

Comment

“I love how they always put the “shes” in”

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I was watching our research video tapes of a classroom in which a computer program and contextual problems which we had written were being introduced. As the camera panned the classroom, it focused briefly on two girls working together on the *Pizza Problem*. One was reading the problem to the other: “*The owner of the Pizza Cave now says that she...* I love how they always put the “shes” in! Did you notice that [in the problem we did] yesterday? And *she decided to build a house...*” Despite the fact that gender issues have played a significant and explicit role in our teaching and research, I was struck by this comment, both by its simplicity and its sincerity. It reminded me of the title of a book review I had recently read: *Justice in mathematics education: reaching beyond equity* [Becker, 1990]. Equity has to do with numbers. We maintain equity in our curricular problems by including an approximately equal ratio of males to females. What I heard from this girl went “beyond equity.”

I heard this girl saying that her experience of mathematics is an experience without females, an experience that cannot be changed by simply altering numbers. I wondered what would happen if we went beyond simply substituting females names in predominantly male-designed problems

and instead thought of females as role models in our very conceptions of problem situations. What would happen if we really did put the “shes” into mathematics classrooms?

Possible models for such classrooms can be found both in the “caring” classroom proposed by Noddings [1984] and the “student-centered” classroom proposed by Confrey [1985]. Such classrooms discourage authoritarian structure, encourage both connectedness and diversity and value the individual within a cooperative setting. A further question remains unanswered: If we put the “shes” in, will the mathematics itself be different from our current conceptions of mathematics?

There are strong arguments from women with long and admirable histories fighting for equity in mathematics education that the answer is no [Hanna, 1989]. Mathematics is mathematics and the only reason for the lack of women in math is a lack of opportunity and other social factors. The current misfit between women and mathematics (i.e. the lack of women in mathematics) must be corrected, in their opinion, by changing women (and thus society), not by changing mathematics. I understand that due to the prevalence of authoritarian and hierarchical tendencies in our society, particularly in terms of views of mathematics and mathematical ability, there is a real danger in even allowing for the possibility that “female math” may in any way be different, for it offers the possibility that others will trivialize it as “something women do.” However to deny this possibility on these grounds alone is (to use a male metaphor) to lose the war before ever fighting a battle. It encourages the very kind of hegemony that is already at work maintaining mathematics as a male bastion. We should not give in to those who say that to be different is to be unequal.

I will be disappointed if the advocates of equity turn out to be right. I hope that they are wrong. I want mathematics to be more than it currently is. I want to have alternative views, alternative ways of seeing and knowing, and alternative kinds of problematic situations added to my ways of understanding the world. I value those who may be able to help me in reaching these understandings and I want to live in a world where others value this diversity also. I majored in mathematics in both undergraduate and graduate school and I would not want to give up that experience. However, I would also look forward to the opportunity to take a mathematics course in which I could honestly say at the end of the course: “I wonder what it would have been like if they had put the hes in.”

Becker, Joanne Rossi [1990] *Justice in mathematics education: reaching beyond equity*

Confrey, Jere [1985] *A framework for constructivist instruction*

Hanna, Gila [1989] *Personal communication*

Noddings, Nel [1984] *Caring*