The Gender Question in Education

Theory, Pedagogy, & Politics

ANN DILLER
BARBARA HOUSTON
KATHRYN PAULY MORGAN
MARYANN AYIM

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with a Foreword by Jane Roland Martin

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The Gender Question in Education

For our Mothers,
Grace Ella Hamilton Snelbaker
Ellen Houston
Estelle Sophia Kummer Pauly
Anne Mercy Cassidy Neely

Foreword

What with the poverty question, the illiteracy question, the math and science question, and the question of multiculturalism, it is only too easy for teachers, school administrators, and even parents to forget just how important the gender question in education really is. The authors of this wonderful volume of essays not only remind us of gender's centrality in education but also provide us with immensely helpful ways in which to think and talk about gender and education.

For more than 2,000 years—indeed, ever since Plato wrote in the *Republic* that sex is a difference that makes no difference—philosophical discussions of gender and education have swung back and forth between two extreme positions. The parties to the historical conversation about gender and education have either denied the relevance of gender to education or insisted that gender is the difference that makes all the difference. Neither answer to the gender question in education is satisfactory.

Those who opt for gender *freedom* or *neutrality* appear to be on the side of the angels. Starting from the valid premise that both males and females are human beings, they correctly conclude that both sexes are entitled to the full rights of citizenship. Unfortunately, from the simple fact of universal citizenship, nothing whatsoever follows about gender's bearing on education. As it happens, study after study of education has revealed that gender does make a difference to education, and an enormous one at that.[1]

It should come as no surprise that gender is relevant to education. Having projected it not just onto our own species but also onto our social and natural worlds, we humans could scarcely have been expected to create a gender-free educational system. Yet, although those who insist that gender does bear on education are correct, it is a grave mistake to adopt the extreme gender-bound approach to education that many do. Entailing separate educational tracks for girls and boys that lead in opposite directions, this stance effectively rejects both the common humanity of the two sexes and the centuries-old struggle for gender equality.

Fortunately, there is another answer to the gender question in education. It is possible to be sensitive to the workings of gender whenever and wherever gender makes a difference to education without endorsing the two-track system that was historically so oppressive to girls and women. In this volume, Ann Diller, Barbara Houston, Kathryn Pauly Morgan, and Maryann Ayim have adopted this alternative. Whether their subject be sexism or sex education, women's physical education or the ethics of care, political correctness or

the androgynous classroom, or for that matter gender theory itself, they have unfailingly developed gender-sensitive analyses. In the process, they have cast education's aims, its curricula, its institutional structures, its pedagogies, and its practices in a brilliant new light.

Jane Roland Martin

Notes

1. See, for example, American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992); Peggy Orenstein, *School Girls* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); Roberta M. Hall and Bernice R. Sandler, *The Classroom Climate: A Chilly One for Women?* (Washington, DC: Project on the Status of Women, 1982); Margaret Clark, *The Great Divide* (Canberra: Curriculum Development Centre, 1989); Dale Spender and Elizabeth Sarah, eds., *Learning to Lose* (London: Women's Press, 1980).

Acknowledgments

The chapters in this book reflect more than two decades of philosophical investigations by all four of us. During these years so many people have contributed to our work that we cannot possibly name everyone here. Each of us has, therefore, forced ourselves to hone down our acknowledgments to a shortened list of persons vital to our work and to the production of this book.

In addition to our individual acknowledgments, we would like to express our collective gratitude to literally thousands of students and hundreds of colleagues at the University of New Hampshire, the University of Toronto, and the University of Western Ontario, as well as to the members of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, the Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy, the Canadian Women's Studies Association, the National Women's Studies Association, and the Philosophy of Education Society for providing the occasions, audiences, encouragement, challenges, and critiques that fostered the growth of this volume.

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This book is dedicated to our mothers. My own mother, Grace Hamilton Snelbaker, who graduated from Ohio State in 1926 with a degree in Home Economics, never could teach me how to sew; but she did teach me how to live, how to do philosophy, and how to practice an ethics of care. Completely honest and unwavering in her pursuit of truth, my mother would not let a perceived falsehood, hasty generalization, or unwarranted conclusion slip past her. She tempered her strong streak of Scottish skepticism with a cheerful sense of humor, compassionate action, and a sympathetic disposition. As a mother myself, I want to acknowledge my debt to my two sons, John Andrew and David Daniel Diller, who have not only brought much joy to my life but have also made me a better teacher, opened up my concept of gender, and expanded my sense of educational possibilities. Ever since the late 1960s my philosophic work has been sustained by the meetings of Phaedra. I am grateful to Phaedra's steadfast members, past and present, Nancy Clover Glock, Beatrice Nelson, Jane Roland Martin, Jennifer Radden, Janet Farrell Smith, Barbara Houston, and Susan Franzosa for the constructive candor of their critiques and the perceptive persistence of their encouragement. Other colleagues and friends toward whom I feel a strong debt of gratitude include

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Ann Diller

In many ways my deepest debt of gratitude is to my mother Ellen Houston who, with enormous courage, determination, and passionate hope, struggled to create for me educational opportunities that she herself never had. I am grateful to my father, Edward Houston, for his nurturance. Early morning porridge and more recently seven-grain bread bespeak his love more than he knows. I thank him for teaching me to reason, to care about doing things well, to play baseball, and for cultivating my sense of morality and my sense of humor. His own sense of humor has made him a teacher I've wanted to listen to. John Diller I thank for his philosophically engaging conversations and for being so willing to share himself when it matters most. David Diller's quiet integrity and kindness are an inspiration, his humor and sense of adventure a joy to share. The "Hags and Crones" of London, Ontario, in particular Gillian Michell and Kathleen Okruhlik, have provided me the best feminist counsel and support one could wish. I want also to enthusiastically thank many other friends and colleagues who have provided me with support, astute criticism, and stimulating conversations. I cannot name them all, but special thanks are owed to Dwight Boyd, Kai Nielsen, Maureen Ford, Nel Noddings, Mike Andrew, Kay Munson, Barbara Brockelman, Denise Connors, Margaret Crowley, and the members of Phaedra: Jane Martin, Ann Diller, Jennifer Radden, Beebe Nelson, Susan Franzosa, and Janet Farrell Smith. I think no words can convey my profound appreciation for the wonderful philosophical friendships I have had with my coauthors: Maryann Ayim, Kathryn Morgan, and especially Ann Diller whose careful and caring labors are chiefly responsible for the publication of this book.

Barbara Houston

Many thanks go, first and foremost, to my mother, Estelle Kummer Pauly, for providing me not only with nurturance, understanding, and lunch but also with the striking image of a Catholic mother of five, up late at night, ex-

ploring tomes of speculative Thomistic metaphysics, her household finally at rest. My thanks, too, go to my father, Leon Pauly, M.D., who integrated his empirical bent as a much-loved physician with his support of his philosopher/daughter. I wish, too, to thank my son Daniel Christopher Pauly, whose antics, insights, and demands for integrity have found their way into my published work more than once. My appreciation should also go to my four brothers and to a series of ill-fated philosopher partners who have helped me sharpen my philosophical wits. I also wish to acknowledge the importance of Jane Roland Martin in being the first to say to me, "Your work is good enough to publish," and for continuing to affirm that throughout my personal and professional life. My students and colleagues in the Women's Studies Programme at the University of Toronto and my feminist colleagues at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education have been a continuing source of support and courage in my "dark nights of the professional soul" when it looked like unemployment, part-time teaching, and sessional appointments might never end. Many friends and colleagues have provided me with invaluable challenges and reflections. I am especially grateful to Martha Ayim, Dwight Boyd, Paula Caplan, Roi Daniels, Maureen Ford, June Larkin, Nel Noddings, David Nyberg, Allen Pearson, Barbara Secker and Ronald de Sousa. Finally, last but certainly not least, this collection speaks to my experience of the delight, the power, and the fruitfulness of the rich philosophical friendships I have been privileged to enjoy with my coauthors: Maryann Ayim, Ann Diller, and Barbara Houston.

Kathryn Pauly Morgan

In a book dedicated to our mothers, it feels especially appropriate to me to formally acknowledge my daughter, Martha Ayim, who is for me a constant source of feminist inspiration and as much a friend as a daughter. I wish to acknowledge also the many years of competent and cheerful labor on these and other manuscripts by my co-workers/secretaries: Stephanie Macleod and Linda Colvin, in the Educational Policies Division, Faculty of Education, The University of Western Ontario. My indebtedness to colleagues who have encouraged my writing, who have engaged in passionate discussions of research topics I was exploring, and who have provided me with invaluable feedback on more and less primitive versions of my work is too extensive to be recorded here. Were I ever to catalogue this debt, however, my coauthors of this book, Barbara Houston, Ann Diller, and Kathryn Pauly Morgan, along with Joan Barfoot, Kathleen Okruhlik, Andrew Blair, Leslie Thielen-Wilson, Martha Ayim, and Jim Mullin would be at the top of the list.

Maryann Ayim

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Contents

Introduction

ANN DILLER

We have designed this volume to be a clear, accessible introduction to gender questions in education. In one sense, this is a how-to book for anyone to use as a set of starting points and guidelines for sustained analysis of gender and education. In another sense, we envision the book as an open invitation to continue the conversation and to further advance investigations into the theory, pedagogy, and politics of gender in education.

Although the volume as a whole constitutes a series of inquiries into the gender question in education, the three parts mark a progressive differentiation in emphasis. Part 1 focuses on theory. Part 2 moves back and forth between theory and practical questions of pedagogy. And Part 3 applies theory to specific problems of practice and politics. Readers may, however, choose to jump about, or "read backwards" so to speak; those with urgent interests in pedagogy or politics may want to leap directly into Parts 2 and 3. For those who wish to read selectively, the next section of this introduction gives a preview for each part, with short chapter by chapter summaries. We do recommend, in any case, that you read this entire introduction first; it provides the contextual framework, and connecting links, for better understanding the individual chapters.

The central theme of the entire volume, both as text and subtext, is that of a *gender-sensitive* perspective on education. The concept of a gender-sensitive ideal for education was first suggested by Jane Roland Martin in a presidential address to the Philosophy of Education Society (Martin [1981b] 1994, pp. 70–87). Martin's gender-sensitive critique of the standard ideal of the educated person, which still dominated Anglo-American philosophy of education at that time, electrified, and in some instances horrified, her audience. When Martin made the case that this traditional ideal reflects a male cognitive perspective and does harm to both men and women, she catapulted the Society's members to a new level of public philosophical dialogue about gender and education.

Shortly after Martin's introduction of her gender-sensitive perspective, the four authors of this book came together, as feminist philosophers of education from Canada and the United States, to initiate plans for our first joint symposium: "Should Public Education Be Gender Free?" Thus began our ongoing collaborative inquiries and philosophical dialogues, which continue to the present day and led to this collection of essays.

All four authors use a gender-sensitive methodology in this book. The same persistent question recurs throughout our inquiries: What do we discover when we pay careful, systematic, sensitive attention to the difference that gender makes in educational thought and practice? And the answer, in broad terms, is that a gender-sensitive approach leads us to discover both new critiques and new possibilities. In some chapters we are more preoccupied with critique, in others with possibility; in a number of chapters we include both.

On the critique side, a gender-sensitive perspective uncovers the extensive effects and harmful consequences of society's gender discrimination, which inevitably intrudes upon education and can even undermine our best pedagogical practices. On the possibilities side, 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 long-standing educational problems.

In Part 1 we begin with some theoretical basics: What do we mean by *sexism*? How can we explain well-intentioned disagreements over what counts as sexism? Which analyses lead us to say that someone can be well meaning and yet still be acting in a sexist manner? How can we recognize sexist education? Maryann Ayim and Barbara Houston discuss these questions in Chapter 1, where they guide us through the process of identifying and assessing various forms of sexism and sexist education. Ayim and Houston show how disagreements can arise when we shift our focus from questions about sexist intentions to ask instead about the existence of sexist content or to inquire into the occurrence of sexist consequences.

Ayim and Houston also address common concerns about the way we use the term sexism and draw helpful distinctions for its use. For example, they remind us to distinguish between the act of assessing something as morally objectionable (e.g., sexist) and the further, separate move of imputing moral blame. In the final section of Chapter 1, Ayim and Houston demonstrate the application of their analyses to five educational cases.

Once we glimpse the pervasive complexities of sexism and its links with our educational experiences, we start to question what we should do about all of this. In the first subpart, each of the three interconnected chapters sets forth an alternative vision of how gender should be treated in public education. The first alternative offers a traditional form of education in which girls and boys are taught their own clearly differentiated, socially determined gender roles (Chapter 2). The second alternative outlines an education that aims

to free both sexes from externally imposed gender roles and from genderized expectations or restrictions by abolishing all gender differentiation from our schools and classroom practices (Chapter 3). Finally, the third alternative argues for the adoption of a gender-sensitive form of education that undertakes to eliminate gender bias by developing a critical awareness of the meaning and evaluation we attach to gender (Chapter 4).

The three alternatives discussed in the subpart do not, of course, exhaust the educational possibilities. Thus, in Chapter 5, Kathryn Morgan looks at another, sometimes popular, alternative. Well before the appearance of postmodernist deconstructions of gender, the ideal of androgyny provided one way to move beyond gender polarities. But when Morgan investigates the possibility of using androgyny as an educational ideal to remedy sexism in the classroom, she discovers three major difficulties: (1) conceptual confusions, (2) pragmatic problems, and (3) undesirable social consequences. Given these difficulties, Morgan concludes that the ideal of androgyny is neither an appropriate nor a feasible guide for classroom practices. This essay also illustrates a general point about the dangers of instituting any gender ideals, however wonderful they may appear to be.

We end Part 1 by returning to the larger overarching question: Theorizing gender: How much of it do we need? In Chapter 6 Barbara Houston examines one set of educational proposals that reflects the postmodernist interest in deconstructing gender. In her analysis, Houston uncovers key assumptions and addresses potential confusions. For example, she notes that efforts to abolish the whole concept of gender seem, at times, to be confused with efforts to reconstitute gender categories. She reminds us that abolishing gender as a category could be dangerous, as, for example, when it leaves us with no way to ground feminist politics. Her own analyses lead her to conclude that just which gender categories and how much attention to gender might best serve women remain unanswered questions. Houston also discusses both the possibilities and problems of abolishing personal gender identity. In her discussion she makes the important educational point that even if we cannot or do not want to abolish gender we can, nevertheless, alter the meaning of the categories; we can learn to change what it means to be a *girl* or a *boy*, a *woman* or a *man*; and we can learn to challenge the definitions that build subordination and domination into our gender categories.

In Part 2 our gender-sensitive search for new models leads us to consider an ethics of care (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984, 1992) as one new possibility for revisioning educational practice. In Chapter 7 I summarize the central tenets of an ethics of care, survey the criticisms leveled against this ethic, and classify the criticisms into two major groups: (1) those that claim that an ethics of care is applicable only to a limited domain of close personal relationships and (2) those that claim it is a dangerous ethic for women or for any other already subordinate group. After examining each of these claims, I argue for further discussion and exploration of educational applications; some-

thing that we return to in our second subpart as well as in Chapter 12. But before pursuing these possibilities, we shift to a critique in Chapter 8.

In Chapter 8, Morgan uncovers the complex ways in which our pedagogical practices continue to perpetuate gendered forms of educational empowerment and disempowerment. She exposes and describes what she calls three myths: (1) The Universality Myth, (2) The Coeducation Myth, and (3) The Equal Opportunity Myth.

At the end of the twentieth century we have become aware, often painfully so, of a multiplicity of axes of power and privilege that affect all of us in educational settings. As Morgan sets out to describe the "Emperor's New Clothes" she first pauses to diagram fourteen intersecting axes of privilege and domination affecting North American education. This diagram reminds us that sexism is only one axis of power among at least thirteen others, such as racism, class bias, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and so forth. Thus, whatever our preoccupation with any single axis, such as gender, race, or class, we still need to strive for awareness and honesty with respect to our own differential positioning along all these multiple axes of power. In some cases we may discover that these myths, which camouflage gender bias, also serve to veil the faces of domination in force elsewhere. In such cases we might follow the same series of steps that Morgan uses in her critique as a means to challenge the myths and begin to free ourselves from their pervasive, often well-hidden power.

In our second subpart, we explore applications of an ethics of care approach within the context of feminist pedagogy. In Chapter 9, Morgan draws upon her own experiences as a feminist teacher and offers her philosophical observations on the difficulties attendant upon constructing an adequate, indeed a superior, model for feminist education. This chapter elucidates two common paradoxes we encounter as feminist teachers who attempt to bring nurturant models, such as the ethics of care, into our classroom practices: (1) the paradox of critical nurturance and (2) the role model paradox.

We encounter the first paradox when we find that feminist teachers are expected to be critical and nurturing at the same time; but students and teachers alike often experience nurturance and criticism as conflicting activities. This conflict becomes the topic of Chapter 10. Even though the general tension between nurturance and criticism is not a new educational problem, when we take a gender-sensitive perspective we discover further complications because of the powerful force exerted by genderized expectations. I begin by considering what we can learn from three standard attempts to resolve the paradox of critical nurturance. I then propose a new fourth alternative that is both gender sensitive and also in line with the ethics of care.

In Chapter 11, Houston addresses Morgan's second paradox, the role model paradox, which is found in the apparent contradiction between a student's identification with her feminist teacher as an ideal role model and the student's development of her own self-created autonomous identity. Using a