boys react to girls. To assume that they will know what they are doing is the teacher’s mistake. If their culture has created these ideas since their earliest years then they very easily have no idea that it is discrimination. Further, assuming in addition to recognizing their discrimination that they will self-correct a situation that they are unaware of is, of course, very poor thinking. Clearly, I have been making misassumptions about their perceptions and overlooking the need for a teacher to directly define a wrong. (Minarik, 1995)

*Skill building.* The second phase of both research projects included a skill building component within the respective physical education classes. The skill building components for both classes contained three aspects: (a) instruction in sport skills in which many of the girls and lesser skilled boys were lacking, (b) modification of the rules of the games to make them less competitive and more cooperative, and (c) de-emphasis on winning and encouragement of a spirit of fun. For instructional purposes, the students were divided into smaller groups based on skill level. Students needing practice on the skills of a specific sport were given that opportunity to improve these skills. When they felt confident, they could then rejoin the larger activity. In Leslie’s class, the small group work continued for many weeks, covering skills in the sports of kickball, soccer, and basketball until all members felt comfortable playing the game. Joyce’s class followed the same design emphasizing the sports skills in kickball. This format proved more comfortable not only for many of the girls but also for many other less competitive or aggressive boys.

To understand the progress the children were making in regard to the attitudes and behaviors, both teachers conducted debriefing or discussion sessions
after the skill building sessions began. The discussions were to provide a forum for the children to exchange ideas and feelings about the progress the class was making. The students indicated that they were learning to get along and cooperate. Leslie overheard one female student comment to a group of boys at the end of recess one day, "I'll play with you tomorrow." During Leslie's class later that day a boy stated, "I would like to give three superslips to (names three girls) because they were my friends." Near the end of October Leslie wrote,

I am not only noticing a change in the boys attitudes, a genuine effort to be kinder to the girls, but they also seem to like the interaction and have begun to appreciate the athletic skills of many of the girls. Several comments also indicated that the class perceived that they were doing the right thing, so to speak, or that they were better people for what they were doing. They felt proud of themselves. (Minarik, 1995)

Joyce's reaction was similar. As part of the data collection process and to document student behavioral change, Joyce videotaped the children in skill practice and in game play. During lesson three, many boys showed their displeasure about the new game focus by moaning about the no-score policy during game play. By lesson seven, these same boys could be seen in the videotape making positive comments to the girls. For example, one boy shouted "That was a good kick, R," while another remarked "M is good," and one, in almost a surprised voice, said "I didn't know K could play so well." After lesson eight, Joyce wrote,

I conducted another interview with the boys and then the girls. I believe the attitudes toward each other have changed. The boys realize that the girls are good in sports if they are taught the skills and are given a chance to practice and play. The girls' self esteem has certainly increased, and they feel they are getting more respect outside now. (Omata, 1998)

Excerpts from a student journal indicated a change as well. A female student in Joyce's class wrote, "We are having fun playing kickball. The boys aren't fighting when the girls play. I made a good kick today. Some of the girls are better than the boys." After the last debriefing session with the children and in reaction to this evidence of change, Joyce wrote in her field notes, "They are showing some understanding. I am very happy" (Omata, 1998).

In these two cases, both teachers successfully began to reconstruct the gendered relationships within their classrooms and helped the children to see themselves and each other as capable and valuable. Both of these approaches resulted in significant changes in attitudes and behaviors in the respective classrooms. In Leslie's class, boys and girls began working together on reading and writing projects. The boys seemed to like the interaction with the girls and were beginning to express appreciation for the girls' sport skills. Joyce observed that during class time the girls and the boys could be found reading together without being asked to do so. In addition, Joyce noticed that a few of the boys were talking with the girls about doing a class project together. Joyce continued by saying that the atmosphere in her classroom had changed since the boys and the girls were interacting in more positive ways. Leslie noted that the girls' self-confidence and self-esteem seemed to change. She found that the girls were not afraid to speak up when they
perceived that the sports equipment was not being distributed equitably, something the girls had not done prior to this research project. In fact, one girl took control of the equipment distribution for recess because it wasn’t fair. With few exceptions in Leslie’s class, girls were now voluntarily participating in sports games.

In regard to her second and third grade students, Leslie concluded after six months of study,

If boys tend to define themselves by their physical abilities at this age and use this to reinforce stereotypical ideas of gender roles and superiority, then it is critical to find ways for the girls to participate fully in sports and to do so equitably — meaning they must be given the skill training necessary to compete fully. This means rethinking our own views of girls and sports, reshaping how we teach sports and physical education classes, how we set the tone for the games, i.e., less competitive and more team building. While there is no question that we must help the girls expand their view of possibilities and work diligently to improve self-esteem, we might also need to look very carefully at how we can alter boys’ notions of sports. (Minarik, 1995)

Leslie’s and Joyce’s exploration of the intersection of gender and sports through action research is significant and critical. First, their willingness to explore altering social relations in the classrooms through action research using gender and sport as elements to be investigated is a statement about their belief in the power of action research as praxis. Second, the possibility for social change within the context of sport can be seen. They did not shy away from a difficult investigation of the powerful nature of play and sport as socializing agents in these children’s lives. Through numerous experiences at home, in school, and on the playground, these children learned the lessons of power and domination that all too often undergird the sport context. The hegemonic attitudes and behavior voiced and exhibited by these children prior to the research projects were seen as natural and right by the girls and the boys and would have gone unchecked unless these teachers had deliberately interrupted the socialization process.

Perhaps the simplest explanation for why these projects produced significant changes in both attitude and behavior was offered by one of Leslie’s students. She asked one of the boys who had been in her second grade class the previous as well as the current year why the class seemed to be working better than the previous year. The boy responded, “Because you didn’t tell us about this last year” (Minarik, 1995). This simple observation points to the necessity for directness.

**Language and The Discourse of Diversity**

How do language and the discourse of diversity relate to the action research projects described in this paper? The connection can be made in contrasting the language the teachers employed to effect social change in the classroom and the rhetoric traditionally used as part of the diversity discourse.

Wright and King (1991) suggest that classroom language helps to construct social order by helping to create categories that come to organize student and teacher lives. In this way, language is a social phenomenon since it influences the way social relations are produced. How language is “used” in the classroom is best
described by the practice of language or the flow of language between individuals. Investigating how teachers actually use language in their practice in the classroom illustrates the nature of social relations and the kind of power struggles that can result.

Note the language of social control the boys appropriate at the beginning of the project. In Leslie’s class the boys stated, “Well the girls can’t have the ball. They’re girls.” Joyce’s class is similar when the boys echoed, “Boys are better in sports than girls.” These responses are typical in that they reflect commonly held beliefs about boys supposed superiority and potential in sport, resulting in a notion that they (boys) therefore have a right (read power) to determine who gets to use what pieces of equipment, when the equipment will be used, and where it will be used. The fact that girls are constructed as different from boys effectively means that girls are defined as less than or inferior to boys (Dewar, 1994). The girls held these views as well, thus acknowledging and participating in a male hegemonic social order that discriminates against them (girls); but since the girls in these two classes lacked a defining language and experience, they were unable to recognize or name these behaviors as discriminatory. At this developmental age (second and third grade), there are no inherent biological determinants of boys’ superior athletic ability. But if this notion of male athletic superiority is left unchallenged, it becomes common sense and is carried into adulthood thereby reproducing differential treatment of girls and women.

The social relations resulting from these beliefs expressed as language are inequitable and discriminatory. Valian (1998) identified “gender schemas,” the beliefs that make up the intuitive concept about the differences between the sexes, as contributing to the cumulative effects of sexual stereotyping. Such bias, or a common sense interpretation of difference, begins in infancy and persists across time, as demonstrated by the attitudes of the children in the study. Valian notes that gender schemas hold inequity and discrimination together by reinforcing unexamined assumptions about differences. Casting such natural differences as diversity does not lead to equity. The important point to be made here is this — teachers can interrupt the way children talk and interact with each other. Furthermore, this interruption can create significant positive differences in student language and behavior. In the cases outlined above, if Leslie and Joyce had not intervened using antidiscriminatory language and changed the attitudes and behaviors of the children, the go-ahead signal would have been given to a pattern of unequal treatment of the girls. Valian suggests that even small differences in treatment can, in time, result in large disparities. She states, “It is unfair to neglect even minor instances of group-based bias, because they add up to major inequalities” (p. 21).

To interrupt attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that oppress girls and women, the language adopted in the classroom must be deliberate and direct. Note that in spite of the many sport experiences the girls were having outside the school (which included karate, swimming, soccer, gymnastics, dance, and wrestling), within the context of school, Joyce’s and Leslie’s girls were limited to very stereotypical gendered activities — either by their own or the boys’ attitudes and behavior. Leslie found that using indirect methods with the children simply did not work. She made sure that she always chose a girl as a team captain, gave the girls monitoring jobs, increased efforts to call on girls and to carefully praise them for scholastic efforts. But, as she noted in her field notes, it was hard to notice any shift in the girls’ or boys’ behavior with the indirect approach.
The Problem of Diversity

Diversity has become an accepted concept as legitimate language to promote the coexistence of difference. Many groups within higher education have adopted the concept of diversity as an educational goal that should be attained. For example, diversity is embedded in the first standard of the Holmes Group Tomorrow’s Schools (1990) where it is stated, “acknowledging diversity means binding the rich mosaics all together” (p.11). However, the diversity discourse has a language liability in regard to issues of equality and discrimination. Clarke (1992), for example, suggests that discourse can be a vehicle for ideological and social control. Noticeably absent from the diversity discourse is a strong commitment to social/institutional change. The language of “acknowledging diversity” suggests a differential mosaic culture bound together within institutions such as schools, but there is no mention of how diverse (read other) cultures can share in the power and oftentimes limited resources within those institutions.

Magda Lewis and Roger Simon (1986) add some insight into this dilemma as they describe the powerful nature of discourse. They state that “discourse refers to the particular ways of organizing meaning-making practices. Discourse as a mode of governance delimits the range of possible practices under its authority and organizes the articulation of these practices within time and space although differently and often unequally for different people” (p. 457). They go on to point out that, as a result, what is perceived as a relevant and legitimate perspective is often limited by the normative expression of experience.

The notion of normative expression of experience is a critical factor in the argument to move beyond diversity. Normative expression includes language that frames the possible. The language of diversity, which has become a dominant philosophical and ethical position, has some serious limitations relating to social and educational change. Accepting or working for diversity does not necessarily mean confronting power structures that limit development and change within classrooms and institutions. The language of diversity includes terms such as “acknowledging,” “appreciating,” “promoting,” “understanding,” or “binding” as in the Holmes Report. Contrast that language with the language of “equity” as provided by Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 and the Women’s Educational Equity Act (WEEA) of 1975 which “affirmed the educational system’s obligation to provide equality of opportunity [our emphasis] in terms of access to resources and services” (Stromquist, 1997, p. 55). Noticeably absent from the language of diversity is any reference to an educational system’s moral and legal obligation to provide equality of opportunity, much less the equality of outcomes.

Zinn (1995) does maintain that diversity can enhance our understanding of difference and the ways educational institutions are socially constructed. However, as we have seen in Leslie’s and Joyce’s cases, some confusion exists over the multiple meanings of diversity and difference. What exactly is diversity? What is difference? Different from what or from whom? Teachers are often taught to use these concepts as if they were one and the same which, in fact, they are not. As Zinn pointed out, diversity connotes variety while difference can imply a dichotomy or even a disagreement.

Zinn (1995) goes on to elaborate on the problems with diversity. First, she states that diversity has the capacity to essentialize difference, or reduce difference to stereotypes that further marginalize the groups who are suppose to be brought
into the mainstream. Joyce and Leslie both discovered the normative discourse of gender difference to be marginalizing to the girls. Second, diversity can be reduced to the study of "others" or an imposed or obligatory study of "them," as in racial ethnicities, poor people, the disabled, women, gays, lesbians, or bisexual/transgendered individuals. In this way, the discourse of diversity portrays reality in a specific way and offers a taken for granted way of understanding (Tinning, 1997). As Madrid asserted,

When we are talking about diversity, we are talking about the other, whatever that might be: someone of different gender, race, class, national origin; somebody at a greater or lesser distance from the norm; someone outside the set; someone who possesses characteristics, features, or attributes; someone who does not fall within the taxonomies we use daily and with which we are comfortable; someone who does not fit into the mental configurations that give our lives order and meaning. (1993, p.385)

A Need for Action

Joyce’s and Leslie’s accounts call for a revitalized commitment to gender issues in education that goes beyond mere recognition of two different sexes and their accompanying socially defined behaviors. The differences in social expectations for girls and women in self perception and skill development have very real negative social consequences (Eccles, Jacobs & Harold, 1990). As Catherine Marshall stated so well, “we need theories and methods that integrate gender issues with the realities of power and politics” (1997, p. 2).

In addition, the two studies point toward the need to consider strategies that move beyond merely working for diversity. It is also clear from these examples that using language to advocate for the valuing diversity without action for equity is not enough. Diversity’s inert language does not encourage an examination of the way students and teachers interact, nor does it encourage a critical examination of the ways educators do gender, that is, the ways that reinforce the gendered power relations as they currently exist within schools. Consider Leslie’s comment,

Looking at gender equity for girls in the classroom has required that I look carefully into actions and thoughts, both spoken and unspoken. Making class more empowering for girls means making changes that allow them to be supported and more comfortable to express who they are. It has meant in this study, that boys’ opinions had to change. In doing so it turned out to be a liberating experience for them. The option of having a more comfortable and equitable relationship with girls gave them a safer and more comfortable place sometimes. That they could have this final dialogue with each other and that they could listen and understand so well is a great tribute to them. Their understanding at this point of what has been, what had happened, and what it meant far surpassed my own understanding in seven years of previous teaching.

As educators, we need to create the kind of educational environments that foster equality. One factor that could contribute to that kind of environment is to
point out through direct instruction the nature of inequitable relationships and the ramifications of discrimination. Another would be to provide the emotional and social support necessary to free girls and boys to safely explore differences and provide alternative role models and ways of being in the classroom. A third is to carefully critique the content of the physical education curriculum to be certain to provide a variety of movement experiences that move beyond dominant ideological practices. Both teachers openly discussed feelings surrounding discrimination and the impact discrimination has on all concerned. The option of having more comfortable and equitable relationships with each other gave both the boys and the girls a safer and more comfortable space within the classroom.

Inequities will no doubt remain unless educators adopt a consciousness and commitment toward exploring gendered relationships (Hollingsworth, 1994a) and contextualize the teaching process in such a way as to place gender differentiation at the heart of emancipatory teaching practice (Nilges, 1998). Valian (1998) maintains that one of the most important remedies to inequities and discrimination is to become educated about gender schemas: how they develop, how they work, how they are maintained, and how they skew expectations. Nilges (1998) adds that uncovering and reconstructing gender ideologies (students’ as well as teachers’) is essential to addressing gender discrimination. But Valian is also quick to point out that widespread direct intervention to effect change will further require (unfortunately) affirmative action policies, legislation, and court action. These three legal strategies for change are also elements missing from diversity discourse.

Finally, it is important to note that real educational change for social justice will need to go beyond the “remediation” of the girls according to the deficit model as described by Dewar (1987). Dewar (1994) challenges teachers to create forms of physical education and sport that are enabling and positive for all students, not just a select few. This challenge specifically applies to teacher education in physical education. The ways in which skill performance and curriculum are defined within physical education remains problematic, especially for those who are expected to teach physical education and have but a cursory introduction. The conceptualization and delivery of skill performance and curriculum within physical education teacher preparation programs reinforces a narrow and limited ideological view of physical education that marginalizes many students. As Nilges stated so emphatically, this profession of physical education has “a patriarchal history of situating boys and girls as largely separate, different, and unequal” (1998, p.192).

Leslie thinks it is very important for teachers to get serious about teaching sports skills to all students who need that instruction. She likens this instruction to the kind that would result if a child needed help in mathematics or reading. But the focus cannot simply be on the girls, as if the girls were the only unskilled students in the class. Leslie’s and Joyce’s stories teach us that the focus needs to be on developing strategies to change the boys’ attitudes while expanding their (boys) understanding of their roles, values, and relationships AND providing a greater variety of opportunities for all students.

References


Notes

1Since the Passage of Proposition 13 in California, which limited property taxes, elementary physical education specialists have all but disappeared. Many elementary schools rely on the classroom teacher to implement physical education instruction.

2Valian provides a compelling description of the profound effect that gender schemas had on women from birth through retirement and how this differential treatment results in large disparities for women.