



Image source: Savannah Mansfield, "Gendered Bathrooms," 2023, original photo.

The Effects of Gender on Students' Learning

Savannah Mansfield

Senior Capstone

Communication

Essay

Dr. Lee Ritscher

School of Humanities and Communication

Spring 2023

Dedication

I dedicate this paper to my colleagues and students at Seaside High School. You have all inspired me to write about this subject, and your interviews gave my research value. I am sad to leave this job, but it has helped me grow tremendously and find my passion in education. I only hope that I have made an impact equal to the one you have all made on me. Go Spartans!

I would also like to thank my family for their unwavering support. I would not have gotten to where I am without them. My parents have given me the strength to persevere through anything and everything, believing in me before I believed in myself. My sister, Grace, provides unconditional backing, whether she'll admit it or not. My grandparents have been my biggest cheerleaders throughout every stage of my life. I love you all so much.

Table of Contents

Senior Project Proposal.....	1
Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	4
Thesis/Research Question.....	6
Dress Codes.....	7
The Sexualization of Girls.....	9
The Assumption of Male Violence.....	14
The Erasure of Gender Nonconforming Students.....	16
Shifting Mindsets.....	19
Conclusion.....	20
Bibliography.....	22
Resume.....	23

Senior Project Proposal

Name: Savannah Mansfield

Area of concentration: Communication

Question addressed in my essay: How does gender affect learning in schools?

Why I chose this focus area: I chose this focus area because of my dual interest in gender and education. I have taken many gender studies courses in my time at CSUMB and I currently am working at Seaside High School with students, talking to them about coursework and future plans. I have noticed in my time working with high school students as well as my own school experiences that gender has an impact on how students are able to learn in an educational environment. I'm curious to learn about the research on this topic and delve further into the issue, as well as potential solutions.

Alignment with Common Theme and HCOM: My paper aligns with the discussion of gender theories and education. It expands on the morality of gender-based principles within school systems. Within the umbrella of HCOM, it discusses a certain aspect of humanity having to do with making sure children have equal access and opportunities within the education system. My paper will convey my ability to master my literary communication skills in order to create a comprehensive piece that includes in-depth research and solutions that can be put to use.

Purpose: The primary purpose of my project is to address how gender affects learning in school. I hope to shed light on gendered issues within the school system and find potential solutions that can help students learn more effectively. The specific question I will be addressing is "How does gender affect learning in schools?"

Capstone Title: The Effects of Gender on Students' Learning

Working Summary: For my project, I will be writing a paper on how gender affects students' learning in school. I will focus on grades one through twelve. I plan on breaking it down into different gender identities and specifying how each is impacted. For example, I will speak about how female-identifying students more often have to worry about how they are dressed. I will research the effects of aspects like gendered bathrooms on students who are nonbinary. I will then relate this to potential policy changes that could enhance student learning and limit the effects of gender identity.

Sources: I anticipate needing to do a lot of research online about studies that have been done about gender within the school system. I plan to potentially speak to students and/or staff at the high school I work at in order to get first-hand accounts. I will need to be able to effectively communicate the deficiencies I see in our school system and be able to articulate reasonable solutions. I intend to use interviews with students and/or staff at Seaside High School as a

primary source. For my secondary sources, I will use research that has been done about gendered issues in school settings. I may refer to statistics that have been collected on the different identities of students ranging from first to twelfth grade. Peer-reviewed articles will be used to further understand gender identities and school policies.

General Info:

- Teacher Gender, Student Gender, and Primary School Achievement: Evidence from Ten Francophone African Countries - Lee, Jieun
- Effect of Aggression on Peer Acceptance Among Adolescents During School Transition and Non-Transition: Focusing on the Moderating Effects of Gender and Physical Education Activities - Shin, Myoungjin
- Are girls always good for boys? Short and long-term effects of school peers' gender - Briole, Simon
- EleMENTary school (hyper)masculinity in a feminized context - Richardson, Scott
- Girls' education in the 21st-century equality, empowerment, and growth - Fort, Lucia
- Impact of math self-efficacy, math anxiety, and growth mindset on math and science career interest for middle school students: the gender moderating effect - Huang, Xiaoxia
- School burnout trends and sociodemographic factors in Finland 2006–2019 -Read, Sanna

Dress code:

- “A Powerful Visual Statement”: Race, Class, and Gender in Uniform and Dress Code Policies in New Orleans Public Charter Schools - Knipp, Hannah
- How dress codes criminalize males and sexualize females of color: Too often, school dress codes are enforced in ways that disproportionately impact students of color--both male and female. (Sex, Gender, and Schooling) - Pavlakis, Alyssa
- Objectification Found in High School Girls' Experience With Dress Code Enforcement - Heejin Lim
- A Curricular Critique of School Dress Codes - Whitman, Gretchen Marie

Nonbinary/Transgender Students:

- Schools Often Fail to Expect Trans and Nonbinary Elementary Children: What Gender Independent, Nonbinary, and Trans Children Desire - Skelton, j wallace
- Youth-specific sexual and gender minority state-level policies: Implications for pronoun, name, and bathroom/locker room use among gender minority youth - Renley, Benton

Next Steps: I need to conduct interviews with students and staff at Seaside High School. I also need to look into more sources of information that relate to my topic. Once I have compiled a reliable number of sources, I will be able to begin my outline and finalize my paper.

Timeline:

All sources collected by March 10th (subject to change if better sources are found at a later date)

Revised senior project proposal done March 13th

Interviews done March 17th

Draft senior project title and abstract done March 27th
Outline of paper done March 28th
Half of 1st draft done April 5th
1st draft of paper done April 10th
1st revision done April 16th
2nd revision done April 21st
3rd revision done April 28th
Final draft of research paper done May 1st
Research poster done May 7th

Abstract

There are many struggles students face when pursuing an education. These barriers often leave students weary and disheartened, dreading the seven hours a day they are forced to spend at an institution that does not value their needs or identity. This paper will focus on how gender affects students' learning in schools. In particular, it will discuss the sexualization of feminine-presenting students, the assumption of violence in masculine-presenting students, and the failure to provide safe and inclusive environments for gender-nonconforming students. All of this will be examined through the lens of gender's effect on relationships within the education system, as well as the impact of shifting student mindsets.

Many school systems have failed to create a space where students feel valued, safe, and understood. The first step to promoting learning is to ensure that gender norms and expectations do not affect student progress. The effects of a gendered binary system are detrimental to the growth of students, no matter the individual's gender expression. The gender binary—and the societal norms that fall within it—serve to shame, stereotype, and constrain students. To create change and truly foster a positive learning environment, an effort must be made on an institutional and cultural level.

Introduction

Students spend most of their time from ages five to eighteen at school. Teachers, friends, and staff often have a greater impact than one's own family, considering the extensive amount of time spent together. It's their own little community that, generally speaking, follows them from childhood through adolescence. This means that the practices, values, and beliefs we are instilling in students must be heavily considered in order to promote healthy learning.

The education system has been binary since the beginning. I can easily recall numerous times when my gender was at the forefront of my school day. In elementary school, girls and boys were often separated into different tables that rarely interacted with one another. The color pink, fashion, and showing emotion became labeled as girly, while blue, sports, and fighting were considered boyish. We were pushed to make friends of the same gender rather than fraternizing with the opposite. Hugging was okay between two girls or two boys, but never a mix. Physical contact between children of the opposite sex was deemed inappropriate.

Moving on to middle school, girls, myself included, were dress-coded daily. On my first day of eighth grade, I wore jeans, a full-length shirt, and a zip-up sweater. The second my feet hit the pavement of the school grounds, my principal notified me that I would need to zip my sweater all the way up because of my cleavage. I was thirteen. My friends were sent home or forced to wear PE clothes for various reasons. In a time when girls were already forced to deal with puberty and changing bodies, we were taught that our clothing defined us and given a message that we should be ashamed of our figures. The objectification of pubescent bodies was normalized. This only added to the anxiety and fear of being judged, leading us girls to feel as though our bodies were something to be hidden.

In high school, I was taught to fear male staff and students. It was my job to prevent them from sexualizing me. School faculty and codes of conduct made excuses for boys my age: they were protected by their assumed raging hormones and anticipated lack of self-control. We needed to save the men and the boys from the consequences of their actions by suppressing our femininity and covering up any source of temptation. These experiences are what began my questioning of the binary education system. Knowing that my circumstances are only a small portion of what today's students experience daily showed me just how important it is that we

shift the structure of the system to create a safe, supportive environment for all students, no matter their gender identity.

Thesis/Research Question

Gender has been a part of society—and therefore the education system—for as long as the institution has existed. For much of history, women were not even allowed in the education system. It was believed that a woman's place was in the home, thus education was deemed unnecessary for their expected roles as wives and mothers. Even when women were finally allowed to attend school, they were often guided into certain roles deemed appropriate for their gender. They were taught subjects such as home economics and typing, while their male peers were taught subjects that would lead to more prestigious and lucrative careers. This perpetuated the idea that women were only capable of certain types of work, and limited their opportunities for success. The impact of gender expectations on education still exists today, with women and gender-nonconforming individuals often facing discrimination and unequal treatment in the classroom. It is important for schools to recognize the harmful effects of gender norms and to work towards creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

The question being addressed in this paper is: How does gender affect learning in schools? Expanding on the morality of gender-based principles within school systems, this paper demonstrates how the gender binary system used in most educational environments negatively impacts students in various ways. These impacts include but are not limited to the sexualization of girls, the assumption of male violence, the erasure of gender-nonconforming students, and the shifting of mindsets. It sheds light on gendered issues within the school system and finds potential solutions that can help students learn more effectively.

Dress Codes

When speaking about gender-based issues in school, one of the most prevalent topics is the dress code. Dress code in itself creates a binary school environment. These codes often state certain restrictions for girls and others for boys. Not only do these leave out any students that do not fit the binary, but they target individuals for their gender identity. In the following sections “girls” and “boys” will be referred to for lack of better terms. However, it is important to recognize that dress codes can impact anyone who identifies with or is affected by the terminology. As explained by Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Hannah Knipp in her article “‘A Powerful Visual Statement’: Race, Class, and Gender in Uniform and Dress Code Policies in New Orleans Public Charter Schools.”, “Dress code policies in the United States, including uniform policies, are deeply impacted by two cultural anxieties, fear of youth violence and fear of youth sex” (Knipp). This contributes to the sexualization of girls and the assumption of violence in males.

Dress codes in schools fail to achieve their supposed goals of promoting unity and preventing distraction, particularly when they are explicitly gendered. “A gendered dress code forces a student to outwardly communicate a fixed gender. When this communication is not consistent with a student’s gender identity, students are at increased risk of dropout, low grades, and behavioral problems. Even when this communication is consistent with their identity, gendered dress codes may simultaneously “out” a student to peers and family, potentially creating an unsafe environment.” (Knipp). By forcing students to conform or holding them to a standard based on perceived or declared gender, these codes of conduct allow clothing and appearance to take precedence over education. One form of extreme dress code is uniforms that are separated based on gender. For example, private schools often force feminine-presenting

students to wear skirts, while masculine-presenting students wear khakis or slacks. While school officials have described these uniforms as “promoting unity, teamwork, pride, and cohesion,” there is a distinct difference between perception and actuality (Knipp). A school where students are distinguished “by gender visually communicates not one united community but a community divided by rigid gender categories” (Knipp). A dress code that explicitly forces students to fall into one of two categories completely erases anyone who does not feel comfortable in a binary structure. Enforcement of such narrow options for students results in punishment for an action as simple as wearing a pair of pants rather than a skirt. It penalizes self-expression.

The harm caused by gendered dress codes cannot be ignored. Alyssa Pavlakis, a Master’s Student in Education, states in her article, “How Dress Codes Criminalize Males and Sexualize Females of Color: Too Often, School Dress Codes Are Enforced in Ways That Disproportionately Impact Students of Color--Both Male and Female. (Sex, Gender, and Schooling).”, “When students are disciplined because of how they are dressed, they lose class time... to search [for] ‘appropriate’ clothes to wear, or even a full-day suspension. Perhaps even worse than losing out on instructional time, they also receive the message--whether explicit or implicit--that there is something wrong with their clothing choices or their bodies” (Pavlakis). Not only are class time and self-image negatively impacted, but socioeconomic status is not considered. All students, including those who are from low-income households, are expected to purchase school-appropriate items that they may not already have access to. It is a huge assumption to expect all families to be able to provide clothing that fits within the dress code provided by the school. No matter what justifications schools may have for their dress codes, these regulations only belittle students’ experiences and magnify the institutional and cultural reinforcement of gender norms. And yet, “Despite this growing attention, schools continue to

enforce dress codes that are explicitly gendered” (Pavlakis). Schools need to recognize the harm caused by these restrictions and work to create an inclusive and safe environment for all students. However, it seems the school system is not yet willing to push for change. To create a safe and inclusive environment, schools must take a critical look at their dress code policies and work towards creating policies that are inclusive, equitable, and considerate of all students' identities and needs. By challenging and disrupting the gender binary, schools have the opportunity to create a more positive learning environment.

The Sexualization of Girls

The issue of dress code has persisted within schools, having a detrimental impact on students, particularly those who are feminine-presenting. Oftentimes, the implementation of dress codes on girls comes from a fear of youth having sex. Knipp notes in her article, “This anxiety of sex is almost entirely directed at female bodies, with the intersections of race, class, and body size determining whose bodies are regulated and controlled” (Knipp). When I spoke with College Facilitator at Seaside High School, Daisy Gonzalez, she furthered this point, noting that working in a school with mostly Black and Latina girls has opened her eyes to the hypersexualization of women of color. Women are sexualized through dressing and expressing their femininity. Pavlakis explains in her article that the enforcement of dress codes is inconsistent and often subjective, clarifying that “two girls could be wearing the same exact piece of clothing, but depending on their body type, one would be out of dress code” (Pavlakis). The dress code policies of many schools have been found to sexualize and objectify female students, reinforcing the belief that their bodies are not their own and are instead meant to be regulated and controlled by authority figures. Furthermore, Knipp notes in many dress codes she looked over, “The acceptable amount of skin shown was extremely detailed, sometimes down to

the inch” (Knipp). This level of specificity goes to show that schools choose to view students’ bodies as inherently sexual. When students’ bodies are constantly judged as a result of their garments, it perpetuates the harmful trope that clothing choice equates to asking for unwanted attention. Dress codes scrutinize and surveil students, to an uncomfortable and invasive degree. In a time where many youths are navigating stressful classes and uncertain futures, they are met with regulations that disrupt their expression and often their comfortability.

In many cases, dress codes are enforced under the facade of preventing distractions. The language of preventing distractions is merely a veil for upholding white supremacist and patriarchal standards, as the bodies of feminine-presenting students are consistently policed and controlled with schools implementing dress codes that ban clothing deemed too revealing. This labeling can have serious consequences for girls, as they are often singled out and punished for their clothing choices, while boys are not held to the same standard. According to a study by Pavlakis, “Female students consistently reported that the dress code sexualized them, treating common U.S. clothing options, such as a spaghetti strap tank top, as though they were revealing, alluring outfits that distracted male students from learning.” (Pavlakis). This reinforces the harmful notion that girls’ bodies are inherently distracting and that boys are unable to control their behavior in the presence of girls who are not dressed in a certain way. “Additionally, some schools specify that peers (as opposed to oneself) specifically must not be distracted by dress. This approach protects the educational environment for some students while sacrificing the education of ‘distracting’ students” (Knipp). This further preserves the idea that girls’ clothing choices are a distraction to others, rather than acknowledging the responsibility of all individuals to focus on their own learning.

Additionally, school staff are often the perpetrators of young women's bodies being sexualized. When speaking with a male student at Seaside High (whom I will refer to as Student A for his privacy), he informed me that "dress codes should be in place to protect teachers" (Student A). When further questioned, it became clear that he meant staff interested in girls shouldn't be subjected to outfits that they feel encourage their attraction. This leads to the question, should girls be responsible for protecting adults from perceiving them as sexual? Daisy Gonzalez argues that they should not, explaining that "That mindset shames survivors and uplifts perpetrators. Why are we not asking perpetrators why they are interested in minors rather than asking girls to change what they're wearing? It sends a message that we care more about perpetrators than students" (Gonzalez). Dress code as a form of protecting adults is unjust repression of feminine-presenting student's expression.

One specific dress code noted by Pavloski "forbids clothing that administrators deem too revealing, with specific bans on spaghetti straps and tube tops, visible midriffs or cleavage, and dresses, skirts, and shorts that do not extend past the middle knuckle when arms are straight down. Undergarments (including bra straps) should not be visible, and leggings are prohibited" (Pavlakis). A student of mine who attends Seaside High School (whom I will refer to as Student B for her privacy) noted an experience she had, where she witnessed a girl in her class being sent home for wearing a single-strap shirt, whereas a boy in the class wearing the same thing experienced no consequence. It is clear that there is a double standard: while boys can wear whatever they wish, almost every aspect of a female presenting student's appearance is ridiculed, down to their undergarments. Once at school, girls face harassment by male peers, sexualization from adults, and class time being robbed from them while they go home to change. The first thing a girl is forced to think about when she wakes up for school is what she is allowed to wear.

Cautiously considering one's outfit is the only way to attempt to avoid such persecution. College Facilitator Daisy wonders, if we are forcing young women to enter a space they are not valued for their brains, but rather degraded for their appearance, "how can we expect them to sit down and learn?" (Gonzalez).

Dress codes continue to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes by enforcing the idea that girls should cover up and not express themselves in certain ways. This instills fear in young women and shifts young boys' thinking about relationships between peers. For example, Student A expressed to me that he believes girls who dress provocatively are "asking for attention" (Student A). He has learned this through the binary school system that portrays young girls as sexual beings who must cover up to avoid unwanted attention. Daisy Gonzalez notes, "Girls are seen as older than they are, and women are slut-shamed, which reinforces structural messages in the system" (Gonzalez). This labeling and shaming of girls for their clothing choices can lead to lowered self-esteem, body image issues, and can even contribute to a culture of victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault. When feminine-presenting students are taught to blame themselves for others' distraction, they are also being taught to self-blame for others' violence and violation. Labeling girls as distracting and placing the responsibility on them to control the behavior of others inhibit a safe and inclusive educational environment for all students.

Dress code implementation extends to private schools as well. Private school outfits are frequently separated by the binary categories of boys and girls. Often, "only the feminine option was available for girls, immediately distinguishing male and female students from their pants type, shirt type, or shoe type. Despite the claim of schools to promote unity, many schools wished to clearly separate masculine and feminine expression within their policies" (Knipp). This practice perpetuates gender stereotypes and reinforces binary gender roles that do not

account for the gender identity of non-binary students. Moreover, this approach contradicts the supposed goal of schools to promote unity and inclusivity, and instead reinforces gender-based discrimination. When speaking to Student B about this issue, she confessed that she believes school dress codes are made to tell students who they should be based on their assigned sex. She went on to explain that “Dress code was made a long time ago and hasn’t been changed”, noting that schools have not shifted to create a more inclusive environment as times have changed (Student B).

Dress codes and other forms of female sexualization in schools propel gender-based discrimination and reinforce harmful stereotypes. The inconsistent enforcement of dress codes and the focus on policing feminine-presenting students is harmful to the well-being and education of all students. To create change, Gretchen Marie Whitman, Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction, urges that schools must shift from “using dress codes to police clothing choices...” to “...teaching students about consent, body autonomy, and respect for diversity” in her article “A Curricular Critique of School Dress Codes” (Whitman). An example of how school districts can make changes for students is evident in the San Jose Union School District’s (SJUSD) new policies. “SJUSD administrators are addressing the ways school dress codes sexualize female students by eliminating gender-specific language in their schools’ dress codes. Instead of calling out specific garments typically worn by girls, such as spaghetti straps or tube tops, SJUSD’s new dress code (2018) states that ‘Clothing must cover the chest, torso, and lower extremities’” (Pavlakakis). Although the complete erasure of dress codes would be ideal, a gender-neutral approach at least attempts to ensure no bias is attached to students with certain gender identities.

The Assumption of Male Violence

The assumption of male violence in the school system is a significant issue that affects the learning environment for masculine-presenting students. According to Knipp, “Strict dress code policies and even city-level sagging bans are deployed and justified as gang-violence prevention efforts” (Knipp). However, these policies disproportionately target male students of color and perpetuate stereotypes that portray them as potential criminals. Scott Richardson, former teacher, Ph.D. student, and author of “EleMENTary school (hyper)masculinity in a feminized context” expands on this, explaining that “Boys who do not conform to traditional masculine norms may be ostracized and bullied by their peers, leading to social isolation and emotional distress” (Richardson).

To get a more hands-on perspective, I spoke to Daisy Gonzalez, who noted that students (especially of color) are criminalized and more likely to enter the school-to-prison pipeline because of how they are perceived by higher authorities. This cultural anxiety around youth violence often targets male students of color and sustains harmful gender-based power dynamics that have lasting impacts on students’ lives. It places male students in a position of either dressing to fit in with their peers or being singled out and punished for not following arbitrary and racist guidelines.

Dress codes further implement these dynamics. One of the main issues brought up by Whitman is that “Rather than teaching students critical thinking skills or promoting respect for diverse opinions, many dress codes aim to enforce conformity and maintain power dynamics in schools.” (Whitman). Not only do those goals often fall through, but they are somewhat of a facade to distract from the true gender stereotyping that goes into dress codes. According to interviews about dress code cited by Pavlakis, “Students and teachers of all genders and

racial/ethnic backgrounds reported that males of color were most likely to be coded.... Several males of color said they believed the school was positioning them as criminals or potential criminals.” (Pavlakis). Unfortunately, this labeling is prevalent in most schools. At Seaside High, my interview with Student A shifted to a conversation on his perception of dress codes imposed on boys. He explained that he was often targeted for specific colors that he wore, as staff assumed he had gang affiliation. As a Hispanic male, he felt that he was targeted, along with his friends. From a young age, boys are viewed as gangsters, criminals, and dangers to society. In a system where teachers and students alike are akin to the incessant stereotyping of male students as violent criminals, it is difficult to imagine there is effective learning.

Apart from perpetuating stereotypes, the assumption of male violence creates a dynamic where male students feel that violence is a necessary part of masculinity. “Boys are socialized to prioritize physical strength and competition over emotional intelligence and empathy, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes.” (Richardson). Ingraining the message that emotions are not part of manhood prevents boys from feeling free to express how they’re feeling. This repression results in outbursts of violence as a form of release. These outbursts are then punished, despite the fact the school system was a main factor in establishing violent behavior.

The assumption of male violence in the school system is a serious issue that affects the growth and well-being of masculine-presenting students. By shifting students’ and staff’s mindsets and focusing on creating a safe and supportive learning environment, schools can help combat harmful gender-based power dynamics and promote equality and inclusivity for all students. When schools expect aggression as the default emotional reaction and violence as the default behavioral reaction, they create a stereotype threat among students. These gender-based stereotypes become internalized in male students, damaging their self-worth and demonizing

them as people. If schools fail to revise how boys are portrayed, the cycle will continue, putting boys (particularly those of color) at a disadvantage when they are released from the school system.

The Erasure of Gender Non-conforming Students

Gender non-conforming students often face erasure within the school system, meaning that their identities and experiences are not acknowledged or validated. This can manifest in several ways, including the use of binary language and gendered facilities that do not align with students' gender identities. Additionally, gender non-conforming students often don't see themselves represented in school policies, leading to a sense of invisibility. In his article, "Schools Often Fail to Expect Trans and Nonbinary Elementary Children: What Gender Independent, Nonbinary, and Trans Children Desire", author, educator, and activist J. Wallace Skelton describes how "Trans and nonbinary children often struggle with feeling invisible, invalidated, or actively excluded by the gender binary expectations that permeate school environments" (Skelton). The gender binary expectations that exist within schools make trans and nonbinary students feel invisible and devalued. This erasure impacts students' mental health and well-being as they are forced to face invalidation in their learning environment. Schools must work to include and support all students, regardless of their gender identity. This includes adopting gender-neutral language and policies, providing access to non-gendered facilities, and incorporating diverse representations of gender.

Benton Renley, researcher and Ph.D. student, asserts in his article, "Youth-specific sexual and gender minority state-level policies: Implications for pronoun, name, and bathroom/locker room use among gender minority youth" that the "Lack of inclusive policies or negative policies surrounding gender identity can have significant impacts on the physical and mental health of

gender minority youth” (Renley). These detrimental policies can include gendered bathrooms, lack of correct pronoun usage, etc. Although these exclusions can be easily shifted, there has not been enough push for more up-to-date policies. It is essential for schools to develop new policies that affirm and support the identities of all students, and in doing so, create a safe and inclusive environment.

One example of more inclusive policies are “Policies that protect gender minority youth’s right to choose their name and pronoun” (Renley). These “significantly impact their well-being and reduce the likelihood of harassment and discrimination” (Renley). School policies should allow all students to choose the name and pronoun that aligns with their gender identity. A simple conversation at the beginning of each school year that makes students aware that their gender identity will be respected could eliminate much of the bullying and general discomfort that gender non-conforming students face, particularly if that message is emphasized throughout the year.

Another way that the school system commonly fails to include gender non-conforming students is within their bathrooms and locker rooms. These facilities are often separated into women’s and men’s, completely erasing the fact that there are genders outside the binary. It has been found that “Bathroom and locker room use policies that allow gender minority youth to use the facility that aligns with their gender identity can help to reduce the stigma and discrimination that they face in school settings” (Renley). It is imperative that the school system takes into account how much of an impact subtle discrimination has on students who do not fit within a gender binary system, not to mention the physical harm that some youth face being forced into a situation where there isn’t a safe option for them to use necessary facilities. The changing of a

few signs and some reworked policies have the potential to make more students feel safe, included, and ready to learn.

It is also important that all staff within the school system work to provide an inclusive environment. “Educators need to be prepared to actively support the gender identity development of all students, and that includes addressing the unique needs of trans and nonbinary students” (Skelton). It is the responsibility of teachers and staff to support all students. This means they must take into account the unique needs of gender non-conforming students, being sure to provide them with the resources and support they need to feel safe and valued in their learning environment. One example of this could be starting off the year with introductions that include preferred names and pronouns. Addressing gender non-conforming students in an accurate and inclusive way is the first step in creating a supportive school environment.

It is important to note that “Gender independent, nonbinary, and trans children are capable of achieving great things, but only if they are given the support and resources they need to succeed” (Skelton). Gender identity should not limit a student’s potential for success. “By providing trans and nonbinary students with resources and support, schools can help these students feel seen, valued, and supported as they navigate the complexities of their gender identity” (Skelton). Schools have the ability to provide trans and nonbinary students with the resources and support necessary, and it is their obligation to do so. By recognizing and affirming the identities and experiences of gender non-conforming students, schools can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for all students. It is important to prioritize the needs and experiences of gender non-conforming students to ensure that they are not erased, excluded, or made to feel unsafe within the school system.

Shifting Mindsets

The impacts of a gender-binary school system can be seen not only throughout students' time in school but throughout the rest of their lives post-graduation. Xiaoxia Huang, educator, and author, explains in her article, "Impact of Math Self-Efficacy, Math Anxiety, and Growth Mindset on Math and Science Career Interest for Middle School Students: The Gender Moderating Effect" that in grades K-12, "Girls tend to have lower levels of math self-efficacy and are more likely to experience math anxiety" (Huang). This often leads to a lack of confidence when pursuing careers in the realm of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). "Reducing the impact of gender stereotypes and promoting inclusivity in STEM fields" is one of the main ways that the school system "can help to foster interest and engagement among all students" (Huang). Opening up a wider field of careers for girls to pursue is one step in shifting student mindsets to believe they are capable of anything they put their minds to.

The gendered school system also manifests itself in self-identification and expression. Daisy Gonzalez felt it was important to mention in her interview that ingraining a binary system in students leads them to "stick with the capitalistic patriarchal mindset" (Gonzalez). She further expressed her concern, talking about how difficult it is to unlearn a structure that is so heavily emphasized at a young age. Daisy was open enough to share her own story as an example. She explained, "I was always pressured to be in this binary structure. It wasn't until two years ago, at the age of 22, that I decided I didn't want to fit into this role of female expression and the colonial mindset. Being 24 and five years out of high school I am barely learning what it means to matter in this world" (Gonzalez). Her story goes to show just how much the school system impacts how students view themselves. In an honest conversation with one of the students at

Seaside High School, Student B expressed to me similar feelings, telling me that “The binary system sticks with students after they graduate. It makes them feel like someone else instead of themselves. Even I feel like I have to make everyone happy but myself” (Student B). The prevalence of students who feel constrained by school policies and attitudes should be a major concern and motivation for change. The school system has failed and continues to fail students of all ages, genders, and races.

Conclusion

As shown by previous research and the interviews I conducted at Seaside High School, a gender-binary education system is detrimental to students. The sexualization of feminine-presenting students, the assumption of violence in masculine-presenting students, and the failure to make gender non-conforming students feel safe and included create an environment that hinders learning. Students are unable to focus on their schoolwork when being constantly berated with comments, policies, and punishments that reflect the stereotypes of their perceived gender identity. It is unjust and a double standard to hold students to any academic expectations when the school system is actively working against them; educational success can only be achieved when students’ well-being is a priority. Students are not receiving the resources and support they need and deserve from peers, teachers, administrators, etc. Creating an inclusive school climate that ensures the success of all students, regardless of gender, is necessary. The goal of having welcoming and accepting school environments will only come to fruition if there are concrete and substantial efforts made toward progress. This can manifest in a number of ways, including but not limited to support groups, counseling, and comprehensive language. A school system actively working to make students feel included, safe, and understood will produce adults that are confident in who they are. It will remove some of the major barriers to

learning, and encourage students to focus on their education. In a future where the school system prioritizes its students, gender is not an obstacle, but rather another opportunity for further knowledge.

Bibliography

Gonzalez, Daisy. Interview. Conducted by Savannah Mansfield. April 6, 2023.

Huang, Xiaoxia, Jie Zhang, and Laura Hudson. "Impact of Math Self-Efficacy, Math Anxiety, and Growth Mindset on Math and Science Career Interest for Middle School Students: The Gender Moderating Effect." *European journal of psychology of education* 34.3 (2019): 621–640. Web.

Knipp, Hannah, and Rae Stevenson. "'A Powerful Visual Statement': Race, Class, and Gender in Uniform and Dress Code Policies in New Orleans Public Charter Schools." *Affilia* 37.1 (2022): 79–96. Web.

Pavlakakis, Alyssa, and Rachel Roegman. "How Dress Codes Criminalize Males and Sexualize Females of Color: Too Often, School Dress Codes Are Enforced in Ways That Disproportionately Impact Students of Color--Both Male and female. (Sex, Gender, and Schooling)." *Phi Delta Kappan* 100.2 (2018): 54–54. Print.

Richardson, Scott. *EleMENTary School (hyper)masculinity in a Feminized Context* / Scott Richardson. 1st ed. 2012. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012. Web.

Skelton, J Wallace. "Schools Often Fail to Expect Trans and Nonbinary Elementary Children: What Gender Independent, Nonbinary, and Trans Children Desire." *Teachers College record* (1970) 124.8 (2022): 244–274. Web.

Student A. Interview. Conducted by Savannah Mansfield. April 4, 2023.

Student B. Interview. Conducted by Savannah Mansfield. April 10, 2023.

Whitman, Gretchen Marie. "A Curricular Critique of School Dress Codes." *The Clearing house* 93.2 (2020): 72–77. Web.