

"If We Can't Get Equal, We'll Get Even"

A Transformative Model of Gender Equity

by June Larkin and Pat Staton

Dans cet article, l'auteure propose un modèle d'équité qui va au-delà de l'approche libérale—des rapports égaux—à l'égalité. Le modèle de l'AICE est bâti de manière à transformer les iniquités systémiques en éducation et met l'accent sur les

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quatre constituantes de l'équité: l'accès, l'inclusion, le climat et l'occasion de se donner du pouvoir.

For the past five years, we have worked with educators, students, and parents across Canada on the problem of school-based sexual harassment. The response has been encouraging. No doubt, there is some degree of polite attention and reluctant tolerance by those who are not convinced of the severity of the problem. But the wrenching stories of young women worn down by persistent and pervasive sexual and gender hassling have a familiar ring for most students and adults. Many have added their personal accounts of the litany of harassing acts we have documented in our own research (Larkin; Staton and Larkin).

A disturbing trend is the increasing stories of vicious verbal assaults by female students who are using harassment to move up the domination hierarchy. Girls who have experienced the sting of gendered insults firsthand have a visceral understanding of the strength and potency of language. Engaging in verbal warfare and other abusive practices may seem like the natural route to equality for those who have felt the bitter connection between violence and power. Unless we challenge the liberal approach to equality, more and more girls will try to bully their way to equity by adopting the demeaning behaviour that has worked so well against them. As one young woman put it, "If girls can't get equal, they'll try to get even."

In the current neo-conservative climate, there has been a return to the "equal opportunity" or "let's treat everyone the same" thinking about equality, and a move away from the more political concept of "equity." Equity is concerned with the elimination of systemic barriers and the development of policies and practices that will support equal outcomes. The "equal opportunity" notion of same-

ness overlooks structural inequities and focuses on transforming individuals to fit the dominant mold. Concerns about the increasing abusive behaviour of female students are an indication that girls are making this transformation successfully. From an "equal opportunity" perspective, educational strategies designed to coax girls into male-dominated professions are likely to be given greater priority than initiatives designed to ensure that girls are treated fairly in these fields. Girls will have to get tough if they want to succeed.

In this article we propose an equity model that is focused on equal outcomes. The AICE model of equity is geared to transforming the structural inequities that make it difficult for girls to get an equal education. AICE includes the following four equity components:

- *Access*—Encouraging equal opportunity in instruction, particularly in fields related to non-traditional jobs. Enabling young women to choose from a range of careers.

- *Inclusion*—Looking at gender bias in teaching and learning materials both in terms of inclusive language and content.

- *Climate*—Creating an educational atmosphere that supports equity. Dealing with sexual harassment and violence.

- *Empowerment*—Creating a "space" within schools where young women can develop a sense of solidarity. Providing an antidote to counter the negative messages young women receive both within and beyond the school setting.

Although our model is based on gender, it is applicable to equity programs designed for students who may be disadvantaged by race, class, sexual orientation, age, and/or disability.

Access: moving beyond remediation

I always felt that I didn't belong in maths and sciences. Sometimes the boys would make jokes about girls doing science experiments. They always thought that they were going to do it better and it made me really nervous. Sometimes I didn't even try to do an experiment because I knew they would laugh if I got it wrong. Now I just deaden myself against it, so I don't hear it any more. My experience now is one of total silence. (Lewis 173)

In our survey of Ontario schools, the most frequently mentioned gender equity initiatives were conferences, workshops, and presentations on non-traditional careers for girls (Staton and Larkin). These popular strategies reflect the liberal ideology of increasing girls' access to an

education that has traditionally favoured boys. The goal is simply to incorporate girls into the existing educational structure rather than to transform the educational system in which females are systematically devalued.

Access-based strategies have been criticized for using a deficit approach to equity that is geared to altering girls by

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focusing on their presumed deficiencies (e.g., training girls to be more assertive, to develop better leadership skills, and to take more mathematics and science) (Coulter; Gaskell *et al.*; Larkin; Sarah and Spender). The strategies ensuing from this deficient model are remedial; the attempt is to increase girls' opportunities by bringing them up to the level of boys (Gaskell *et al.*).

Focusing on the alleged deficits of girls and other marginalized groups is a political position that has diverted our attention from the myriad factors that interfere with their ability to get an equal education. When structural barriers are ignored, the onus for girls' and women's lack of success can fall squarely on their own shoulders. Power inequities remain intact.

We are not denying the importance of increasing girls' access to the full range of educational opportunities. But equal access does not guarantee equal participation. The numbers of girls enrolled in maths and sciences has increased over the past few years but there is strong evidence that these disciplines are not always inclusive and supportive places for girls to be (Coulter; Larkin; Sarah and Spender). Female students have opted out of science after getting a taste of the hostility that acts as a reminder of their infringement of male territory (Larkin). In one school, a number of young women had given up their plans for a career in science because they worried that the anti-female comments made by their Grade 10 teacher would only get worse as they went further in their education:

A lot of the girls take science in Grade 10 because they want to go into the medical field. Afterwards they don't want to take science anymore. They figure if this is what I'm meeting in high school, what kind of opposition am I going to get when I get to university. (Larkin 58)

This is the kind of situation that has caused educators like Pat Mahony to worry that equal opportunity initiatives may have "made life more, not less, difficult" (42) for female students.

Encouraging female students to enter non-traditional fields is a laudable goal, but this strategy alone will not remove all the obstacles they face in their education. In the AICE model, access means more than dismantling barriers. It means making schools more supportive and inclusive places for girls to be.

Inclusion: counting girls in

[The] content of education itself invalidates men even as it invalidates women. Its very message is that men have been the shapers and thinkers of the world and that this is only natural. (Rich 237)

In their important book, *Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls*, Sadker and Sadker describe the ways boys are "the heart and center" (42) of classroom interactions. After almost two decades of conducting research and observations on gender bias in classrooms, they concluded that boys are continuing to take up a disproportionate amount of teachers' time. In over 100 classrooms, Sadker and Sadker found:

- Male students control classroom conversations.
- Males receive more approval for the intellectual quality of their ideas.
- Male students speak out eight times more than female students and whether the comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them.
- When female students speak out, they are more likely to be reminded to raise their hand.
- Males get more help from teachers.
- Males are more likely than females to receive attention in the form of praise, corrections, help, or criticism that fosters student achievement.

In general, the Sadkers found that white males are the most likely group to receive teacher attention, followed by minority males, white females, and finally minority females. Black females are the least likely group to get clear academic feedback from teachers. This means that minority girls are doubly disadvantaged because they get discounted on the basis of their race as well as their gender.

This gender imbalance is typical of most classrooms, although most teachers are surprisingly unaware of their biases. Teachers who have claimed to treat male and female students equally are often shocked to discover through various observation measures that they spend

over two-thirds of their time with boys (Gaskell *et al.*; Houston 1996; Larkin). When teachers attempt to adjust their gender-biased interactions with students, they are often unsuccessful. The evidence shows that boys continue to get the lion's share of the attention even when teachers made a conscious effort to favour girls (Houston 1996; Larkin).

The focus on boys in classrooms is typical of the kind of expected advantage enjoyed by those who are members of dominant groups. One teacher was stunned by the complaints of some male students and teachers when she made a concerted effort to equalize the time, encouragement,

"I really hate going to this class because where I sit I'm surrounded by guys and they keep talking about hookers, strip bars, women's body parts, 'making it' with girls, and so on. It really makes me angry. It makes me sick to my stomach."

and praise she gave to male and female students in her class. She was accused of favouring the girls. The boys were so accustomed to getting the bulk of the attention they felt cheated when she tried to even it out.

The exclusion girls face in schools goes beyond their limited contact with teachers. In 1970, the Canadian Royal Commission on the Status of Women reviewed a variety of educational materials and found that the creative and intellectual potential of women was either underplayed or ignored in the school curriculum (cited in Gaskell *et al.*). If girls and women made it on to the pages of textbooks at all, they were generally portrayed in roles that were secondary and more passive than those assigned to males. Over two decades later, the records shows that material on women continues to be undervalued and underrepresented in schools (AAUW 1990; Sadker and Sadker). Myra and David Sadker analyzed the content of 15 textbooks currently used in schools and found that the names and pictures of males continue to outnumber those of females. In a 673-page textbook on the history of the world only seven pages related to women (Sadker and Sadker). In their analysis of ministry-approved history and contemporary studies textbooks, Light, Staton, and Bourne found that attempts to increase the representation of women in texts had actually reinforced the notion of women as fringe participants in society. Women were typically portrayed in incidental and marginal roles; any focused discussion of women was often reserved for a separate chapter at the end of the book.

Putting a few women on a course outline will not even out such a lopsided curriculum. The task is much larger. The way Watkinson and Epp see it, critical questioning is the key equity ingredient:

Inclusive curriculum necessitates the asking of ques-

tions which may bring discomfort and in some cases, disharmony, such as: Who decides curriculum? Who is left out? Whose ideology is represented here? Would this have the same meaning if examined by people not of our culture? The questioning provides classroom space where educators/teachers and students raise critical questions and interrogates texts in light of their experiences.... (207)

Inclusion also involves reviewing our approach to learning. Traditional pedagogical practices designed "for the education of a homogeneous group of children" (Watkinson and Epp 199) cannot accommodate the diverse learning style of students. There is strong evidence that conventional teaching methods disadvantage girls and minority students (Belenky *et al.*; Dei; Kruse). In the current corporate schooling climate this problem is exacerbated. The increasing focus on outcomes, ranking, measurement, and competition is at odds with the more collaborative learning styles of girls (Belenky *et al.*; Kruse). Collaborative learning involves methods that encourage students to develop more than a simplistic and dichotomous approach to problem solving. Considering the historical origins of problems, developing and testing various theories, and discussing alternative ways of framing questions are more in line with the ways girls resolve problems and can offer a more complex approach to learning for all students (Moore and Goudie).

In the AICE model, inclusion means more than inserting women's experiences into the existing curriculum. It means transforming our very concept of education and re-thinking our notion of what is worth knowing; what counts as real knowledge; and how knowledge is shared.

Climate: creating a safe space to learn

I really hate going to this class because where I sit I'm surrounded by guys and they keep talking about hookers, strip bars, women's body parts, "making it" with girls, and so on. It really makes me angry. It makes me sick to my stomach. (Larkin 13)

For many girls, sexual harassment is part of the fabric of school life and occurs in the context of racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. When sexual harassment is racialized the experience is qualitatively different. As they pass through school hallways, all female students are vulnerable to ratings by their male peers. But the lowest scores are typically ascribed to Black girls:

The guys would ... all have ... a number and [they would score] girls who passed by them in the hallway.... If a Black girl walked by they'd go, "Oh my God, she's got such a big ass...." They'd give her a low score. (Larkin 92)

Much of the verbal harassment inflicted on female

students is laced with racist slurs and stereotypes: "Is it true Chinese girls have slanted cunts?" Jokes about Black girls "being good in bed" express the stereotype of the highly sexed and promiscuous Black woman (Larkin). Comments such as "I hear Black girls like white guys' dicks" resonate with the common pornographic image of Black women as willing slaves to their white masters and reflect and reproduce colonial relations that are part of the cement of our entrenched hierarchical power structure (Mayall and Russell).

Putting up with everyday harassment at school can be draining for any student. This task is particularly wearing

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for minority girls who are less likely than white girls to get student support:

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Sexual harassment creates a hostile learning climate that can interfere with young women's education. When we work with female students we hear endless accounts of the insults and degradation they endure in their schools. Their stories are not unique. In a study recently conducted with students in the United States, 89 per cent of the girls reported having experienced inappropriate sexual comments, gestures, and looks; 83 per cent had been touched, pinched, or grabbed; and 40 per cent said that these incidents occur daily at school (Stein, Marshall, and Tropp). In an Ontario study, 83 per cent of female high school students reported having been sexually harassed in the school setting (OSSTF).

This is not to deny that boys get harassed too. But research has shown that boys are harassed far less often than girls, that the impact of being harassed is much less significant, and that much of the harassment is homophobic and comes from other boys (AAUW 1993; OSSTF). In one study, 85 per cent of boys claimed they would be "very upset" if they were called gay. No other type of harassment, including physical abuse, provoked such a strong reaction. Boys were more likely than girls to be targeted in this way and they were more likely than girls to call someone else gay (AAUW 1993).

Girls pay a high price for the harassment they suffer in

school. Barbara Houston argues that sexual harassment operates to ensure "that women will not feel at ease" and, certainly, that is the general effect on students. Sexual harassment can erode a young woman's confidence and sense of security and be manifested in physical symptoms that can include anxiety, nausea, and disordered eating (Larkin and Rice).

In an Ontario study, 49 per cent of females compared to 14 per cent of males reported that the experience of sexual harassment had an effect on their education (OSSTF). When compared to the results of a sexual harassment study conducted by the American Association of University Women, the responses of Ontario girls were fairly similar. These included not wanting to go to class, finding it hard to pay attention in school, staying home from school or cutting a class, making a lower grade in class, not speaking up in class, dropping courses, and leaving school (AAUW 1993; Larkin; Staton and Larkin).

In the AICE model, when we talk about climate we expect that educators will take an active stance against harassing and abusive behaviour. The tolerant and passive attitude taken by many teachers who witness demeaning comments and antics sends a dangerous message to both male and female students. The way one female student sees it:

... teachers are very influential over students, and when they do not take a definite stand against these attitudes, they are, in effect, condoning them. The fact that they possess this power as role models obligates them to realize that many young people are sculpted through their actions. (White 62)

When girls are not supported by their teachers, they are placed in the no-win situation of tolerating the abuse or mounting their own defence. The strategy of tolerance can cause girls to fade into the background of school life as they regulate their behaviour to avoid being a target of further abuse. Dealing with harassment head-on, however, can be interpreted as girls' provoking or participating in harassing behaviour which is used to dismiss their need to be protected.

Over the past few years, several school districts in the United States paid out high settlements when they were successfully sued for failing to respond appropriately to complaints about sexual harassment in their schools. In Canada, the threat of legal liability has motivated many school boards to put a policy in place. A policy is a statement of institutional support and offers a course of redress to those who are sexually harassed, but it has little effect on changing the attitudes that support sexually harassing behaviour. As one student put it, "Education is the key to prevention" (Larkin 135).

Empowerment: fostering strength and solidarity

I think attending a girls' class is wonderful. There are so many things we can do. The boys haven't laughed

at us the way they used to do. We've had more freedom and have been much more outspoken—and best of all, we can walk around without being kicked and things like that. (Kruse 92)

Our research supports the evidence that same-sex education can empower girls in ways that can facilitate their education and personal development (Briskin; Kruse; Larkin; Staton and Larkin). We acknowledge the concerns of feminists who have become critical of empowerment as an ideology. The charges of individualism and homogenization that have caused uneasiness with the notion of

we have talked about us girls.... Usually we sit there listening to teachers talking to boys about boys. We aren't really interested in that, and in the girls' class we haven't been forced to spend our time on them.... Apart from that we have learned not to just sit back, twiddle our thumbs and let *them* (the boys) take over. (Kruse 93)

Educators have found that girls who spend even a portion of their time in segregated groups are more likely to gain the confidence and conviction to hold their own in mixed-sex settings (Reay; Kruse).



Rochelle Rubinstein, "Wake Up," rubber stamp print, 1997.

empowerment have sprung from concerns that the concept does not address the complexity of power relations. We use empowerment to mean a process of "analyzing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives" (Lather 4). For us, this is the ultimate aim of any equity model: social change. Empowerment involves a process of politicization not apparent in the access, inclusion, and climate strategies outlined above; this is why the empowerment component of AICE is so essential.

For AICE, empowerment is about providing girls with the opportunity to develop strong bonds and a "common reference point" (Raymond 8) from which to examine their worlds. This is not to deny the diversity of girls' experiences, only to provide a space where these experiences can be shared.

Schools may seem like obvious places for students to form alliances, but the exclusive and hostile climate in some coeducational settings can squash the opportunities for girls to forge connections. Single-sex groups can be a strategy for raising girls' awareness about the gendered relations of power and for empowering girls to resist them (Briskin). As they become closer knit, girls can develop the support and the skills to overcome the dominating behaviour of some of their male peers:

[In the all-girls class] when we have sat in the circle,

Separate spaces for girls can take a variety of forms. The most obvious is the all-girls school. The arguments against all-girls schools range from those who reject the evidence of gender bias in education and consider separate schooling to be preferential treatment for girls, to those who worry that moving some girls out of coeducational settings will reduce the pressure for school boards to deal with gender-related problems. Robertson is concerned that the option of all-girls' schools will be seen as a solution to a more difficult problem: the beliefs and behaviour of boys and men:

... our most challenging work remains to be done.... If we pull away our bravest girls, our most demanding parents, and our most progressive teachers from "ordinary" classrooms, who will maintain the pressure to insist that all schools change, and especially the boys and men within it. (7)

We agree that altering male behaviour is the greatest challenge of equity work and the area in which we have made the least headway. This is not surprising. Most equity initiatives have been directed at getting girls to fit the dominant mold. The tough equity work involves shifting the focus from "fixing" girls to guaranteeing their equal treatment in schools. This is a more formidable task that requires a chipping away at the privileged position of dominant boys. Transforming power relations is a more

extensive project than getting girls into maths and sciences and is likely to generate strong resistance from those who benefit from the current power hierarchy. Altering the attitudes of boys and men is a crucial, long-term project and girls should not bear the brunt of this difficult work. They have a right to an equal education today. Regardless of the gender composition of a particular school setting, equity education should be an important goal. In the same way that race and class issues should be an integral part of the curriculum of white middle-class schools, gendered education should not vary with the male-female ratio of students.

Girls' schools are only one of many same-sex educational options. In coeducational schools, single-sex education has taken various forms: all-girls classes in computers and non-traditional subjects, courses with high female-male ratios, and all-girls clubs organized as an extracurricular school activity are just a few examples.

Using same-sex groups as an equity strategy differs from imposed segregation by naming power as the core issue and seeking to address this imbalance (Briskin). The evidence shows that gender dynamics improve when girls have had some opportunity to get their grounding in an all-girl setting. In reporting on the success of a same-sex working group initiative in her Inner London primary school, teacher Diane Reay commented on the altered power relations of her young students:

I had the happy experience of seeing a transformation in the girls.... As their confidence began to grow, *peer group interaction back in the mixed classroom was affected*.... Tina, one of the girls wrote in her end of term report ... "I've learnt not to put up with the boys putting me down. I tell them to shut up and get on with their work." (42; emphasis in original)

This is not to say that the onus for changing the behaviour of male students should be shifted on to their female counterparts. Same-sex groups where boys can address issues of equity and identify their own shifting power positions are essential to the transformative process and it is here that male educators can play a significant role in equity work. After spending considerable time dealing with equity-related issues, boys' and girls' clubs in some schools have combined their efforts to develop action plans for dealing with sexism, racism, and homophobia within their schools. This cooperative effort can greatly enhance the educational environment for every student.

Conclusion

Moving from a liberal to a transformative perspective on gender equity is a crucial step to getting beyond the "get even" approach to equality. This is the goal of the AICE model. Dealing with the AICE components of access, inclusion, climate, and empowerment will help curb abusive behaviour in schools by dealing with inequities that perpetu-

ate it. By meeting the criteria of AICE, educators can help to ensure that girls can avoid the bullying route to equity.

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SUSAN E. HARRIS

Ode to a Paradigm

There was a time when I considered you more
 than an old reliable friend.
 Back then, I was like a fresh cut flower in an
 oversized vase,
 and the allure of firm solid lines defining your
 body
 had the power to ground me,
 or so it seemed.
 I took comfort in those words about truth
 you spoke so confidently.
 Loyal I followed,
 certain you would be there to help me along the
 way.
 But like the soft pallid petals of a flower past
 bloom,
 I fell
 as you stood at a distance watching
 where you did not, indeed could not, catch me.

I fell
 landing gently alongside a different yet strangely
 familiar form.
 Twisting, turning,
 trying to maintain my balance,
 I began tracing patterns along the contours of
 this curious new body.
 Here, within the shadowy crevices where bone
 gives way to flesh
 I heard sounds like echoes,
 and my own voice began to resonate.
 Soon, I came to re/dis/cover myself
 in these curved spaces.

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