



THE FOUR APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION

The story 'Of Mountains and Oceans and Jungles and Whys' is an allegory depicting four approaches to curriculum transformation. In it:

- 1 Ace represents access and equity;
- 2 Val represents the commitment of many teachers to valuing girls' and women's skills and experiences equally with those of boys and men;
- 3 Dif stands for acknowledging differences among girls;
- 4 Soc represents challenging and critically examining the social structures that are detrimental to women and girls.

1 Access and equity

With this approach, teachers work to ensure that girls have real access to resources, including teacher time, and space in the classroom and the playground, and to equipment such as balls, bats and computers. The access and equity approach recognises that simply making available the opportunity for sharing resources is not enough to genuinely challenge unfair practices, or to stop the demanding and selfish behaviour of some students (often particular boys), which gain them a disproportionate share of classroom resources.

Ways for teachers to provide real access include: using a range of teaching and learning situations, monitoring classroom interactions in an ongoing manner and choosing resources that are inclusive of girls' as well as boys' interests and knowledge.

2 Valuing girls' and women's skills and experiences

This approach to a more inclusive curriculum recognises that because girls bring different experiences to the classroom, they have also often developed different skills. A sound principle of good teaching practice is to 'start from where our students are at'. This means that we, as teachers, need to recognise the strengths that girls have developed from their different experiences and to provide a curriculum that acknowledges the many and diverse contributions that women, as well as men, have made to our culture. Units of work using sexist examples or reference experiences more common to boys, and which focus on topics of greater interest to boys, directly limit girls' participation and development.

We need to ensure that changing the curriculum to reflect women's contributions more accurately is not a tokenistic gesture but a thorough and ongoing reform. Like the fairy godmother, teachers need to explore new pathways forward which are meaningful and challenging to girls. By making what we teach, how we teach and how we assess more inclusive of all our students, we can build on and endorse girls' skills and enable them to feel pride in their own achievements.

3 Acknowledging differences among girls

As the fairy godmother found out, however, what works for some girls does not necessarily work for all girls. It is important that we teachers understand how beliefs about gender, about 'appropriate' masculine or feminine behaviours, are individually and collectively constructed. This is the 'Dif' factor in curriculum transformation.



Beliefs about what is acceptable feminine or masculine behaviour within a particular culture are not inextricably linked to our biological sex but instead are learned in an ongoing way. Such beliefs are influenced by a person's ethnicity, by their social class, and by their race as well as their age. Such beliefs are changing and changeable. They are negotiated on both an individual and a collective basis. So, while as teachers we can recognise that many girls, because of their gendered experiences, may prefer to work in groups, to collaborate, to share the decision-making, to be cooperative and pleasant (because those are the 'feminine' characteristics defined by our society), other girls resist these 'expected behaviours' and behave in very different ways. How girls make sense of the world need not be limited to only the 'socially approved' ways of demonstrating their femininity. The same may be said for boys, who, because of the limited 'masculine' behaviours allowed within our culture, too often are restricted in the ways they interact with each other, the ways they can express a range of emotions or in their ability to understand the dynamics and participate actively in groups.

We need to provide learning experiences which will enable our students to move beyond such limitations, to help them understand that such binary oppositions are not innate or 'natural' but are instead learned and negotiable.

By valuing differences among girls as well as among boys, we as teachers are encouraging our students to explore and appreciate real diversity rather than limiting expectations. Like the fairy godmother and Dif, we need to take the time to listen to girls and to involve our students in setting learning goals that are meaningful to them individually as well as collectively. Most research into sex differences in education has noted that the measured differences within either sex are much greater than average differences between the two sexes. Yet much of our focus has been misdirected to these smaller average differences.

4 Challenging and critically examining the social structures

The fourth aspect of moving toward a more gender inclusive curriculum is represented by the character of Soc. By questioning the fairy godmother, Soc represents the approach of challenging and critically examining the social structures that are detrimental to women and girls. This includes the ways in which schools allow sex-based harassment to be used by some boys to silence, intimidate or humiliate girls; the ways in which the curriculum (implicitly as well as explicitly) encourages boys and girls to view each other not as friends but as opposites with almost nothing in common; the way in which the hierarchical structure of schools subtly legitimises the authoritarian power-over mode of management at the expense of more collaborative, democratic approaches.

Encouraging children to develop skills which will enable them to use such collaborative and democratic processes is a way of beginning to address this aspect of equity. At the end of our story, the fairy godmother asks a question of her own: 'What do I do now to help you?' Addressing gender equity through transforming the curriculum requires many approaches to answering this question, and a constant willingness to explore and reflect on how we as teachers, and we as learners, are going.¹⁸

