

UNMASKING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM: BUILDING CLASSROOMS FREE FROM GENDER BIAS

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Education does not exist solely through textbooks, lesson plans, and examinations. Alongside the formal curriculum operates a powerful but often invisible force—the hidden curriculum. This consists of the unspoken norms, expectations, and social cues embedded in daily school life. In the Philippine context, gender bias within this hidden curriculum is widely visible yet frequently unnoticed. These subtle patterns influence how learners see themselves, their abilities, and their future roles in society.

Across many Philippine classrooms, traditional gender expectations continue to shape interactions and opportunities. Boys are often encouraged to be assertive, competitive, and tough, while girls are praised for being quiet, organized, and nurturing. During group work, boys may be assigned physically demanding tasks or leadership roles, while girls are asked to decorate materials or manage classroom cleanliness. Textbooks and instructional examples sometimes portray fathers as breadwinners and mothers as homemakers, reinforcing conventional family roles. Historical narratives may highlight male leaders more prominently than female contributors.

These recurring scenes resemble everyday representations. They are so common that they blend into routine practice. But their impact is profound. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, gender bias in education affects learners' self-confidence, academic engagement, and future career choices. When stereotypes are repeatedly modeled in school settings, they gradually shape aspirations and limit perceived possibilities.

The Philippine educational environment, shaped by cultural traditions and community norms, often reflects deeply rooted gender expectations. Without intentional reflection, classroom practices may unintentionally reinforce inequality. The central argument is clear: teachers play a decisive role in dismantling gender bias embedded in the hidden curriculum by modeling fairness, revising classroom practices, and ensuring equitable participation for all learners.

Gender bias is rarely overt. It often appears in subtle ways – through language, tone, and expectations. Statements such as “Boys will be boys” or “Act like a lady” reinforce behavioral norms tied to gender. Calling on boys more frequently during problem-solving discussions or assuming girls will naturally excel in caregiving roles during role plays are examples of unconscious bias. Research from UNICEF emphasizes that gender norms formed during childhood significantly influence long-term confidence and ambition. When learners internalize limiting beliefs at an early age, these beliefs can shape academic paths and professional aspirations.

Educational philosopher Paulo Freire asserted that education is never neutral; it either sustains existing inequalities or challenges them. Silence toward gender bias is not neutrality. It becomes quiet reinforcement. In classrooms where leadership roles are consistently assigned based on gender assumptions, inequality is rehearsed daily. Conversely, when opportunities are distributed equitably, schools become spaces of transformation.

Creating a classroom free from gender bias requires deliberate action. Reflection on personal assumptions and teaching practices is the first step. Leadership roles, classroom responsibilities, and participation opportunities must rotate equitably. Instructional materials should include diverse representations of men and women in various professions and roles. Encouraging all learners to explore subjects traditionally

dominated by one gender—such as girls in technology or boys in caregiving fields—broadens perspectives and dismantles stereotypes.

Professional development initiatives should incorporate gender-sensitivity training to strengthen awareness among educators. School policies must promote inclusivity and fairness in both academic and extracurricular activities. Collaboration with families is also essential, as gender norms are often reinforced at home. Open dialogue between schools and communities can gradually reshape shared expectations.

An experienced educator once shared the story of a young learner who hesitated to join a robotics program due to the belief that such activities were intended primarily for boys. Through intentional encouragement and exposure to female role models in science and engineering, the learner gained confidence and pursued a path once considered unattainable. This example demonstrates that when educators consciously counter stereotypes, they expand horizons and redefine possibilities.

A gender-fair classroom does not erase individuality; rather, it ensures that identity does not become a limitation. In a society where traditional gender roles remain influential, the classroom can either mirror inequality or model progress. By recognizing and addressing the hidden curriculum, schools in the Philippines can cultivate environments where every learner is free to explore interests, develop talents, and pursue aspirations without constraint.

The task is both urgent and hopeful. Through intentional practice, equitable leadership, inclusive language, and continuous reflection, classrooms can become spaces where fairness is not merely taught but lived. In such environments, learners grow not within the boundaries of stereotypes, but within the boundless space of equal opportunity.

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