Gender Sensitivity for Adventist Teachers

BY DORA D. CLARKE-PINE

It was one of those crushing moments that we have all faced at some time in our lives. I was on the sidelines, waiting to be picked for an informal softball game at a church-related recreational outing. It was 1977. I was 16, I was a girl, and it was my first game with this group. As a result, I knew I would be one of the last chosen. Neither of the two captains disappointed me on that point. However, I could hardly blame them. No one knew I could actually play softball. I proved myself on the field that day, and never had to suffer the humiliation of being picked last again, at least with that particular group.

Let’s move forward 20 years. It is 1997. I have shown up to play on a faculty softball team, which is scheduled to play a student team. Again, no one knows I can play softball. There is no blatant discrimination, but as before, there are assumptions. I am not asked where I would like to play, but am placed by default at second base—a relatively safe position for a woman in the infield. This is familiar territory to me (not the position—I usually play shortstop—but the assumption: Females can’t play as well as males). Again, I will have to prove myself. Halfway through the game, I hear one of the student softball players say, “Don’t hit it to her—she’s too good.” One guy who does hit it to me stops running to first base when he sees where it’s going. I hear him say to his fellow teammates, “Why even bother running? She’s going to throw me out anyway.” My husband later told me he got a kick out of listening to the students talk about me. He said that I had definitely earned their respect.

So what is gender bias? Simply put, it means not affording one gender (men or women) the same opportunities given to the other. But the definition goes beyond that. Gender bias can also mean not challenging a climate of assumptions that places one gender in an inferior position to the other. This can occur on the ballfield, in the classroom, in the home, or in the church—and lifelong attitudes can thereby be lodged in the impressionable mind of a young person.

Many articles and books have highlighted issues related to gender bias, especially in the field of education. To deal with such problems, a number of gender-sensitivity education strategies, programs, and models have been proposed.

Regardless of whether a gender-sensitivity training model is actively selected for a particular school system, gender role training will occur, either formally or informally. As a result, it may or may not foster an inclusive and gender-neutral climate.

Informal learning occurs all of the time. Children learn from the adults in their lives what those adults have learned growing up from the adults in their lives. Thus, if gender-sensitivity awareness is not actively encouraged, our classroom education on this issue will depend primarily upon teachers’ personal experiences and attitudes, their priorities, and how much they actually know about fostering gender-neutral attitudes in young people.

The Need for Gender-Sensitivity Training

Instead of this haphazard approach, Adventist schools...
ought to provide gender-sensitivity training at all levels within the church educational system—from elementary through the college/university level. This will provide numerous benefits to our students, as well as our denomination, ranging from individual gains in self-worth to improved school communities. There will even be worldwide mission gains when no talent or skill goes ignored or undeveloped. Indeed, throughout Scripture, God tells us that His kingdom is not about walls or barriers, or about power or status. He reminds us that we are all His children. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, KJV).

**Unlimited Possibilities**

Thus, when we begin to value each other as God values us, and when we learn to expect limitless possibilities from our youth, regardless of gender, we may be surprised at the results. But should we be? The value God has placed on each one of us often defies understanding. Romans 9:31 and 32 state, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (NKJV). To this type of love, it is not surprising that some would respond as Paul did: “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:20, 21, NIV).

Paul was not ashamed of his God, his faith, or his life mission. We want every person in our educational system to be similarly minded. Gender-sensitivity training can be part of this process, opening up young minds to the special value that God places on each one of us individually. This can also help each person to define the roles in his or her life more fully (psychologically, socially, educationally, and spiritually), making sure they are not limited or tainted by unnecessary limitations.

**What Happens in a Gender-Sensitivity Program?**

In a gender-sensitivity program, teachers learn to provide equitable opportunities for both girls and boys to participate and answer questions in class. Teachers also learn how to respond more equitably to students in areas such as praise, individual assistance, high-level questioning, active listening, positive personal interest, and affirmation of expressed feelings. Such adjustments are needed because gender bias, already known to exist in many classrooms as demonstrated by problems in the above areas, often goes unrecognized by teachers.

Gender-sensitivity programs also help teachers learn how to model the use of gender-friendly language, thus ensuring that students learn to consider as appropriate a variety of roles for males and females. For example, a teacher wanting to introduce a critical-thinking assignment might use an illustration such as this: “A powerful IBM executive, wanting to create a new software program, decided that he or she needed
to hire two of the best research assistants in the area, Ms. Franks and Mr. Cole. The executive offered them great salary and benefit packages, but after hiring both of them, didn't follow through with the promise of individual company cars. If you were one of the research assistants, what would you do after it became evident that you would not be receiving the previously promised company car?" (Note that the executive and research assistants are not assumed to be male.)

Within the curriculum, teachers should ensure that resource materials such as textbooks, videotapes, and interactive CD-ROMs use gender-friendly images, photographs, illustrations, and language. If such resources are not available, teachers should ensure that the gender bias is pointed out and discussed, thereby increasing awareness of such biases. Research shows that in mixed-group situations, males are much more likely to assume, or to be selected for, leadership positions.

Classroom activities can be designed to encourage more active listening and empathetic response styles for both sexes. Again, using a variety of male and female adult models to introduce and encourage such activities would, of course, be ideal. Conflict-resolution programs that are integrated and infused throughout the entire school curriculum might be one way to develop these types of skills.

Finally, teachers should ensure that men and women are presented fairly in various subject areas, especially in areas that are often male- or female-dominated (math, science, literature, social studies, etc.). When students begin to see real-life examples of individuals to whom they can personally relate making significant contributions in areas not often seen, they may be tempted to say: "Why can't I do that, too?"

**In Conclusion**

The sad thing about the softball illustration used at the beginning of this article is that societal sex-role expectations have been so ingrained into people's personal psyches that they don't generally regard as "abnormal" the assumption that "Girls can't play as well as boys." That is how pervasive gender bias can be. The good news is that even though I viewed the initial assumptions of my male peers as "normal," I was not afraid to challenge those assumptions. And there's even more good news. If more women and more men get into the habit of challenging assumptions like those, pretty soon those assumptions—and other gender-biased assumptions—will be forced to change. I know, because again and again it has happened to me on the softball field—in the minds of both my male and female peers. And if it can happen on the softball field, it can happen in the classroom and in society as well.

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