

What About Career Education for Girls?



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"CAREER Education" is the new terminology applied to programs designed to develop an early awareness of varied and related vocational opportunities. Spanning the total school years, kindergarten through high school graduation, career education attempts to provide for greater vocational flexibility in a world of rapid vocational change.

However, the new efforts have not recognized the seriousness of the vocational miseducation of girls. They focus largely upon the idea of work, and its multiple and related forms, without indicating an awareness that sexist prejudices still pervade the entire curriculum and are subtly reflected in the attitudes of the school personnel.

Admitting a girl to a high school shop or drafting course does not constitute a realistic career program which increases aspirations of women. High school is already too late to attempt to break stereotypes drawn from sex roles. From a feminist point of view, effective career education for girls would have to be remedial even in the elementary school. Attitudes limiting women's career opportunities are rooted deep in early childhood. If there is to be an effective change in future vocational roles for women, there must be a concerted effort directed toward parents of preschool children, and elementary teachers, as well as high school counselors and teachers.

Steps have recently been taken to open doors to women in corporations, government, and university faculties. While these steps may be viewed as tokenism on the one hand, they could be useful opportunities to improve the status of women. The irony is that women cannot be offered jobs at these levels until routes leading to such positions are more accessible to them. There are relatively few women who have "made it" to a highly qualified level, and many of those who have done so are nonetheless caught in the internal conflict and guilt precipitated by an uncertain identity.

The professional level in graduate school is a bitter place to unlock the doors to a woman when she has been socially brainwashed against her own development. The system must be opened up from the preschool through the entire educational system and finally out into an open society.

Sex Stereotypes Begin in the Crib

It is not necessary to document the pervasive social attitude which favors the birth of a boy baby over the birth of a girl. One may protest the truth of such a statement,

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and yet it is more customary to sympathize with families who have only daughters than to commiserate with a man who has all sons.

Children become aware of differences in sex roles, and learn which roles are appropriate for them, long before they start to school. Many sex-role patterns have been established by the time a child is two years old. Some important differences between the sexes may very well be biological.¹ Behaviors which seem to be innate, however, need to be carefully interpreted in order to avoid the error of reinforcing old myths based on unexamined folk wisdom.

It is scientifically important to learn in what ways male and female are innately different. Such studies are valuable in learning more about humankind in general. However, the sex differences which emerge do not provide evidence supporting the subordinate, inferior, and dependent role which women in our society have been assigned.

Even Girls Think Boys Are Best

Not only are parents' attitudes apparent in a "sex-set" before the baby's birth, but as soon as the child is born its sex influences the way in which it will be treated. Baby boys generally are handled more roughly than baby girls; baby girls are talked to and cooed to more gently; baby boys are encouraged to be independent and energetic explorers while the passive side of girl babies is reinforced.²

We take for granted sexual distinctions in color choices (pink and blue), in clothing, and in early toys. Even the toy manufacturers, when informed that girls like Tonka trucks too, refused to change their slogan

"You can't raise boys without Tonka Toys," telling one mother, "... there is a psychological factor involved in that little boys don't want toys that girls can also play with."³

Adult attitudes expressed about the importance of the sex of the child during infancy are continued throughout the preschool years, resulting in the development of negative attitudes by both boys and girls toward what is considered to be female. Several studies have shown that femininity and being female are devalued by both sexes. Boys readily identify with male figures and activities, but girls are less likely to make the same sort of identification with female stereotypes. In fact, women have so internalized the contempt for being female that they may be the worst offenders in subverting their own growth.⁴ The self-hate which is characteristic of groups which feel impotent or powerless finds expression in women's contempt for other women.

Examples of this contempt are easily cited. Recent ferment among women employees at the United Nations placed blame on women, rather than on men, for indifference about women's rights.⁵ Studies have repeatedly shown that both men and women (but particularly women) rated men as more worthwhile than women, or found that with increasing age both boys and girls had a better opinion of boys and a lower opinion of girls.⁶ Women's rejection of the capabilities of their sex was demonstrated further by Goldberg, who had a group of women rate the scholarship in an essay which was signed John McKay and Joan McKay, alternately. Women generally judged the article by John to be more scholarly than Joan's, although the articles were identical.⁷

¹ Jerome Kagan. *Change and Continuity in Infancy*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1971; J. Kagan. "The Emergence of Sex Differences." *School Review* 80: 217-27; 1972; G. D. Mitchell. "Attachment Differences in Male and Female Infant Monkeys." *Child Development* 39: 611-20; 1968; Eleanor E. Maccoby. "Sex Differences in Intellectual Functioning." In: *The Development of Sex Differences*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1966. pp. 27-28.

² Florence Howe. "Sexual Stereotypes Start Early." *Saturday Review* 54 (4): 76 ff.; October 16, 1971; Michael Lewis. "Parents and Children: Sex Role Developments." *School Review* 80: 229-40; 1972.

³ Judith Hole and Ellen Levine. *Rebirth of Feminism*. New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971.

⁴ Philip Goldberg. "Are Women Prejudiced Against Women?" *Transaction* 5: 28-30; April 1968; E. Keniston and K. Keniston. "An American Anachronism: The Image of Women and Work." *American Scholar* 33: 255-75; 1964.

⁵ Kathleen Teltsch. "At the U.N., Polite Feminism." *New York Times*, April 25, 1972. p. 48.

⁶ S. Smith. "Age and Sex Differences in Children's Opinion Concerning Sex Differences." *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 54: 17-35; 1939.

⁷ Goldberg, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

Sex stereotypes which begin early are not simply a matter of role differentiation by sex, but they repeatedly show antipathy toward activities or objects viewed as female. Boys learn quickly that to be labeled "sissy" is highly derogatory, but to tell a girl she is a tomboy or "almost as good as a guy" is considered a backhanded compliment. Further, girls who have been tomboys are found to be much more likely to be successful as creative self-reliant women.⁸

However, even girls who are successful tomboys learn self-defeating attitudes early. Baumrind makes the following assessment:

It is common in the public school setting for boys from about age 6 to 13 to put girls down, and each other for playing with girls. Few girls protest, believing that this is how it has to be. Teachers almost never interfere or present an opposing viewpoint. Beginning readers show girls and boys playing with different toys, and men working while women stay at home. Physical education is segregated by sex, although in the early elementary school years much overlap exists between boys and girls in athletic skills. Somewhat later boys are offered woodworking and machine shop classes, while girls are offered child care, sewing, and cooking classes. Thus the traditional division of labor by sex, reinforced by textbooks, teachers, and counselors, is as discriminatory as a similar division by ethnic group.⁹

Parents are clear in their expectations of higher achievement for boys than for girls. By adolescence girls have learned to

⁸ Ravenna Helson. "Childhood Interests Related to Creativity in Women." *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 29: 352-61, 1965.

⁹ Diana Baumrind. "From Each According to Her Ability." *School Review* 80: 166; 1972.

equate intellectual achievement with loss of femininity.¹⁰ Academic success, intellectual superiority in competition with men are often sources of guilt for the adolescent girl who may be achievement motivated but who also wants to be sexually attractive.

Girls learn to rely almost solely on *expressive competence* and are incompetent in *instrumental skills* or those skills considered essential for achievement in our society.¹¹ Instrumental skills which are valued and nurtured in the male, and which have survival value for either sex, are assertiveness, rationality, and independence.

Recommendations for Career Education

Solutions to the miseducation of girls which can be implemented through new career curricula in the schools should include some, if not all, of the following strategies:

1. A plan should be developed and implemented in each school for examining the nature of the school experience in order to identify the subtle ways in which girls are being restricted in their achievements specifically by sex stereotypes. All teaching materials should be examined for possible sex discrimination and appropriate steps should be taken to eliminate the discriminatory impact of that material.

In the case of textbooks and reading materials, children can be alerted to the narrow interpretation of roles offered in such

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-97.

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"Children become aware of differences in sex roles, and learn which roles are appropriate for them, long before they start to school."

books. At the same time, schools should make efforts to eradicate feminine stereotypes from school textbooks. In the case of toys and manipulative materials, both sexes can learn to use materials traditionally designed for boys or just for girls. If this cannot be done, the material should be eliminated from the classroom.

2. Workshops and in-service training sessions for teachers should be designed to focus attention on the pervasiveness of sex stereotyping. Deliberate steps should be presented to sensitize teachers and enable them to avoid repetition of the old patterns of expectancies set for both males and females.

3. Change within the curriculum itself should include two aspects: (a) sections about the changing status of women and material from women's studies should be incorporated in the social science curriculum; and (b) deliberate techniques should be taught to enable teachers to help girls develop instrumental competency.

More attention should be given to girls' use of thought, logic, and problem-solving techniques, and less reinforcement should be given to rote memorization and verbal facility. Perhaps girls should be deliberately exposed to experiences which try to raise their abilities to tolerate frustration, anxiety, and criticism. Discussion techniques should be explored in classroom groups which could expose girls to verbal conflict, disagreement, and even hostility in a way which would help them learn how to face difficult interpersonal relationships without resorting to traditional feminine behaviors of withdrawal, acquiescence, passive submission, or emotional irrelevancies.

4. Special efforts should be made in the elementary school to draw into the school women who have achieved in various fields. Women in science, politics, medicine, and

business, for example, could be invited as leaders in workshops, seminars, or as resident scholars. Whenever possible, these women should be representative of those who are combining serious careers with the roles of wife and mother.

5. Parent education, focusing on the issue of improving opportunities for the full development of girls' potential, should be sponsored by the school as early as the kindergarten.

6. Finally, high school counselors should be given special professional training for the elimination of discrimination against girls in vocational and educational counseling. This writer's own research on the aspirations of high school seniors dramatically indicated the depressed level of aspiration in general among girls regardless of class rank, socioeconomic status, or academic ability.¹² We look not only to the schools to aid in the liberation of women but also to the government for legal support, to society for social awareness, and to women themselves for sustained effort. However, it is through education that we expect the greatest impact. Pat Minuchin expressed it well when she wrote:

... It seems evident that the nature of schooling, from the earliest years on, shapes the capacities and strengths of the growing female. If we are to understand such forces, we shall probably have to look at schools in all their complexity, as small societies and total educational environments, rather than at specific pieces of curriculum for teaching one point or another. And if we are to implement on any sizable scale a kind of educational experience that equips young women to choose, fight for, and carry out personally meaningful life patterns, we may need to make dramatic changes in the prevailing organization of many schools: the values they represent, the relationship they foster, and the form and control of the learning experiences they offer.¹³ □

¹² Daniel Levine, Edna Mitchell, and Robert Havighurst. *Opportunities for Higher Education in a Metropolitan Area: A Study of High School Seniors in Kansas City 1967*. Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Press, 1971.

¹³ Patricia Minuchin. "The Schooling of Tomorrow's Women." *School Review* 80: 207, 1972.

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