

Cinderella Grows Up:

SEX STEREOTYPING IN THE SCHOOLS

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A FEW months ago a professor from a Big Ten university was recruiting high school students in various towns. He stopped in each community for half a day and chatted in a high school counselor's office with graduating seniors about the university that he represented. In one community he met a steady procession of students—all young men. The principal explained, "We didn't send any girls; our community doesn't want the girls to go to college."

What has happened in this story? The principal blamed this "Cinderella Syndrome" on his conservative locality, but his actions indicated that his value system was congruent with that of the community. A public institution is observed reinforcing sex-channeling. Should educators be concerned over this event? There is a feeling that "we need" talented leaders in the home, as if this thought represented an extension of the principle of the conservation of matter: nothing is wasted. The woman's loss in personal and professional development is the family's gain, so this reasoning goes. Yet more and more families are requiring co-breadwinners. And the smart wife is learning, often bitterly, that the best life insurance is an adequate education.

The writers of this article wonder who

is concerned over the women who never came to the counselor's office. Elizabeth Koontz remarked recently that the developing countries are determined not to make the mistake of many Western countries that have warped female potential; indeed, these emergent nations feel that they cannot afford to waste their human resources.¹ In 1968, of a total of 180 countries and territories, there were only 16 where girls and women represented 40 percent or more of the total number of college students. The United States was not among these 16.²

Schools Must Help

The schools must play a part in reducing this waste of human talent. First, educators must be made aware of what

¹ Elizabeth D. Koontz, in a talk at a special session, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Annual Conference in Philadelphia, March 1972.

² Jacqueline Chabaud, *The Education and Advancement of Women*. Paris: Unesco, 1970, p. 88.

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sex-channeling is. A subtle interplay of role-reinforcers emerges in early elementary school. Primers show girls as essentially passive creatures with restricted body movement and a limited range of facial expressions. Their hands are often clasped or hidden behind their backs in the illustrations. The boys, on the other hand, leap, stretch, and engage themselves fully in physical movement. They accompany their fathers on canoe outings, find treasures, and catch robbers, while their sisters help a mother made nervous by the appearance of a garter snake back at the campsite.³

The anthologies for older students scarcely represent healthy women at all in a significant number of images. Girls become the "straight women" or "fall guys" for the organized, determined boys, who usually solve the plot problems. If they act upon their own stages without boys, then the stories often have the fragile quality of a glass menagerie. Helen Astin remarked that the adjectives used to describe girls and women are among those clinicians call unhealthy or neurotic.⁴

It is little wonder that the girl has internalized a role-limiting set of images for herself by the time she reaches adolescence.

In the early adolescent years, a larger obstacle to the full development of women appears. The institutions themselves set quasi-legal barriers. The schools send the women to home economics for cooking, sewing, child care, interior decoration, and other

pursuits under the direction of a teacher who often has not had extensive occupational experience outside teaching. Male students attend industrial arts with its large outlays of expensive and fascinating equipment. Their experiences are directed toward the outer world of work. Some school systems compound this sexual channeling by enlarging the practical arts courses for boys and offering a reduced range of selection for the girls.⁵

When the student enters high school, there is an expansion in course choices. It is possible at this point for the woman to take industrial arts, for the man to take home economics. In many instances, however, class differences have also emerged by this time, with the college-bound students segregated away from the practical arts. A very strong ego is required to leap both sexual and class barriers.

Meanwhile other quasi-legal forces are at work to reinforce the sexual channeling. The top priority of use for the physical education facilities is not for physical education but for male interscholastic athletics. Some well-intentioned educators, intent on preventing the performance-directed misuses of interscholastic athletics, have stressed intramural programs for women in the secondary schools. Occasionally one finds balanced intramural programs, and a few schools offer coeducational experiences. But the large social rewards (and for the top performers also vocational rewards) persist in male interscholastic activities.

Women are increasingly interested in participating in sports. Many of the conditions governing their participation have been defined by predominantly male athletic associations. The barriers to their participation also typically have been built by males, as in the case of girls' basketball.

Women must contend not only with these quasi-legal limitations upon participation in sports. In addition, blatant, raw attitudes often question the virtue of and even impute homosexuality to the woman

⁵ Anne Grant West and others. *Report on Sex Bias in the Public Schools*. Brooklyn, New York: National Organization for Women, n.d.

³ Phyllis Alroy and others. *Dick and Jane as Victims: Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers*. Princeton, New Jersey: Women on Words and Images, 1972.

⁴ Helen S. Astin, in a talk at a special session, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Annual Conference in Philadelphia, March 1972. See also: JoAnn Gardner. "Sexist Counseling Must Stop." *Personnel and Guidance Journal* 49 (9): 705-14; May 1971.

who attempts body contact interscholastic sports.⁶

Sex stereotyping occurs in the school courses, in the text materials, in the extracurricular opportunities, in the process of "misguidance,"⁷ and in the very management of schools. Women leaders are missing from most of the formal organizational charts of the public secondary schools.

In an age of accountability we should be deeply concerned over the kind of product, or student, who emerges from our schools. If we allow sex stereotyping to persist, we will have crippled personalities to treat in later years. Koontz described, for example, a large sample of young black women with defective work attitudes. Interviews disclosed that the vocational role exemplars for the women were limited chiefly to domestics, and the subjects had rejected this narrow occupational choice.⁸

Corrections Are Needed

What is being done and what more may be done to make reasonable corrections of sex stereotyping? Some of the following appear to be minimal steps.

1. Examine your own attitudes toward the range of roles possible for women in American society. Are there certain activities or areas you feel should be off limits to women? If so, why?

2. Analyze an educational institution with which you are acquainted. Do the provisions for rank and pay, status, trips, and other benefits appear to be equitably distributed between the sexes? Do the classroom materials, the curriculum, and the extracurriculum contain limitations to the development of men and women on the basis of sex?

3. If you find that you are discriminated against, talk to a local or state women's caucus.

⁶ Jack Scott. "Sports." *Ramparts* 10: 56-57; February 1972. See also: Dr. Westervelt. "Non-Sexist Child-Rearing." *New Woman*, Vol. 1, February 1972. See also: Marie Hart. "Women Sit in the Back of the Bus." *Psychology Today* 5 (5): 64-66; October 1971.

⁷ Astin, *loc. cit.*

⁸ Elizabeth Duncan Koontz. "Women and Jobs in a Changing World." *American Vocational Journal* 45: 13; December 1970.

If one does not exist, consider organizing one within your professional organizations.

4. Contact a civil rights or American Civil Liberties group. Continue your dialogue with these allied groups; remember that they have opened doors.

5. Write to Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), National Press Building, 14th and F Streets, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20004.

6. Ask for packets of information (be specific as to the nature of the request) from: The Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, D.C. 20000.

7. Address complaints to HEW, Congressmen, and higher officials whose responsibility is to respond. The silent majority breeds an impression of contentment. Write your legislators.

8. School systems receiving federal funds may be subject to HEW investigations if complaints concerning sex discrimination are voiced.⁹

9. Seek out the barriers that limit the development of women other than yourself. What are their needs? Day care or child development centers?

10. Do you belong to a professional association that could benefit from "cleaning house" with its sex stereotyping? Meet with other concerned individuals to consider how this may be accomplished. Is a resolution in order?

These actions are intended neither to represent an exhaustive list nor to suggest a hierarchy of priorities. The careful observer will find much else that needs to be altered in order to decrease sex stereotyping. These investigations should not wait upon each other; it is important to proceed along a variety of avenues.

The key to the entry of the American woman into full citizenship seems to lie in changing an attitude that says, in effect, it is not that women should fail but that they should not succeed. A new unity is called for so that they may possess leverage within the wisdom of our check-and-balance system. □

⁹ For more complete information, the reader is urged to obtain a copy of the excellent article by: Patricia Chesebro. "What About Equal Rights for Women?" *Illinois Education* 60 (4): 142-46; April 1972.

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