
There are no "masculine" and "feminine" virtues, only human virtues, and textbooks and reading materials must be revised to promote non-sexist values.

Do Instructional Materials Reinforce Sex Stereotyping?

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"Boys invent things, girls use what boys invent."¹

Until recently, this quotation would go unquestioned as an appropriate indicator of what boys and girls are capable of doing by virtue of their sex. Today, however, the whole concept of the division of activity and temperament by sex and the detrimental consequences of such division upon the young are serious problems for educators. Research indicates that sex typing is one of the most important factors in the governance of behavioral development,² motivation, and even self-concept.³ The effect of depicting the female sex, specifically, in stereotypical ways in children's media limits opportunities for

personal growth and is negative in terms of healthy adult performance.⁴

Doubts as to the validity of reinforcing "masculine" behavior for boys and "feminine" characteristics for girls are appearing in social science literature, yet such reservations are not likely to have as direct an effect on boys and girls as do the ideas and images presented in school textbooks and reading materials. The stereotypes in visuals and literature can have such a dramatic impact upon children's behavior because one is usually required in school to focus on the meaning of words, the study of a skill, or information to be remembered, not on the value patterns or the message in context. "Reality and truth" are often presented not for discussion, but as a vehicle for other "content." Whole clusters of related values of

⁴ Eleanor E. Maccoby. "Sex Differences in Intellectual Functioning." In: Scarvia Anderson, editor. *Sex Differences and Discrimination in Education*. Worthington, Ohio: Charles A. Jones Publishing Co., 1972.

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¹ Whitney Darrow, Jr. *I'm Glad I'm a Boy!, I'm Glad I'm a Girl!* New York: Windmill Books/Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1970.

² Jerome Kagan and Howard A. Moss. *Birth to Maturity: A Study in Psychological Development*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1962.

³ Matina Horner. "Women's Will To Fail." *Psychology Today* 3 (6): 36-42; November 1969.



In adolescent literature, it is easy to figure out which world one would rather be a part of.

sex-appropriate behavior are learned, in most cases, without the knowledge that they are being learned, or taught, at all.

Why is it that girls do not aspire to be pilots, doctors, or businesswomen, assuming, of course, that they will not be prevented from achieving their goals because of admission quotas, counseling to the contrary, and other expectations of what women are capable of doing? Why do boys not look forward to being secretaries or nurses and combining two careers, namely, fatherhood and work? Where is it that boys learn a distaste for "female" role behavior ("You'll never catch me doing that!"), while girls learn that "masculinity" is the highest value but that they themselves must avoid being masculine? A look at the images presented in instructional materials will suggest part of the answer, because it can reasonably be concluded that children's books play a vital role in communicating attitudes and cultural values.

What is the message that reading texts send to children? While both boys and girls are depicted in stereotypical ways, it happens that boys have models that are brave, cool headed, athletic, unafraid, and competent at male-type jobs. Although girls and women appear in only about 20 percent of the stories in elementary texts,⁵ they are depicted as fearful, passive, dependent upon men,

⁵ Gail A. Vincent. "Sex Differences in Children's Textbooks: A Study in the Socialization of the Female." Unpublished manuscript, University of California at Berkeley, 1970.

whiney, and, all-in-all, not the kind of people that boys (or anybody) would want to be. For example, Janet and Mark, the main characters in a series published by Harper & Row, are shown in several situations in which fearful Janet cannot act without help from her older, more accomplished brother. In the following instance Janet is trying to learn to skate but she falls and cries:

"Mark! Janet!" said Mother.
 "What is going on here?"
 "She cannot skate," said Mark.
 "I can help her."
 "I want to help her."
 "Look at her, Mother."
 "Just look at her."
 "She is just like a girl."
 "She gives up."

Janet tries again.

"Now you see," said Mark.
 "Now you can skate."
 "But just with me to help you."⁶

By third grade, girls already know what they can and cannot do. For example, in one such story a boy has just received a compass in trade and is explaining to Anne that he will use it in case he gets lost in the woods. "Get lost!" says Anne. "Are you going to get lost? I am just a girl and I know enough not to get lost!"

When girls in the texts are not obsessed with their appearance, they are often practicing the role of mother and endlessly rehearsing that difficult and challenging task of keeping house. In the following incident, Mark has just shown Janet his parachute and spaceship. Then Janet shows Mark her doll's house.

"Come in, Mark," she says.
 "Come and see my table. See my two chairs."
 "See the windows. See my curtains. Come here, Mark."
 "Come and see my telephone. . . ." ⁷

Boys, on the other hand, are rarely seen

⁶ Harper & Row Basic Reading Program. *Around the Corner*. Published by the California State Department of Education, Sacramento, 1969.

⁷ *Ibid.*

practicing the role of father. Either there isn't much to it, fatherhood comes more "naturally" to men, or men just do other, more important things.

Adult women fare no better than girls in elementary texts. Women rarely have hobbies, interests, or work outside of dishes and keeping house. In a survey done by *Women on Words and Images*, 147 different occupations were tabulated for males in elementary readers, 25 for females.⁸ Among these 25 were listed fat lady in the circus, witch, queen, and parent. Parent, incidentally, was not among the occupations listed for males.

It has been argued that textbooks, pictures, and literature portray women's life as it is, particularly since most women do not work at "masculine" jobs, such as engineering or medicine, and girls really *do* like to do "feminine" things. While it is true that there are no women astronauts and no women on the Supreme Court, it is also true that years ago few black people lived in the suburbs, which was all the more reason to change the texts to show life as it should be—that is, integrated. While the following quotation from a book for adolescents does describe "real" life for girls, it should also comment and leave children feeling that something is wrong here: "Accept the fact that this is a man's world and learn to play the game gracefully."⁹

Similarly, we do frequently find bossy, dominating women in real life, but we also find men who are the same. However, studies reveal that men in the textbooks are portrayed as having negative characteristics about half as frequently as women. This is probably because our society values masculine characteristics more highly. If a woman must be portrayed as a fool or villain for children, some understanding, perhaps, regarding her frustration or her hostility at not being allowed to play an equal role in the world is in order.

⁸ *Dick and Jane as Victims: Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers*. Princeton, New Jersey: Women on Words and Images, 1972.

⁹ Irene Hunt. *Up the Road Slowly*. New York: Follett Publishing Company, 1966.

After the sixth grade it is more difficult to study the images of women and girls because the female sex virtually disappears from the textbooks. However, literature for adolescents is often the most objectionable. Books or stories which are "girl centered" deal with shyness, romance, and adjusting to being "just a girl."¹⁰ Boys would rather read about sports, cars, and exciting scrapes with danger. It is, therefore, not surprising that educators find that boys will not read "girls' " books, but that girls will read almost anything, consequently perpetuating the practice of filling upper grade readers with male characters and male models. However, girls are rarely seen as trying or succeeding at any of these "male" things except where a compromise is reached. Girls in adolescent stories are concerned not about who they are going to be, but whom they are going to marry. The message again is clear: women center their lives and interests on men, while men have other goals to achieve.

Research indicates that girls suffer more role anxiety than boys during preadolescence, but little attention is given to these conflicts other than their resolution in accepting the passive and supportive role which every woman should want to achieve. Given their female models it is no wonder that females experience more role conflict, since developing one's full potential is portrayed as "unfeminine." It is also not surprising that boys grow up with notions of what female capabilities are. It does not take much guessing to figure out from the reading of texts and literature who has more fun and which world one would not want to be part of.

Other subject textbooks are guilty of sexism more by omission than commission. Civics and history texts scarcely mention women,¹¹ confirming the notion that women have not made and do not make their own destinies, much less anyone else's. Little coverage is given to domestic developments,

¹⁰ Betty Cavanna. *A Girl Can Dream*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948.

¹¹ Elizabeth Burr, Susan Dunn, and Norma Farquhar. "Equal Treatment of the Sexes in Social Studies Textbooks: Guidelines for Authors and Editors." 1972.

changes in family structure, social welfare, education, things that might be considered women's fields, or the legal and economic and social barriers which women experienced, and still experience, that discourage them from appearing in the foreground. As with black history, it will take major surgery on our writings to include what women actually did do, and how they have affected the social and political institutions of this country.

Science texts fare no better. Girls are illustrated as timid observers while the boys execute the experiments and projects. The strongest message communicated is that science is something men make, not women. One way to rectify this situation temporarily is to present women who are or were scientists without stressing that they are a particular kind of scientist, namely, a "woman scientist." Attention needs to be given to the overwhelming struggles women had and still have in order to carry out their work. For example, Marie Curie is often cited as an outstanding (woman) scientist, but explanation is never given of the fact that she received no remuneration for her work until winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

New Role Models

What are the values and models which should be portrayed in books and curriculum materials as positive images for girls? Since nearly half of the married women work, it is important to see women not only happily pursuing careers, but also being aware of and struggling with the conflicts imposed by a society which indicates that a working mother has difficulty being a loving mother. Women should be portrayed earning a living—because many have to, or prefer to. Girls and women should be depicted as living independently of men—thereby ending the suspicion often communicated through literature that a woman is less "feminine" if she does not have a man. Women should be characterized as physically active and strong, studying seriously, solving problems, getting promoted, and becoming the people they want to be.

Boys also suffer from the portrayal of

woman in a limited way, because in a stereotypical world masculinity is what femininity is not. Male characters should be presented as liking and working with women and girls, and being capable of showing emotion without fear of being a "sissy" or "mommy-whipped." Boys do not always have the answers, they doubt and question themselves, and they are not all "heroes." Not all boys are athletically inclined, aggressive, or brave, nor want to be.

Boys also need role models in order to be warm, loving fathers. Portraying the male's primary function as the breadwinner and final judge and arbiter in a family limits a boy's choice also. It is time that men be seen doing something other than going to work outside the home, without the stigma that doing housework, caring for children, reading poetry, gardening, and baking bread are unmasculine. Masculinity does not merely rely upon female dependency, success in work, or athletic prowess, but upon being able to admit weakness, display emotion, and care for others.

Psychologically healthy role models for women depend upon changing the stereotypes of the male role, because many of the constrictions women suffer in society stem from men's role anxiety. What we need to portray for our children is a society in which men and women truly share privilege, responsibility, political power, and opportunity for personal growth, with sex being a secondary characteristic of a person, not an ascribed characteristic. However, until materials are rewritten, films, books, and "the facts" revised, the values which are currently represented must be called to attention, particularly in the classroom. In addition, educators must look for books with strong heroines and for superior biographies of women. History texts must be supplemented and students should be encouraged to write their own non-sexist materials in all subject areas.

Finally, the concept of "masculine" virtues and "feminine" characteristics must be reevaluated, because there are no masculine and feminine virtues. There are only human virtues, and these are desirable for both sexes. □

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