

Review:

*John Glass*

**Britt-Marie Berge with Hildur Ve (2000). Action Research for Gender Equity.**  
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#### Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Overview of the Book](#)
- [3. Highlights](#)
- [4. Evaluative Commentary](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

## 1. Introduction

*Action Research for Gender Equity* is part of the Feminist Educational Thinking series published by Open University Press. According to the Book Series Editors, the series and this book in particular, represents an effort to "... explore the ways in which theory and practice are interrelated ..." (WEILER, WEINER & YATES 2000, p.viii) within the scope of feminist educational thinking. Towards that end, BERGE and VE strive to demonstrate the process and complexity of utilizing a feminist, post-structuralist-influenced action research methodology in documenting how equality strategies and processes are experienced in a classroom setting. [1]

The book provides a comprehensive and in-depth presentation of their efforts and experiences in implementing an action research model for gender equity. They go to great pains to explicate their theoretical and philosophical foundations, the social context out of which the gender equity pedagogy was born, and the actual "data" drawn from both students and teachers. [2]

## 2. Overview of the Book

The book begins with an introduction about the rationale for using an action research methodology for gender equity. It also includes a thorough description of the greater social context (Sweden), the cultural rationale for gender equity pedagogy, and an overview of the classrooms in which the research took place. The second chapter provides an overview of the methodological strategies of the project. Of note is the description of their (researchers and participating teachers) vision of gender equity. It

"... means to strive for an equal society where women and men share the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities to 1) pursue work which provides economic independence; 2) care for children and home; and 3) participate in politics, unions and other societal activities." (p.15) [3]

As such, these were some of the conceptual areas that both students and teachers addressed throughout the project. The third chapter covers the theoretical underpinnings of action research, post-structural feminism, and definitions and models of power and equity. Briefly discussed in this chapter are the two conceptual centerpieces of the project which were initially introduced in the preface—"moments of equity" ("... when recognizable progress towards gender equity is visible" [p.x]) and "moments of normalization" ("... which signal resistances to changed gender practices and relationships ..." [p.x]). The fourth chapter reviews the concept of a moment of normalization. The authors delineate this concept further into two main points—resistance to superior and demanding girls and the resistance to subordinate and compliant boys. They then use specific examples from the research to bring these ideas to life. As this is a main focus of the book, the illustrations are helpful in understanding the conceptual framework. The next three chapters provide more illustrations of the action research paradigm, moments of equity, moments of normalization, and the precise methodologies used to gather the data. Each of these three chapters essentially is a case study of select teachers' classrooms. The final chapter advocates for continued use of action research for gender equity. [4]

### 3. Highlights

The book provides a very thorough and comprehensive discussion of the utility of action research for issues of gender equity. The setting of Sweden is interesting as there has been an effort to address the issue of gender inequality through legislation and national compulsory education which has gender equality as one of its goals. Reading about the view of gender equity by the students, the teachers, and the researchers is interesting and stimulates deserved thought on the issue. In particular, it is interesting to read of the differing views that the teachers themselves have about gender equity—what it is and how to cultivate it within a classroom setting. Initially, one might suppose that there would be a consensus on the issue among those who are responsible for implementing pedagogy that supports its emergence, especially since the definition of gender equity that all had agreed upon was discussed in the first chapter. This is not the case, however. This lack of consensus on the definition is in keeping with the post-structuralist framework that informs the research paradigm and is, perhaps another reminder of the situated and conceptual nature of meaning and understanding. This issue, along with the related issues of discourse, power, and embodiment and how they intertwine to manifest and maintain gender inequality are extensively discussed. [5]

The authors provide insight into the process of how the action research process evolved in this setting through quotes and passages from the teachers and the students. One of the "methodologies" used by the researchers to gain a sense of

change in the students' perceptions of gender equity are written assignments on the students' visions of their futures, identifying the kind of career they would have, ideas about family, etc. Excerpts from these are included and provide good insights into not only the methodology itself, but also the diverse visions developed by students who have been engaged in gender equity pedagogy. Another methodology used is gender-specific group interviews after classroom exercises related to gender equity have been completed. It is within these interviews that the immediate impact of the equity pedagogy is revealed. Embodied responses to equity and normalization are captured and discussed. Of interest are the ways that both the girls and the boys frame the recent classroom interactions and the differences in definition of the interactions between (and within) the two groups. It is within these transcripts that one can easily identify the tendrils of cultural beliefs and attitudes about gender, gender equity, and gender inequality. [6]

#### **4. Evaluative Commentary**

*Action Research for Gender Equity* provides the reader with an in-depth account of the philosophical underpinnings of the approach, reasons for adopting such an approach, examples of how to conduct this type of research, and ideas for the future. Along the way, one learns a considerable amount about the manifestations of gender inequality within the context of a Swedish educational institution. For one who has not implemented this type of research, it is an enlightening read. [7]

Having said the above, there were certain aspects of the work that left one wanting. In specific, it would have been nice to have had the material presented in such a way that one could use the text as a manual, as opposed to simply an example of this type of research. The approach has much to offer, as the issue of gender inequality is global, insidious, and lethal. One could deduce a method for implementing such an approach from the work, however, more of a "how-to" format would have been preferred. In this regard, the title of the work is a bit misleading. As stated, it seems to imply more of a handbook for this type of research, as opposed to an accounting of one project. A small point, but one could imagine it being significant to some potential readers. Perhaps a "how-to" manual is an idea for a future volume. [8]

Although the meticulous presentation of the "content" of the research was insightful and added to the understanding of the approach, reading about the different teachers, the students' responses, etc., was at times, a bit cumbersome. Trying to keep all of the "players" and their respective histories straight was often difficult and to some extent, took away from the impact of the material. [9]

Lastly, the authors themselves note how the entire endeavor was a bit more complex than originally thought due to the pervasiveness and persistence of the moments of normalization. When reading about the attempts of the different pedagogical approaches applied by the teachers to foster gender equity within the classroom, one couldn't help but think about the vast social pressures and

institutions that maintain gender inequality and the influence that these have on the children. Or to put it another way, it would seem that there would be only so much that a classroom experience could do to offset the influence of entrenched patriarchal structures. These influences are in evidence not only among the children, but also among the teachers. Each one had a different view of the definition of gender equity, the methods to employ to cultivate it in the classroom, and what exactly it "looked like" when manifested. Some of the ideas purported to be consistent with gender equity were, to this reader, more suggestive of normative, patriarchal ideas than anything else. This is not to say that moments of equity did not emerge nor that the pedagogy did not have a positive impact toward the cultivation of gender equity among the students, however. Any effort toward the dismantling of oppressive social structures is critical and necessary, as this approach is. [10]

## Author

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