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**I am a Girl in the World and Amazing Just the Way I Am**

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# **Creating a Classroom Learning Community in the University Setting**

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## **Abstract**

Although much has been written concerning the development of campus-wide and subsequent professional learning communities, much less attention has been given to the development of learning communities within the university classroom and how this development may be practically accomplished. The need to establish classroom learning communities is becoming increasingly important, in part, due to the perceived benefits of collaborative learning environments, the shifting student generation demographics (from predominantly Boomer and Generation X students to Millennial Generation learners), and educator exposure to key components of social learning theory. This article examines five ways in which one university professor attempted to encourage a community of learners within his university classroom in light of this recognized need.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the development of learning communities where students, faculty, and/or other professionals work interdependently and collaboratively to meet learning goals and exhibit a shared pursuit to improve as a group in knowledge and/or skills. Such communities may exist among professionals, students, and other stakeholders. As noted by Smith (2010), sometimes learning communities are developed as larger-scale efforts towards improving student achievement, student sense of belonging, and the retention of students at the university level. At other times, learning communities are established to improve professional education practice (Corcoran & Silander, 2009), initiate social reform (Hennessy & Evans, 2006), or as a response to calls for education reform (Santagata & Guarino, 2012).

This call for the use of learning communities at the university level is grounded, in part, in the perceived benefits of collaborative approaches to learning, changed demographics of the university student generation (from primarily Boomer and Generation X students to largely Millennial Generation students), and a larger number of practitioners who have been exposed to social learning theory models and applications. Each of these aspects has contributed to the emphasis for the learning community movement, and each should be considered as the development of learning communities is pursued.

According to Smith (2010), implementations of social approaches to learning and the subsequent outcomes of these approaches have been examined since the 1980s and have received increasing support in the higher education community due their perceived positive impacts on student learning. Additionally, Smith and MacGregor (2000) trace the history of some of the most popular approaches to developing university-wide learning communities and propose benefits such as positive impacts on student achievement, students' increased sense of belonging, and positive results on student retention. In their research, Kay, Svinicki, and Summers (2011) have identified similar outcomes.

At their core, learning communities are broader applications of collaborative approaches to learning. In these communities, multiple collaborative methods and interactive approaches to learning are used, including peer study groups used outside of class, program team projects,

inquiry-based methods, cohort-structured programs, supplemental instructional efforts, and linked courses (Smith & MacGregor, 2000).

As it relates to the preparation of teacher educators, Santagata and Guarino (2012) suggest that teacher candidates should be encouraged in and be provided with opportunities for participation in preservice learning communities that will prepare them to interact effectively in professional learning communities in their future educational careers. According to Santagata and Guarino, the results of such collaborative efforts cannot be underestimated.

A second area to consider when establishing a learning community in the university setting is that of the changing generational demographics of the university student population. The initial Millennial Generation cohort members began entering the university campus during the new millennium. This cohort consists of approximately 78-82 million members (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Currently in their mid-20s and younger, this group is one of the largest generational cohorts to date, and universities are presently experiencing the middle portion of this cohort (Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen, 2011).

Due to a host of environmental shaping factors, e.g., changing parenting styles, greater Internet access, new child safety emphases, use of social and interactive media tools [e.g., iPods, iPhones, Android Phones, Blackberries, etc.], standards movements in schools, etc., the generation has an extremely different view of the teaching and learning process. Whereas, the previous generations viewed learning as a primarily isolated and solitary endeavor, many times the Millennial Generation perceives learning as a social and interactive process (Carter, 2008). As noted by Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen, (2011), this generational cohort can be considered a collaborative rather than individual learning group when compared and contrasted with previous generations.

As a result of these life experiences and learning expectations, the Millennial Generation can be expected to be particularly responsive to the development of a learning community within the classroom and outside of it. According to Carter (2008), the Millennial Generation seems to demand rather than passively accept learning approaches that are more student-centered and interactive in nature. These expectations coupled with the third area – that of increased exposure to social learning theory for teachers at various levels – provide greater potential for learning communities involving high engagement where learners work interdependently and collaboratively to meet learning goals and exhibit a shared pursuit to improve as a group in knowledge and/or skills.

Although an extensive overview of this third area – social learning theory exposure (about which numerous books have been written) – is beyond the scope of the current discussion, a few brief highlights should be mentioned. According to constructivist thought, the roles of interactive approaches and social engagement are essential to the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). These approaches and engagement apply regardless of whether one might be considered more social constructivist in philosophy where interactions contribute to a shared knowledge base or cognitive constructivist where interactions are used to challenge the individual schemas of the learners.

From an applied perspective, a constructivist classroom would typically involve students interacting with multiple resources (Carter, 2008), other learners (Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen, 2011), various materials, and more capable experts (Vygotsky, 1978). In such an environment, a learning community is pursued where the teachers and students all work together to ensure high levels of learning of everyone involved (Eggen &

Kauchak, 2013). In addition, there is a clear understanding that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Along with the changing student demographics and call for more collaborative learning approaches, the translation and dissemination of the works of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1932/1965) have provided strong research bases to support these changes. And social learning theory applications have received greater and greater attention on university campuses in recent years. For instance, Smith (2010) reviews approximately 30 years of changes in higher education concerning social learning approaches on university campuses and grounds these changes in social learning theory. He notes the ways that universities have pursued these approaches not only within the classroom but particularly outside of the university classroom setting on the campus at large. Prior to reporting these findings, Smith and MacGregor (2000) had discussed grassroots and institutional efforts used during these years of change at universities across the United States. Many of these universities involved changes to provide greater learning communities outside the university classroom primarily where large classes were involved.

The emphasis of these three aforementioned areas, i.e., a call for more collaborative efforts in learning, the changing of generations with new expectations, and the greater exposure to the works of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1932/1965) among other research concerning social learning theory, have been keys in the pursuit of learning communities on university campuses. However, the majority of these efforts have been predominantly limited to larger-scale, university/college/department-wide approaches on campuses. As suggested by Kay, Svinicki, and Summers (2011), much less attention has been given to examining the development of learning communities *within* the university classroom. In spite of more effective collaborative approaches, changing expectations of a new generational cohort, and faculty members' increased exposure to social learning theory and its applications, the research and development of classroom learning communities is still lacking at the university level *particularly* within its individual classrooms.

Noting these concerns, the remainder of this paper examines ways the author has attempted to establish a learning community within the university classroom. Five separate activities will be briefly described where students and the instructor are provided opportunity to work together to improve everyone's learning within the university class. This goal of developing a learning community is in agreement with the description of Eggen and Kauchak (2013) who have described a classroom learning community as a "learning environment in which the teacher and students all work together to help everyone learn" (p. 191).

The following descriptions detail five ways of encouraged learning communities for students enrolled in the course titled, *Classroom Applications of Educational Psychology*. This junior/senior-level course emphasizes learning theory, methods of instruction, classroom management, motivation, and assessment. Students meet three times per week for two hours during each class meeting totaling six hours per week. The course is offered during the fall and spring semesters. Each semester the composition of the class includes students from various secondary education major fields, e.g., social studies education, math education, science education, music education, English education, etc. The numbers of students in the class range from 17 to 30 participants contingent upon the section offerings and the semester of the year when the course is offered. The class almost always consists of an approximately equal number of males and females with a small percentage of ethnic minority students (typically less than

5%). The class includes multiple performance assessments, e.g., a unit plan, the creation of assessments, etc., and a field experience. One main goal guiding the course is to develop a preservice learning community among the members of the class. There are five ways that this goal is pursued. Each of these ways will be discussed briefly, and the connections to collaborative approaches to learning, changing student generation demographics, and social learning theory will be noted within this discussion.

### **Standards of the Community**

The first aspect to be examined is the establishment of the standards of the community. When considering the development of any community, the standards upon which the community is founded are of vital importance. In today's educational context, the foundation is especially true when working with Millennial Generation students who have become accustomed to a standards-based environment in their public education experience. In addition, familiarity with these standards is useful to teacher candidates as they begin to engage in the process of becoming part of the professional learning community in education (Santagata & Guarino, 2012).

With this reality, the first several class meetings in the course, "Classroom Applications of Educational Psychology," are used to acquaint candidates with the standards expected of an initially-licensed teacher, the origination of these standards, and ways that teacher candidates ultimately will be assessed in relationship to these standards. For instance, in one activity, candidates are asked to highlight (from a list of initial licensure standards) all standards for which they will be responsible as denoted on their course syllabus. This exercise leads to a discussion of the importance of the standards and the course objectives aligned to these standards. In a subsequent class period, candidates are asked to examine curriculum frameworks and Common Core State Standards concerning the learning expectations of their future students, and they are asked to consider their respective Specialized Professional Association (SPA) standards. These standard examinations are coupled with assessment expectations for the candidates and their future students.

In these explorations of the standards, candidates are provided the opportunity to interact with other candidates as they analyze their past schooling experiences in light of the requirements associated with newer standards (and subsequently required of them as classroom teachers). For example, in one such activity, candidates are asked to identify the action verbs in the curriculum frameworks and Common Core State Standards, brainstorm a class list of these verbs, and compare and contrast their experiences in public school and university classrooms with this list. Then candidates share their thoughts relating this shift in expectations and the meanings for them in the classroom context. During this early point in the semester, candidates do not yet fully know their career plans, but they do begin to understand that they have embarked on a new journey towards becoming a professional with sets of professional standards guiding their community.

In addition to examining the product standards expected of them and their students, candidates in this course are asked to brainstorm a set of process standards or norms that will guide their professional interactions with their peers in university classrooms. Candidates use a typical brainstorming approach to delineate the ways that they will interact with one another in this professional community of learners. They brainstorm their expectations they have for themselves and their peers with instructor guidance. Then they spend a few moments clarifying each statement. Finally, through consensus, the group agrees on a proposed set of norms that will guide their interactions throughout the semester. This process is intriguing to both the

candidates and the instructor. Candidates typically express consensus on such statements as, “everyone pulls his or her own weight in small group interactions,” “disagree agreeably,” “active listening,” “respect other people’s opinions,” “be prepared,” and so forth. This norm-setting approach during the first session of the course helps candidates begin to see themselves as part of a broader standards-based professional community containing members who work together within the classroom for the good of the learning community.

The approaches used to establish the standards foundation of the community of learners fit well with the research of Vygotsky (1978) and his ideas related to learning environments where experts and novices reach consensus as they use speech, psychological and physical tools, and scaffolding to assist in development. The approaches also follow the suggestions of Carter (2008), Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen (2011), and Smith (2010) concerning interactive and social approaches to learning that are particularly useful for Millennial Generation learners.

### **Social Interaction**

A second aspect within the course, “Classroom Applications of Educational Psychology,” that helps candidates grow into a learning community is the extensive use of social interaction. As noted by Smith (2010) and Vygotsky (1978), such opportunities are essential in helping learners develop a sense of belonging in a learning community.

Throughout this course, candidates consistently peer brainstorm, summarize, and clarify. These processes occur particularly during times of direct instruction concerning a skill or ability that needs to be developed with this group, e.g., test score analysis, objective writing, the use of reinforcement in management situations, etc. Candidates are frequently asked to “turn to the person next to you and summarize...,” “with the person sitting next to you, provide three applications of what was just discussed for your future classroom,” and “turn to the person next to you and clarify what was just shared, and point this out on the paper you are examining.”

In addition to the use of these peer interactions, small group activities are constantly used to help the candidates engage with their peers toward the goal of learning and application. For instance, they are asked to complete jigsaw activities, graphic organizing activities, and computer-based activities as a group. These approaches allow candidates to interact interdependently and collaboratively, which helps them engage in a developing learning community rather than participating as a passive observer in an expert presentation.

For Millennial Generation candidates, such interactions fit well with their life experiences (Carter, 2008; Howe & Strauss 2000). This cohort has been “socially connected” through various technological and face-to-face environments, and opportunities to use this “natural” process such as the ones mentioned above are typically deemed worthwhile by this generational group.

### **Peer Critique and Evaluation**

A primary function of the learning community is ensuring that learning occurs within this community. For the learning community to progress in this way, it is useful for candidates to move beyond the lower levels of thinking and into higher levels of thinking in activities and approaches that allow them to apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. In addition, these higher levels of thinking are particularly useful if they allow the learning community to become more effective as well as more knowledgeable. Therefore, much time is spent in this course providing candidates with opportunities for peer analysis and peer evaluation of one another’s work.

In its simplest form, analysis and evaluation occur through a process of labeling ABCD, i.e., Audience, Behavior, Condition, and Degree, related to the objectives that a peer has just created along with identifying the target level of Bloom's taxonomy. In a more complex form, the analyses and evaluation involve the use of a professor-designed rubric that helps a group of candidates carefully critique another group's lesson plans posted on a Wikispaces page with additional information the critique provides ways that the plan could be improved.

In either of these contexts, candidates receive and provide evaluative feedback (with well-defined professional boundaries) and help other candidates to improve in their knowledge and skills. Such efforts involving continuous analysis, evaluation, and improvement are key features of a professional learning community. In a practical sense, these social interactions give candidates an indication of their future professional careers as they participate in professional learning communities in the educational setting (Santagata & Guarino, 2012). These professional interactions also fit well with Millennial expectations of immediate feedback and social approaches to learning (Carter, 2008; Hennessy & Evans, 2006).

### **Cross-content Group Projects**

With the exception of general education courses, on many university campuses teacher candidates rarely interact with majors from other academic fields across campus. In the course, "Classroom Applications of Educational Psychology," previous experience with community interaction can be problematic since a variety of major fields are represented by the candidates participating in the course, and these candidates sometimes exhibit stereotypical views of other majors that may not be the most useful for the learning community.

The segregation of these groups is quite apparent early on in the course. Typically, majors from a particular field of study will sit with others from this same field and, in general, will sit at great distances away from majors from other fields of study. However, in a learning community such isolated behaviors are not acceptable. It is essential that all learners work together interdependently and collaboratively toward the goals of the learning community, which includes individuals and groups from various backgrounds of expertise.

Therefore, a conscious effort is made to mix and match candidates from various fields in activities such as the designing of multiple intelligences learning centers, the creation of graphic organizers, and computer-based activities, e.g., one involves candidates working together to create a definition of constructivism, which is shared with the rest of the class and debated until a class definition is agreed upon through a consensus-building approach.

For many of these candidates, it is the first time that their views of a learning community move beyond the scope of their own field of study. This sort of learning community perspective is vital if teacher educators are seeking to improve whole schools and school districts through the development of stronger professional learning communities involving professional educators, teacher candidates, and other stakeholders.

This approach also encourages experts in particular fields and novices in other fields to interact socially to construct meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). Interaction further allows social opportunities for learning that enlarge the perspective of the members of the learning community, which is vital as candidates enter professional learning communities in their future (Santagata & Gurarino, 2012).

### **Small-group and Whole-group Discussion**

As noted by Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen. (2011), discussions can be an effective tool particularly when attempting to teach candidates from the Millennial Generation. Discussions move the learning community past a teacher-centric approach and place learners in a position of direct engagement within the community through the use of higher-level, open-ended questioning that is supported by social learning theory and fits well with the recent collaborative emphasis in the classroom (Smith, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

This goal is accomplished in the course, “Classroom Applications of Educational Psychology,” in several areas of educational interest. Before examining areas where discussion is used, it should be noted that in order to keep one candidate from dominating the discussion and to keep all candidates engaged throughout the discussion, it is useful to use a small-group to large-group approach. This design is beneficial for multiple reasons. First, candidates are afforded the opportunity to reflect before speaking to the larger group. Second, candidates help peers in the small group “filter” their comments about controversial topics before the larger group is engaged. Third, if candidates share in the small group, they tend to be more comfortable in sharing in the larger group. Fourth, if there is disagreement in the small group, it allows candidates to refine their thoughts and points before speaking to the larger group.

One of the discussions initiated early in the semester involves candidates’ perspectives on the differences between knowledge and information, which leads into the exploration of constructivism. Another discussion used later in the semester involves cross-content groups working as a team of teachers who have been asked to respond to candidates’ test scores in areas identified areas as less-than-stellar. Yet another discussion involves the question of using rewards in classrooms, and if so, when and with whom? In each case, candidates are asked to discuss these topics with peers in a small-group setting and then expand the discussion into the large-group setting.

Such discussions allow the candidates to understand the differing perspectives and the processes that must be considered when a professional learning community is interacting to attack problems and improve their efforts. Opportunities for these discussions also provide candidates with a real-world experience in a safe context as they prepare to go into the field as interns in the profession they have chosen and into the professional learning communities within this field (Santagata & Guarino, 2012).

## **Summary**

The establishment of a learning community where the learners work interdependently and collaboratively toward learning goals and seek to improve as a group in their knowledge and skills is important for three overarching reasons. First, this process fits with the social learning theory perspectives of such researchers as Vygotsky (1978). Second, it is supported by Millennial Generation expectations for the classroom (Carter, 2008). Third, it is founded in the changing instructional approaches used in universities in the last 30 years involving increased collaboration between faculty and students (Smith, 2010).

By examining and developing standards within the learning community, allowing for social interaction, using peer critique and evaluation, implementing cross-content group projects, and encouraging small-group and whole-group discussion, the establishment of a university classroom learning community may be more obtainable. This goal will serve teacher candidates well in the present and in the future as they seek to become members of professional learning communities in the schools where they teach (Santagata & Guarino, 2012).



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## **I am a Girl in the World and Amazing Just the Way I Am**

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### Abstract

Through narrative enquiry, the researcher relates the memories of a fourth-grade teacher reflecting on her challenges with gender equity as a fourth-grade student and the influences of those memories on her pedagogical practices in her current classroom. Attempting to overcome the generational perpetuation of practice (Gallavan, 2007), the fourth-grade teacher developed an approach emphasizing equity called CARE to incorporate across her curriculum content, instructional strategies, assessment techniques, and management procedures. Maintaining the power of “I” messages, the fourth-grade teacher capitalizes upon every moment through images idioms, information, integration, imagination, internalization, investment, and integrity helpful for all classroom teachers and teacher educators.

### Introduction

As a fourth-grade student, Kaitlin began to notice the presence and power of gender inequalities in the classroom; boys were treated both differently and better than girls. While a student in middle school, high school, and higher education, Kaitlin realized that girls not only received less respect and recognition than the boys received, girls began to expect less of

themselves and to modify their interactions in ways that both allowed and encouraged boys to participate more often in class, i.e., be more involved in their learning, and to be in charge of group activities, i.e., fill leadership positions. Likewise, girls transferred attention from their academics to their appearances granting boys dominance over social relationships too.

Increased competition among girls created more challenges for girls like Kaitlin who considered herself not as physically attractive, academically confident, and socially adept as most other girls. Kaitlin recognized the influential roles that teachers and other adults played in their modeling and mentoring of boys versus their modeling and mentoring of girls.

Now 20 years later to strengthen her resolve, Kaitlin has combined the words from two contemporary songs telling herself: I'm a girl in the world (sung by No Doubt) and amazing just the way I am (sung by Bruno Mars). As a fourth-grade teacher in her eighth year of teaching, Kaitlin's ever-evolving awareness has escalated into well-honed and developmentally appropriate practices in her classroom ensuring that girls are treated equally to boys while helping all learners to increase their awareness, understanding, command, and promotion of gender-neutral assumptions, language, interactions, and self-esteem. Concomitantly, Kaitlin is attentive to gender-neutral curriculum, instruction, assessment, and discipline. In this paper, Kaitlin shares her experiences and insights to guide and support other teachers to advance gender-neutral procedures and practices in their classrooms that change and benefit the teachers and their teaching as well as the learners and their learning.

Through narrative enquiry, events of importance from the past and present were captured as shared by the fourth-grade teacher to the researcher through written submissions and oral conversations. Prompts for writing and talking focused on events viewed in isolation and as results of changes over time instituted by the fourth-grade teacher. Summarizing the events and changes provided themes with descriptive analysis and established structure through meaningful explanations. Dialogic performance enabled the identification of classroom practices and procedures related to CARE and context. Visual analyses extend beyond description, explanation, and significance to the manifestation of salient outcomes that the fourth-grade teacher has personalized for her own effectiveness and well-being.

### **Kaitlin's Experiences and Insights**

*When I was a fourth-grader, I began to notice that boys and girls were treated differently. Over the years, my eyes were opened, confirming my initial observations as I realized that girls received less respect and recognition; girls were regarded as if they were not as good as boys. The lack of fairness and equity was obvious as boys were called on to answer more questions during discussions, to show more examples on the blackboard, and to help the teachers more often with special projects. The boys shouted out their ideas while the girls held up their hands and waited and waited and waited for their names to be called. Boys kept talking and girls just quit trying. After a while, the teachers usually reminded their classes to hold up their hands, although it was the teachers who let the boys take control. I honestly believed that most of my teachers liked the boys better. Boys were invited and allowed to participate in more activities in the classroom and around the school than the girls were encouraged or permitted to partake.*

*For the most part, I didn't care because I was afraid my answers and examples would be wrong; I was fearful that the class would laugh at my ideas. Although I did not share my concerns with my parents or friends, for the most part, school was scary for me. I wanted other students to think I was as smart and as cool as they were. I was not comfortable talking in front*

*of the class or working at the board where they could see and hear me. I think I liked learning, but in my memory, I was more concerned with getting good grades and blending in with the class. I became an overachiever early in elementary school. As I moved from elementary school to middle school and onto high school, I focused on turning in my assignments on time, earning all the extra-credit possible, and staying unnoticed. Although I knew the information and think I could have added to (and grown from) the classroom conversations, I watched and listened as the teachers engaged and encouraged the boys. It was obvious that I was” just a girl in the world.”*

*Not only was I afraid of school academically, I was fearful socially. Although school seemed interesting and grades were important, honestly I was more concerned about my size, my hair, and my clothes. It seemed like all of the other girls were smaller and prettier than I was; they wore trendier clothes too. I felt like I was fat and ugly so I had to wear fat and ugly clothes. Even though I earned top grades and took all the college prep courses, I didn’t feel smart since the teachers rarely talked with me or asked me to do anything special. Plus, I was not popular since I didn’t have any special talents like singing or running or anything. I would never be a cheerleader, homecoming queen, or star in the school play. I doubted that I would ever have a boyfriend or be part of the in group. I wished the world would say that I was” amazing just the way I am.”*

*By the time I was a college student, I was sure that boys and girls were treated differently, and boys were treated better by most adults, boys, and girls. Being aware of this relationship became more curious than scary to me. I could blend in easily in my college classes but I became more attentive to the words and actions that elevated the boys’ presence and power. The instructors thrived on interacting with boys to keep the class moving quickly. Few girls volunteered to offer information or ask questions in class, readily accepting the dynamics that girls were not respected fairly as equals or could be accepted for their experiences and contributions. College seemed much more focused on scholastics, sports, and social opportunities for the boys.*

*Girls also acted differently in college and I wondered if they noticed the inequities as clearly as I saw them. Girls seemed more attentive to their appearance rather than their achievements...unless their achievements were social such as getting accepted into a particular sorority or club. The popular girls were still smaller, prettier, and wearing the hip clothes. And I was reminded frequently that the popular students were not always kind to the not-so-popular students. The popular girls wanted to win no-matter-what. Their idea of winning was not the same as mine. Their goals were related to popularity. My goals were related to school and life; I wanted to become an elementary school teacher. I think I wanted to make sure that girls are treated the same as the boys starting at a young age. I didn’t want school to be scary or painful for the girls. I wanted girls to have confidence in themselves and to feel valued and valuable.*

*As I grew older, I also decided that one day I wanted to get married and to have children. Part of me wanted to be like the women I saw on television and in the magazines. They lived in picture-perfect homes, they looked beautiful; their children were smart; the families took fabulous vacations; they seemed to have endless reserves of money. Plus the women had wonderful jobs where people listened to them and treated them well; everyone seemed so happy. Although girls around me seemed to share this same dream, I knew that this dream life was not real.*

*Now as a young adult, here’s what is real to me. We girls are expected to look a certain way, talk a certain way, and act a certain way so we please boys and make their worlds better in*

*every way. We girls should refrain from speaking openly; unlike boys, we definitely should not express our opinions if they strong ones as we will be labeled in negative socially-unaccepted terms...by males and females. The desired image is based on being sexy all of the time as if that image is the center of every girl's universe. We are expected to have a few close girl friends, BFFs, but the goal is to be better than other girls and to make sure other girls know they are not as good as we are. The world is based on competing and winning. We girls can be smart, but the world has taught us to be reserved, that we shouldn't show off our smarts the same way that boys show off their smarts. We need to be much quieter about our academic achievements and career goals, unless we want to be nurses or teachers, since those are expected careers for girls.*

*My reality also has revealed that our language caters to the masculine gender; people on television, such as news reports and other powerful role models, certainly prefer the masculine gender as heard through the words they use. Too often, people are referred to as mankind rather than humankind. Occupations such as firefighters are called firemen, police officers are called policemen, mail carriers are called mailmen, and so forth. Similarly, titles such as chairmen should be chair or chairperson, congressman should be congressional member, businessmen should be business person, etc. Even the person of the year is commonly called the man of the year.*

*Using gender-neutral terminology is simply right and good. After all, approximately half of the world's population is female so they should be included in all conversations too. Plus, all young children, both female and male, need to hear adults in all capacities use gender-neutral language so the terminology is adopted and applied sooner. There is no need for the few conscientious adults to translate gender-biased language to gender-neutral terminology to explain the full meaning of a written or spoken passage. Girls can pursue any career they want; the doors of language should be opened to them throughout life.*

*Likewise, the word guy should not be used to greet or reference females. Girls are not guys and, although many girls do not detect any difference, girls should not be grouped as one of the guys. A group of boys and girls would not respond positively if they were called girls. This word would be considered offensive, yet girls are called guys all the time. There are many words and phrases that make being a girl bad. For example, "You run like a girl." "You throw like a girl." "He cried like a little girl." For a boy to be described as a girl is insulting and demeaning to both boys and girls.*

*Girls have never been treated the same as boys, and many girls around the world have it much worse than girls in the United States. Girls in some parts of the world are not allowed to talk and/or to vote; they are shot for standing up for education or raped for trying to protect their bodies. U.S. boys and girls should be cognizant of the biased assumptions that people have and act upon in their daily lives; the prejudicial language choices they make that reflect their favoritism; the unequal interactions used with other boys and girls as well as adults to express themselves and show partiality; and their own self-esteem development to increase their comfort with themselves and to communicate respect for other people and themselves. Gender-neutral language and its accompanying interactions constitute basic human rights; I want to equip and empower my students to become gender-neutral models and mentors among their friends and with their own future children.*

### **Classroom Procedures and Practices**

Kaitlin's approaches to gender equity in her classroom start with awareness of her own assumptions, beliefs, and values that generate her thoughts, actions, and interactions. Although

she has conducted years of self-assessment that monitor her quick impulsive reactions as well as her deliberate mindful responses, Kaitlin continues to stay attuned to the ever-changing contexts and challenges associated with gender-neutrality. Her goal is to fulfill her responsibilities in the classroom and become the best teacher possible. Kaitlin also realizes that she must combat the generational perpetuation of practices (Gallavan, 2007) that she has acquired throughout her life and are reinforced in the world around her.

Kaitlin holds high expectations of all of her learners scholastically and socially; she communicates her expectations directly and indirectly, redirecting her learners appropriately as necessary. Plus she consistently models her expectations and mentors her learners both as members of the larger group and as individuals. Kaitlin admits that her learners bring their own experiences and expectations acquired from their families and friends; some efforts to ensure gender-neutrality are met with hesitation and perhaps resistance by the learners. However, Kaitlin is committed to establishing learning environments that are more supportive of her learners than the gender-biased environments resulting in a lack of self-esteem as a female that she experienced throughout her schooling.

### **Maintaining the Presence of Equity with CARE**

During her eight years of teaching, Kaitlin has honed four overarching procedures and practices she calls CARE that she uses daily and advocates for other teachers.

1. C: Call on females and males and Conduct interactions with both genders equally.

Kaitlin keeps copies of the class roster ready as she uses several copies each day. Next to each learner's name, Kaitlin records the order that she calls on her learners and the subject area or class period that she calls on them. Kaitlin analyzes these data looking for her patterns. She wants to know if she calls on females and males, especially specific individuals, in a particular order. Perhaps she relies upon one particular gender to begin content discussions, board demonstrations, or class presentations. Perhaps she follows the same pattern due the ebb and flow of the class period calling on some learners more or less frequently. Perhaps she defaults to the same learners in one class period yet other learners in a different class period depending on the academic discipline, i.e., reading, math, science, social studies, etc.

An advocate of shared responsibility, Kaitlin also gives each learner a red plastic chip (acquired from a teacher's supply store) for them to use during the discussions, demonstrations, and presentations. Rather than calling on a specific learner, Kaitlin may ask for a volunteer. All learners may volunteer one time by raising her or his hand. After participating, the selected learner pushes the red plastic chip to the corner of the desk and is unable to volunteer or be called upon again during the class period. This approach equips the learners with the responsibility to participate on their own.

2. A: Ask questions of females and males and Advance learning by delving with each learner equally.

Reflecting on her own classroom experiences as a learner, Kaitlin comprehends that her teachers asked easier questions of some learners and harder questions of other learners, frequently asking the easier questions of females and the harder questions of males. Although Kaitlin sighed with relief that she was not asked the more difficult questions, now as a teacher, she knows that all learners should be asked all types of questions in every academic discipline and keeps records of the questioning and delving on her class rosters.

Kaitlin also is keenly attentive to advancing the learning with every learner using equal kinds of delving. All learners should be given ample opportunities to describe, explain, justify,

summarize, and imagine. Again, when thinking on her own past, Kaitlin recognizes that her teachers delved more often with male rather than female learners.

3. R: Require high expectations of females and males and Respond to learners equally.

Kaitlin accepts that many teachers have internalized different expectations of their female and male learners not only for the outcomes the learners will produce and/or achieve in the classroom, but in relationship to the goals the learners will pursue and/or accomplish in life. Teachers, most of whom are female, may not realize that they view males as the primary income earners for their families so male learners should be held to higher expectations, and, thus, challenged more and given more opportunities. This distorted perspective of expectations in learning and living manifested in the classroom communicates strong messages to all learners.

Similarly, Kaitlin knows that many teachers do not demonstrate their respect or care for male and female learners equally. Some teachers prefer male learners more than female learners so they dedicate more time and attention to male learners during both formal and informal class time. Some teachers give their male and female learners different types of feedback. Teachers may tell their male learners that their answers are outstanding or clever and their papers show creative thinking providing specific praise and reinforcement whereas they tell their female learners that their answers are adequate or close and their papers are neat allotting general acceptance. Males tend to be presented with analytical details for improving their work while females are provided more general feedback. Kaitlin remembers teachers who seemed reluctant to let females hear them say that they were smarter and quicker than the males. Conversely, Kaitlin is fully aware that most teachers are more likely to punish their male learners than their female learners. Not only do males tend to receive more punishment, they also tend to receive harsher punishments. Again, Kaitlin maintains accurate records to monitor her responses with learners.

4. E: Engage with each learner and Extend the same amount of wait time for females and males equally.

Kaitlin grasps that teachers may not provide equal amounts of help to their female and male learners. Some teachers listen more attentively to male learners rather than female learners; some teachers more frequently work individually with males showing more personal interest yet work in groups of females and show less personal interest. Additionally, some teachers also allow males to progress more quickly or independently while these teachers ask females to assist other students with their activities and assignments. Ascribing to the notion that females are life's helpers (i.e., future nurses and teachers) often occurs early in classrooms.

Recalling her own classroom situations, Kaitlin is attentive to the amount of wait time that she gives her female and male learners. She realizes that males tend to respond faster, regardless of the response, and males tend to volunteer more eagerly. Kaitlin incorporates various approaches so all learners are granted an equal amount of time to answer a question or to volunteer.

### **Advancing the Power of Context with CARE**

Kaitlin's CARE approach is positive, productive, quick, and easy. The four letters help her ensure equity for her female and male learners as she remembers to call and conduct, ask and advance, require and respond, and engage and extend with every learner in every class on every day. Concomitantly, Kaitlin is attentive to gender-neutral content, instruction, assessment, and discipline. She has established guidelines for each area:

1. Curricular Content–Use textbooks, fiction and nonfiction texts, supplementary materials, videos, posters, etc., that include narration and illustrations with equal representation of females and males in all capacities. Show learners that females and males are represented in all capacities in the curricular content. When the representation is skewed, take time to explain the limited context to the learners.
2. Instructional Strategies–Incorporate whole group, small group, individual, and cooperative learning approaches that are literacy-based, inquiry-based, discovery-based, project-based, multidisciplinary, and so forth. Organize groups so females and males are placed in leadership roles and work with all other learners throughout the school year.
3. Assessment Techniques-Conduct preassessments, formative assessments, and summative assessments that measure recall and recognition, logic and reasoning, skills and applications, productivity and creativity, outlooks and dispositions through selected answers, constructed responses, performed demonstrations, and/or spoken communications. Co-construct self-assessments, peer-assessments, and teacher-assessments with learners in ways for females and males to reflect upon their own learning and the contributions of their peers respectfully.
4. Disciplinary Procedures – Discuss in developmentally appropriate language and listen carefully to ensure that expectations are detailed and constructed as a community of learners with everyone’s contributions, understanding, and support. The goal is to monitor disciplinary procedures closely so positive rewards and negative consequences are distributed equitably and consistently.

### **Every Moment is Imperative; Every Person is Important**

As Kaitlin’s eyes widened over the years to the realities that frame the inequalities toward and about females, she has taken the messages from two popular songs to create a saying for herself: “I’m a girl in the world (Stefani & Dumont, 1995) and amazing just the way I am” (Mars, 2010). Repeating her saying allows Kaitlin to build her self-esteem, guide and support her learners, and serve as a strong role model. Kaitlin appreciates that every moment is imperative and every person is importance so she focuses on gender equity as an educational professional using eight words that start with the letter “I:”

- Images-the appearance of the classroom communicated through the photos, displays, learners’ products, etc.; the classroom should be transformed into a community of learners and reflect all people.
- Idioms-the language used in formal and informal expressions, phrases, words, sayings, etc., by the teacher and the learners; the conversations should be representative and respectful of all people.
- Information-the knowledge of the world near and far from the past, through the present, and into the future expressed through multiple perspectives; as with idioms, the content should be representative and respectful of all people.
- Integration-the incorporation of various academic disciplines such as interdisciplinary integration (within one discipline, i.e., biology and chemistry within science) and/or multidisciplinary integration (across two or more disciplines, i.e., literacy and social studies within the fourth-grade) and multiple teaching strategies into one curricular and/or instructional event; the combination of disciplines should be honest, natural, authentic, and holistic.

- Imagination-the extension of the learning exploring and investigating the probabilities and various possibilities; the creativity should be integrated throughout all learning and encouraged in all learners through individual forms of expressions.
- Internalization-the self-acceptance of learning through the cognitive, affective, social, and physical domains; the construction and co-construction of new knowledge should transform individuals holistically.
- Investment-the dedication to the worth of all people and their endeavors promoting both the traditions from the past and the innovations of the present and future that contribute to female equity; the commitment to listen closely and to guide all learners carefully as equal contributors to society.
- Integrity-the honor to maintain moral principles and ethical accountability associated with gender equity among female and male learners; the characteristics that demonstrate authenticity, sincerity, legitimacy, and reliability among all learners

### **Conclusion**

Substantiating the presence, power, and importance of gender equity, the United Nations adopted the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 to promote gender equity and to empower women of all ages around the world. The Millennium Development Goals state:

The Millennium Development Goals provide the entire United Nations System including the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, with a blueprint to work coherently together towards a common goal to reduce poverty and improve lives. They set time bound targets, by which progress in reducing income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion---while promoting gender equality, health, education and environmental sustainability---can be measured. They also embody basic human rights — the rights of each person on the planet to health, education, shelter and security.

Kaitlin's experiences and insight motivate her procedures and practices; they help her to manifest the guidelines and to support the power of gender equity she uses to strengthen her young learners with their awareness, development, explorations, and resolve.

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