

## **Equity and Identity: Teaching as a Political Act**

### **Success**

Science education now wrestles with issues of diversity, social justice, and equity in ways that I am particularly excited about. Specifically, I am thrilled about how the research community is beginning to address the issue of gender equity. We have moved from strictly exploring gender as a thing worthy of description to a process worthy of deconstruction. In other words, our exploration of gender no longer has to be limited to “the males did this” and “the females did that.” Instead, we can now look at how the very processes of becoming male and/or female actually operate within the daily lives of teachers and students. Seeing students’ identities as being very much formed within daily participation in the science classroom is much different than “dealing with” student identities as something fixed that they bring with them to class. Particularly salient for us as science educators is the ability to see how science teaching and learning actually works to influence that process of becoming a gendered individual. The thrill (for me) is that novel theoretical and methodological perspectives on issues of equity and identity (e.g., feminist poststructuralism), are allowing us to see these complex social issues in ways that are not limited to dualistic frames of thought. Seeing gender as multiple masculinities and femininities that are social constructions, rather than as biological males and females, is a perspective that I have found very useful in my own work.

This is not to say that “the males did this” and “the females did that” forms of research are not important in science education. On the contrary, they contribute incredibly by exposing inequitable patterns that may exist in any learning environment. They allow us to draw lines in the sand, take positions, and declare where hegemonic practices need to be addressed. Equity research along this vein powerfully utilizes identity politics as a way of calling us out on our inequitable classroom practices. Indeed, resulting interventions have made great strides toward more equitable forms of teaching.

Issues of identity (including gender, ethnicity, class, race, etc.) can be viewed as static categories that we claim and author ourselves through. However, they can also be viewed as fluid positions that we hail and resist constantly throughout the day as we renegotiate who we are. Every new conversation, in every new situation, forces us to take up and/or reject various discourses in order to take up a comfortable storyline, to claim an “I,” or in other words, to have an identity. While the process may be fluidly constructed, the product is often viewed as concretely fixed. Thus, having multiple ways of looking at issues of identity allows us as teacher educators to validate the importance of identity politics, while at the same time, recognize its limitations. It is this productive tension I see being explored in very successful ways, particularly in terms of urban and multicultural science education.

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### **My Vexation**

In light of poststructural and other discursive perspectives on gender that may pique my interests as a science teacher educator and a researcher, I feel thwarted about how to go about crystallizing those perspectives into something tangible and fruitful for my students, particularly preservice teachers. Holding such a perspective on identity pushes one to see teaching very much as a political act. And this, teaching as a political act, seems to be my focus here. How do I not only have a positive influence on students' views about science content, scientific inquiry, and the nature of science, but also about their very identities as science educators? Although I may be able to theoretically talk to my students about how gender, or other markers of difference, are constantly renegotiated within the context of a science classroom, the majority of individuals in that classroom more than likely do not hold the same perspective and, in fact, may see it as threatening or fruitless.

If I see science teaching as very much a political act (and identity as a fluid construction that is highly influenced by that teaching), where does that leave me in terms of my own role as a science educator? By no means do I feel that having a feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework is necessary, or even fruitful, for every classroom teacher to have. However, acknowledging that teaching science is very much wrapped up in maintaining and/or challenging inequities is something that I feel is imperative. I have very clear strategies that I use to talk about instructional congruency, having my preservice teachers understand that students' home cultures and lived experiences may not perfectly fit within the culture of Western science. Therefore, tapping into the lived experiences of the students to inform pedagogy can greatly facilitate students' participation in school science. However, attaining instructional congruency does not automatically lend itself to developing a teacher-hood that is explicitly political and interested in notions of social justice. In other words, learning to teach more equitably does not exactly mean learning to teach for equity.

Perhaps viewing teaching as a political act is a disposition that is too demanding for beginning teachers in light of everything else they are expected to know before setting foot in a classroom. Perhaps this is a perspective that teachers don't even want to hold? Perhaps school administrators do not particularly want a teacher who sees her job as something political? Or perhaps it is a disposition that is outside of my sphere of influence as a teacher educator. I would like to find this balance between what is needed and fruitful in schools in terms of diversity and equity and what I feel is explosively wonderful within certain theoretical threads of research. In other words, are there strategies out there that would facilitate preservice students taking up the identity of a political teacher, one who teaches science for equity? Or, is such an identity not one that is particularly fruitful within the current educational climate?