

## The Gender Question in Education

Ann Diller, Barbara Houston, Kathryn Pauly Morgan, and Maryann Ayim, *The Gender Question in Education* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 45.

THEORY, PEDAGOGY, AND POLITICS

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Diller, Houston, Pauly Morgan and Ayim in their anthology on *the Gender Question in Education* have honored the concept of *gender sensitivity* as constructed by their friend and Phaedra circle member, Jane Roland Martin. In writing the Foreword to this collection of essays Roland Martin says, "It is possible to be sensitive to the workings of gender whenever and wherever gender makes a difference" (p. ix).

As Diller, Houston, Pauly Morgan, and Ayim explore the construct of *gender sensitivity* they seem to require us to position ourselves in relation to certain essentialized features of gender. This requirement, while a learned behavior and easily done, creates an intellectual discomfort for me, as it appears I am being asked to look at gender as something which can sometimes be ignored and at other times acknowledged. I understand the request, but I resist. Gender is not an object.

As Pat Parker expresses so succinctly in her poem "For The White Person Who Wants to Know How To Be My Friend":

"The first thing you do is forget that i'm Black  
Second, you must never forget that i'm Black."<sup>1</sup>

I want to use the critical perspective of this paradox as a way of knotting a thread which weaves in and out of this collection of essays. I have articulated at some length elsewhere that gender relations, particularly the relations of domination and subjugation characteristic of patriarchy, serve, at a structural level within culture, to condition our way of knowing, of teaching, of learning, and even of understanding gender itself. Gender as such, I have argued, is not an issue. Gender is an embedded and dynamic construct which has become essentialized across contexts of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

I understand Diller, Houston, Pauly Morgan, and Ayim to be clarifying some of the circumstances under or in which they believe we should be or could be *gender sensitive*.

Unfortunately, just as Plato had presumed that sex was (or could be) a difference that makes no difference, these authors who would use a constructed concept of *gender sensitivity* must assume that gender is sometimes reducible to a difference that makes no difference. If, as I have assumed, gender is a social construction that includes interactive regulating themes, then it follows that a question such as: 'What is gender-sensitive teaching?' begs the question. I do not wish to suggest that the challenge to raise consciousness about gender issues is not of great value. In fact, I believe it to be a significant part of a mutual feminist effort to deconstruct patriarchy. My concern is that those defending the powerful patriarchal constructions as well as

our here well intentioned feminist sister philosophers are about the business of arguing from and thus contributing to the essentialization of the meaning of gender.

Kathryn Pauly Morgan makes a point in an endnote to her chapter on "Freeing the Children: The Abolition of Gender" that she understands: "Gender freedom...to be understood as gender sensitivity" and that she understands that notion to be directed toward the elimination of gender bias. She attributes that intention to Houston in chapter 4. Then Pauly Morgan goes on to say that, "I argue for the abolition of gender in the public domain where it may be appealed to to support differential access to rights, etc."

What is the connection between gender bias and essentializing gender? How could gender bias be abolished in public? Would it continue to exist in private? What are the patriarchal functions of gender bias? Would she have us believe that some meaningful boundary could be imposed between public bias and private bias? Would that really affect genderized power relations within patriarchal value systems?

As I read these chapters, I asked myself, "Are they/we talking about taking away identifying labels?" "Are they/we cleaning up a sexist language system?" "Are they/we separating a biological heterosexual identity from the politics of genderization within patriarchy?" It seems to me that the constructs of gender, if they are structurally reenforced constructs of meaning, will adapt and flow with the forms in which they are embedded and thus patriarchal structures will maintain some approximation of existent power relations.

I thought we had learned that because of the values inherent in patriarchy as those identified as women excel in an area of work the prestige of the job decreases as does the pay. Patriarchal values are adaptive to circumstances. As Gloria Steinem so wisely put it, "If men menstruated it would be a sacrament."

As I read on, I noted that Pauly Morgan became more pronounced in her deviation from the gender-sensitive approach as she declared in chapter 9, "At present, I see no obvious resolution to the paradoxes I have posed." The authors, in their search for resolutions, often seem to have gotten caught up in thinking of gender as an issue rather than as an embedded structure which reflects and supports patriarchy.

In chapter 1 Ayim and Houston, for example, seem to be absorbed into the overarching social project and power relations when they conclude their definitional refinement of sexism by saying that, "even a cursory investigation of the now voluminous body of empirical writing on the topic points to the need for having a clearer understanding of the concept (sexism) both for designing empirical studies and interpreting the results" (p. 28). I do not understand why it would be an appropriate project for those who are oppressed by gender constraints to service that kind of patriarchally embedded empiricism. Is there some hope that patriarchal values can be dislodged by empirical methodologies?

Pauly Morgan pronounces at the end of chapter 5, "Liberation from injustices endemic to sexist polarization is possible but not through androgyny" (p. 73). The

question that remains for me is to understand how Pauly Morgan sees the problem being solved. What is “the problem?” May I suggest that a simple pragmatic of problem solving may in itself serve to perpetuate a structural problem.

The title of this book is *The Gender Question in Education*. Use of the article “the” further alerts me to watch for the authors’ participation in essentializing gender as a definable problem to be solved.

Perhaps the moment in the book that comes the closest to suggesting the authors’ recognition of the importance of the process of deconstruction — albeit from the perspective of a modernist notion of identity — is Houston’s “Theorizing Gender” in chapter 6. Here, in her efforts to explore a 1989 article by Davies, Houston considers “radical” change, but dilutes it by expressing a need for “an adequate theory (which) is also going to have to provide a good, detailed accounting of the possibility of individual agency in these matters.”

I am further encouraged in the final chapter of the anthology when Ayim analyzes the matter of political correctness as she explores the limitations of the liberal and identity-based scholarship that Houston and Diller seem to have supported in their remarks. Ayim notes that those who have traditionally defined matters such as racism and sexism through their control of language have had great power, but, she says, “we all have a stake in which particular definitions gain acceptance as correct.” Perhaps there lies within this thought the move from individualism and identity politics to a necessary connection within and among groups and communities for participation in power. In this way Ayim may sense a need to be involved in social projects which serve in cultural deconstructions.

While I respect the effort put forth by these philosophers and I often find my own work mired in the manifestations of gendered identities, my critique lies with the focus on identity politics and individual moral acts related to *gender sensitivity*. This collection does little to move our feminist discourse beyond an issues approach. As such this analysis, relying on the concept of *gender sensitivity*, tends strongly to suggest that the political is personal, that gender sensitivity can alter gender bias and gender bias when disallowed will produce gender freedom. In that approach I see little that might serve cultural deconstructions of what our authors call in their subtitle “Theory, Pedagogy, and Politics.”

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1. Pat Parker’s poem appears in *Making Face, Making Soul/Hacienda Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldua (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990), 297

2. Glorianne M. Leck, “Examining Gender As A Foundation within Foundational Studies,” *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 3 (1990) 382-95.

## GENDER-SENSITIVE EDUCATION AND JUSTICE

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*The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy and Politics* is a persuasive and compelling series of essays on sexism and education. The authors, through a series of essays brought together in this volume, contribute important insights to our understanding of this important issue in education. Although the essays are by different authors and written over a number of years, they read very much as a piece. A central argument in the book is a defence of "gender-sensitive" education. To approach my task of providing a response in a limited space, I have chosen to take one issue raised by my reading of the book and explore it. By doing this, I will of course miss or ignore many, indeed most, of the valuable points the authors make. I do hope that my considerations will speak to an important issue and that in doing so I may contribute to the dialogue started by the authors.

I take my starting point from Morgan: "I claim that a social policy of gender-freedom gives equality and justice pride of place alongside liberty and self-determination" (p. 45). The question I want to pose is whether the ideal of gender-sensitivity promotes justice. Now, I will have to be brief dealing with some major points. The first, obviously, is justice. As a way to get to my issue, consider one well-known position on justice, that of John Rawls. Susan Moller Okin has argued that "the feminist *potential* of Rawls's method of thinking and his conclusions is considerable. The original position, with the veil of ignorance hiding from its participants their sex as well as their other particular characteristics, talents, circumstances, and aims, is a powerful concept for challenging the gender structure."<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the deeply gendered nature of Rawls's work, Moller Okin nonetheless argues that his theory gives us tools for getting at the question of justice. The original position asks us to consider what principles we would choose to live by if we did not know the particular circumstances we might enjoy in life. Without going any further into this position, it is eminently plausible that if gender is added to the consideration, a sexist society is not one that would be allowed to be just. Quite simply, if we had the power to set the moral conditions and principles of justice in a society when we were in a position not to know the talents or characteristics or gender we might enjoy as persons we certainly would not choose a society that gave differential positions of power and influence on the basis of gender. The Rawlsian position on justice can thereby be used to show that a sexist society is an unjust one. But since the original position is one in which people are behind the "veil of ignorance," it seems to require that a just society is a gender-free society.

I think that this result is independent of the choice of theories of justice. Whether we choose Rawls or some other position as our theoretical framework, we will find that a sexist society is not a just society. This is because a sexist society is one in which people are not accorded equal respect and consideration. As Will Kymlicka argues, "the fundamental agreement [in political theory] is not whether to accept equality as a value, but how best to interpret it."<sup>2</sup> What unites the variety of theories

of justice available to us is their commitment to the equal treatment of persons. Since a sexist society denies equal treatment on the basis of gender, any theory of justice ought to lead to the same conclusion. Rawls, then, is just one example of this conclusion.

In principle, then, there are strong reasons for advocating a gender-free society. This position has to be weighed against Houston's argument that a gender-free approach to education "would likely ensure that females continue to have unequal educational opportunity" (p. 51). The apparent contradiction here can be addressed by noting that the comparison is between a gender-free society and gender-free education. If gender-free education were to be introduced in a society ordered by genderized or patriarchal principles, it would seem that Houston is absolutely right in her claim. If education were to treat gender as a category that made no difference in a society where it does make a difference, our efforts to create a just society are likely doomed to failure in that there would be no social reinforcement for our efforts in education. So, Houston's argument in this chapter strikes me as being absolutely correct. Through careful analysis and drawing upon research and practice she shows convincingly, to me at least, that gender-free education is not likely to produce the social change that is needed. She goes on in this chapter to call for gender-sensitive education. It is the relation between gender-sensitive education and Morgan's basic call for justice that I now want to pursue briefly.

As stated earlier, gender-sensitive education is a theme that runs throughout the book. Diller captures gender-sensitive education as an approach to education "where one recognizes the likelihood of crucial gender differences, watches for these, notices their effects and adapts educational practices accordingly" (p. 100). A gender-sensitive approach to education thereby is not one that assumes that gender does not exist or does not matter. Rather, education ought to take into account gender differences and change practices so as to recognize such differences. There are of course a multitude of ways in which educational practice can be modified so as to be sensitive to gender. Single sex classrooms or schools can be arranged so as to provide females with learning environments that promote the highest possible success and participation. Teaching strategies can be modified to allow for greater participation by female students. Activities that are genderized in society can be taught to both boys and girls. To use Jane Martin's distinction, female students can be introduced to the productive activities of society and male students to the reproductive activities.

Suppose we are successful in developing a gender-sensitive approach to education. Will we be instituting an approach that is just? To answer this question in detail might require us to examine the issue from the vantage points of several theories of justice. More importantly, we would have to examine specific gender-sensitive approaches and cases. Questions of justice are answered by examining particular policies and practices. But perhaps some insight can be gained by looking at the question in general. To get a feel for the issues involved let us consider the case from the viewpoint that Moller Okin uses, referred to earlier. Suppose we were in the original position behind the veil of ignorance and hence with no knowledge of

our characteristics (including gender) and talents and were to ask ourselves whether a gender-sensitive approach to education would be one that we would choose. It would seem that the choice would not be automatic. If gender-sensitive education is instituted in a society that accords differential respect and power on the basis of gender, some people will remain disadvantaged because of gender. So, from behind the veil of ignorance a gender-sensitive approach to education requires a gender-free society, a society in which one's gender does not affect a person's claim to equal treatment and respect. Again, it is apparent that a fundamental commitment to equality is necessary in a society before schools can make a difference with respect to gender and sexism.

Once again the centrality of equality to approaches to education to deal with gender issues is revealed. Morgan is correct, then, in claiming that a social policy of gender-freedom gives pride of place to equality and justice. In the absence of such a social policy and commitment it seems questionable that gender-sensitive approaches to education will be themselves be sufficient to bring about a nonsexist society. But they may well be crucial steps in achieving this goal. By making changes to practice in light of gender differences and by treating such differences with respect, we are making the first steps in the needed social changes. By helping students become sensitive to gender we allow them to see the inequities that exist. To solve a problem one first needs to see that there is a problem.

So my considerations do not lead to a rejection of gender-sensitive approaches. But I think I may have recast them as a means to an end, rather than approaches of inherent value. This arises, I think, from the differences, and tensions, between gender-free and gender-sensitive education. However these differences are worked out, what must be fundamental is our pursuit of justice.

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1. Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (Basic Books, 1986), 108-9. Emphasis in the original.

2. Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF "GENDER IDENTIFICATION DISORDER"

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Ann Diller, Barbara Houston, Kathryn Morgan, and Maryann Ayim were beacons for me in the early eighties as I attempted to locate myself as a doctoral student and as a woman within the philosophy of education. Later, I felt welcomed by each of them into the community of feminist scholars writing in the philosophy of education and feminist studies. It is indeed an honor for me to have the opportunity to respond to a book by philosophers whose work in feminist ethics and feminist pedagogy I have admired for so long.

By necessity, I must focus my comments and I do this by looking more closely at what counts as gender within a question about gender in education. Ayim and

Houston argue that one of the criteria by which to assess the adequacy of the analysis of a moral term is that the "analysis must capture all the ethically significant cases" (p. 18). In this paper, I hope to push the boundaries of what might be recognized as ethically significant instances of gender-sensitive education by opening up "gender" as a category. By opening up gender to other significations, it should be possible to expand alternatives to the important questions Houston poses in one of her essays: "Is gender operative here? How is gender operative? What other effects do our strategies for eliminating gender bias have?" (p. 61).

The essays in *The Gender Question in Education* are exemplary of philosophical analysis. Surprisingly, however, gender is not systematically addressed as an analytical category. The few attempts at even a descriptive definition of gender are taken up by Houston who opts for gender as signifying "a set of relations between the sexes" (p. 61) and gender as signifying social rather than biological "differences between the sexes" (p. 84n). This assumption of two sexes to which the social adheres results in the assertion that "we have only two genders" (p. 146).

Houston's essay, "Theorizing Gender: How Much of It Do We Need?" provides a way into exploring the adequacy of these limits on gender. In this essay, Houston critically looks at a paper by Bronwyn Davies in which Davies argues for a deconstructionist approach to understanding gender (p. 75). After a convincing critique of the implications of deconstruction as understood by Davies, Houston concludes that, "a more promising deconstructionist position is advanced by Judith Butler."

Had Judith Butler and not Davies written the paper on a deconstructionist approach to gender in education, much different conclusions might have been reached about the value of deconstruction for understanding gender. Whereas Houston concludes from Davies that deconstruction leads to the abandonment of categories, Butler makes clear that to deconstruct is not "to negate or throw away."<sup>1</sup> Far from eliminating categories, deconstruction calls into question, problematizes, and "opens up" a category for "a reuse or redeployment that previously has not been authorized."<sup>2</sup> Deconstruction is "a way of interrogating [a category's] construction as a pre-given or foundationalist premise"<sup>3</sup> and demonstrates "how the very establishment of the system as a system impies a beyond to it, precisely by virtue of what it excludes."<sup>4</sup> I might also add that the impulse of deconstruction is different from that of analytic philosophy; analytic philosophy establishes and distinguishes boundaries of a concept or category, while the task of deconstruction is to trouble and break open these boundaries.

Houston worries that deconstruction "might leave a child not knowing whether she is a girl or a boy [or neither?]" (p. 81). In opening up alternatives for gender, deconstruction breaks apart the presumed coherence between and among sexed bodies, gendered behavior, and sexuality and permits the possibility, for example, that a female sexed child might "know" something about her/his gender not contained by the categories "boy" or "girl." Gender does not disappear but it is polymorphous and unpredictable.



In a culture in which gender is arbitrarily tied to sex and in which “we are socially and communicatively helpless if we do not know the sex of everybody we have anything to do with,”<sup>5</sup> it is appropriate to worry about those who disrupt the assumption that sexed bodies, gender, and sexuality cohere because there are real punishing effects for those who confuse others about their gender or sexuality. But, if the alternative is a conformity to a dishonest gender rigidity, it is as necessary to worry about ways in which all children, but particularly nonconforming children, are forced into normalizing their bodies, gender, and sexuality within an arbitrary two-sex, two-gender, one-sexuality system.

Let me explain by way of an example. In her literally shocking book, *Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male & Female*, Phyllis Burke tells the stories of children forced by parents and teachers to conform to gender standards.<sup>6</sup> One of the children, seven-year-old Becky, was identified by experts as having “female sexual identity disturbance.”<sup>7</sup> What did Becky do to be pathologized in this way? Burke writes:

Becky liked to stomp around with her pants tucked into her cowboy boots, and she refused to wear dresses. She liked basketball and climbing....She liked to play with her toy walkie-talkies, rifle, dart game, and marbles. She stood with her hands on her hips, fingers facing forward. She swung her arms, and took big, surefooted strides when she walked.<sup>8</sup>

A core gender identity, tentatively supported by Houston (p. 81), may be helpful in tracing technologies which construct the embodiment of this core, but it is important to recognize that psychiatrists rely on an assumption of the “realness” of a core gender identity to pathologize children. Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood is regarded as a “pathology involving the Core Gender Identity...consistent with one’s biological sex.”<sup>9</sup> Clinics to “cure” gender identity disorder are often as near as the local university hospital.

The number of girls vulnerable to diagnosis has dramatically increased as girls become more assertive and as they engage in “rough-and-tumble play” which, “in psychological terminology, is the hallmark of the male child.”<sup>10</sup> Ruckers, Becky’s psychiatrist, has stated that gender identity disorder can be determined by comparing a child with same-sex, same-aged peers in athletic skills such as throwing a ball and percentage of baskets made from the free throw line. As Burke, sardonically comments, “I...hate to think that a child’s diagnosis of mental health...depend[s] on basketball shots made, or not made, from the free throw line.”<sup>11</sup> That uncoordinated boys and coordinated girls are vulnerable to a gender identity disorder diagnosis, has quite profound implications for a gender sensitive physical education. Physical education for boys becomes a normalizing pursuit while physical education for girls has the potential to increase “gender deviance.”<sup>12</sup>

The “cure” for Becky’s “gender identity disorder” (GID) consisted of one hundred and two sessions of behavior modification in the clinic and ninety-six sessions in her bedroom. She was rewarded for playing with “feminine sex-typed” toys and behavior and rejecting “masculine sex-typed” toys and behavior. Lest it is thought that Becky’s story is as an example of a 1950s overkill, these interventions are recommended to doctors in Ruckers, *Handbook of Child and Adolescent Sexual Problems* published in 1995.<sup>13</sup>



As Burke indicates, “rather than being ‘cured’, Becky’s self-esteem was destroyed” by constant monitoring. “Her...desires and feelings had been worn down, split off from her everyday world, only to become hidden within a secret and shamed place inside her. Becky valiantly strove for acceptance and to do what was necessary in the face of overwhelming odds. She wanted to earn back love, and if that meant choosing the pots and pans over the soft-ball mitt, so be it.”<sup>14</sup> A desire to cooperate, a typically “feminine” behavior, overrode Becky’s desire to play with “masculine sex-typed” toys. Rather than recognize a hybridity to gender identity, Becky, like the rest of us, was forced into one of two manifestations of gender.

Houston writes that she thinks “that core gender identity is mutable in the sense that we can change the *meaning* of what it is to be a girl or a boy, a woman or man, even if we cannot or do not want to abolish gender in the sense of changing an individual’s sense of themselves as being one or the other.” She goes on to say that, “if we can alter the *meaning* of what it is to be female or male then, even if the categories continue to be bipolar, the dominance-subordinance structuring can be removed” (p. 83). But, if meaning is mutable such that “boy” can mean either feminine or masculine and feminine and masculine can include a range of possibilities, this cannot help but call into question “boy” as an identity and the worthiness of a bipolar system of categorization.

It is not even necessary to rely on deconstruction to open up the limits of a bipolar system of categorization. The work could also be done by medical science if practitioners broke the silence about the inexact relationship between sex chromosomes and genitalia or indeed about the existence of at least five sexes — what Anne Fausto-Sterling refers to as male, intersexed male, true intersexed male, intersexed female, and female.<sup>15</sup>

Diller speaks for her coauthors when she writes, that “taking a gender-sensitive perspective on education can open up new angles of vision, expand our range of alternatives, alter our priorities, change our preoccupations, and help us to think more creatively about longstanding educational problems” (p. 2). Opening up the category of gender to other significations, increases exponentially the possibilities for a gender-sensitive education and permits many sets of answers to Houston’s questions: Is gender operative here? How is gender operative? What other effects do our strategies for eliminating gender bias have?

A gender-sensitive education might in some instances not even foreground gender. It would allow, for example, that a sensitivity to how things turn out for girls in education may in some instances have little to do with gender and more to do with race, class, or sexuality. Importantly, opening up gender and, as a consequence, what counts as gender-sensitivity would not only make it possible to recognize sexist distinctions between “boys” and “girls,” it would permit a sensitivity to the rigidity of these categories. This expanded gender-sensitivity would allow distinctions between gender conforming females and males and nonconforming females and males and a noticing of whether gender conformists do better at school.

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1. Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 9.
4. Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.
5. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Calif.: Freedom, 1983), 22.
6. Phyllis Burke, *Gender Shock: Exploding the Myths of Male and Female* (New York: Anchorage Books, 1996).
7. Ibid., 5.
8. Ibid.
9. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 158.
10. Burke, *Gender Shock*, 5.
11. Ibid., 205.
12. Ibid., 204.
13. Ibid., 19.
14. Ibid.
15. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).