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Communities, Classrooms, and Peers: Examining How Local Contexts Shape Female Students'

STEM Intentions

CATHERINE RIEGLE-CRUMB, University of Texas at Austin

Despite being the focus of decades of research as well as interventions, gender inequality in representation in many STEM fields, including physics, engineering, and computer science remains. Recent research indicates that high school is a particularly important time point to investigate regarding the roots of inequality, as this is when many young women decide that they are not interested in pursuing degrees in these STEM fields. This presentation will focus on the role of local contexts, including communities, classrooms, and peers, in contributing to such decisions. Specifically, sociological theories suggest that role models and peers within young people's immediate environment can send both implicit and explicit messages that contradict larger social stereotypes, and promote perceptions and experiences of inclusion. Alternatively, adults and peers can endorse and behave in a manner consistent with stereotypes, leading to overtly exclusionary messages and actions. Utilizing data from a large urban district in the Southwest, as well as a national sample of high school students, this presentation will examine how such factors within local contexts can work in both positive and negative ways to shape girls' interests and expectations in STEM fields.