Women and Education

Carol Millsom

The turbulence of the past decade has brought to educator and layman alike an increased awareness of the plight of those groups for whom the right to pursue desirable educational and vocational objectives, and to exercise control over their own lives, has been denied or restricted. Attention has been directed primarily to inequities in the treatment of minority groups; yet in recent years recognition has also been given to the fact that one majority group, that of women, has been similarly disadvantaged.

The fact is that despite radical changes in the educational and occupational opportunities available to women, they remain as underrepresented as do members of many minority groups in high status professional or executive positions. Although women constitute 40 percent of the labor force and control, at least in name, 82 percent of the country's wealth, their participation in business and industry is perhaps summarized by the titles of two entries in a recent issue of Business World:

The Men at the Top: Business World
Speaks with Thirty Industry Leaders.

The Women at the Top: Business World
Speaks with Two Senior Vice Presidents at Macy's.

And women fare little better in educational institutions. As students they are underrepresented in higher education and as professionals in the higher status positions. Although the number of women graduating from high school exceeds that of males, women received only 40 percent of the bachelor's degrees, 34 percent of the master's degrees, and 12 percent of the doctorates awarded in 1969. And despite the fact that teaching has traditionally been viewed as an appropriate profession for women, they constitute only 9 percent of college and university faculties and receive salaries $1,000-$1,500 lower than those paid to their male colleagues.

Women predominate on the staffs of elementary schools and constitute about half of high school faculties; nevertheless, they hold only 20 percent of the elementary school


2 "No Comment." Ms. 1: 100; July 1973.


and 3 percent of the high school principalships. Moreover, according to the National Council of Administrative Women in Education, there are now even fewer women principals than there were ten years ago.

Armed with statistics like these, women's organizations of varying persuasions are pressing educators not only to put their own houses in order with respect to discriminatory salary scales, hiring, and promotion practices, but to examine the curriculum and teacher behavior as well for instances, however subtle, of sex role stereotyping. Under particular attack have been curriculum materials which portray women in passive, subordinate roles and career education programs which prepare young women for a limited range of vocational opportunities.

Protest has also been leveled against such diverse practices as excluding pregnant teenagers from school programs, requiring female teachers to wear skirts instead of pants in the classroom, prohibiting girls from participating on school athletic teams, and electing the football queen as the embodiment of adolescent beauty and femininity. Yet however strident the voices and fragmentary the issues, the school is being asked—in fact required—to participate in a cultural revolution which has as its objective the redefinition of the role of women in contemporary society, a role which will radically alter their relationship to men.

Role Assignment

And it is the relationship of men and women to one another which must ultimately be the focus of the feminist movement. The roles of the two sexes have never been defined in isolation, but only in conjunction with each other. If the traditional definitions have deprived women of the opportunity to develop fully their own abilities and qualities, by defining the characteristics which they must not develop, these definitions have similarly deprived men by defining the characteristics which they must develop. If it is unfair to women to say that only men should be aggressive and competitive, it is unfair to men to say that only women should be nurturant and supportive. And it places an unfair burden on both sexes to require that women be just homemakers and that men be just providers.

An example of how an overly narrow conception of sex roles works to the disadvantage of both men and women may be illustrated by an interview conducted recently with a woman in her mid-forties who, prepared only for a career as wife and mother, found herself "unemployed" when her youngest child left the home. In despair about how she would spend the rest of her life, but with limited education and no work experience, she accepted a position as a file clerk.

To the college educated leaders of the women's movement, a file clerk's job may not seem the route to liberation, but to this woman it was a first step into the world beyond her neighborhood. This step, however, was opposed by her husband, who felt his wife's employment made him look like a man unable to provide for his own family. Yet in order to carry out the male role as he defined it, he was working 14-16 hour days as a cab driver. When he realized that the addition of his wife's income would permit him to work shorter hours and spend more time with his family, his opposition to her employment gradually lessened. As a result of a more flexible view of their own roles, this couple was able to spend more time with each other than they had in the previous 25 years of their marriage.

In like manner, the disadvantages for both sexes of an overly narrow definition of role assignment may be seen in the professional relationships of men and women. When an individual's sex is a factor in the assignment of principalships, to take but one example, it is not only women teachers who are jeopardized but many male teachers as well. Since the roles of principal and teacher require quite different skills, the man with a

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genuine talent and love for teaching may be as frustrated as a principal as is the female teacher with administrative skills who must remain in the classroom. How many male principals are there who really prefer teaching but have accepted the administrative position because it is what is expected of a man?

Similarly a man who applies for a position as an early childhood teacher may be subjected to considerable scrutiny not only concerning his ability to work effectively with young children but also concerning his adequacy as a male. And he feels no less prejudice against him in the achieving of his occupational goals than does the woman who applies for an academic appointment in a school of engineering. The consequence of such prejudice, though, is felt not only by the individuals directly involved but by all of us who are deprived of the opportunity to benefit through people, whether male or female, who are making best use of their talents whatever they may be.

The same considerations can be applied to the curriculum. Do we not stultify both boys and girls when we supply outer space stories for one and fairy tales for the other? Or when we decide that karate is not appropriate for girls’ physical education, nor modern dance for boys? Or hold separate sex education classes? The same consequences follow from the more subtle forms of sex stereotyping such as differentiating using the pronouns he and she when referring to people in various occupational roles, or setting as a model for classroom behavior that of the more submissive girls.

We can best design a curriculum for boys and girls by avoiding these categorical distinctions and focusing instead on the individual educational requirements of each child. For what is first needed in all the furor surrounding the redefinition of sex roles is consideration of how we can best be educated to maximize our potential as human beings and how we can best carry out our human roles as human beings rather than as men or women.

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ASCD Establishes Working Group on the Education of Women

The ASCD Working Group on the Education of Women advised in the planning of this issue of Educational Leadership.

Present members of that working group are: Audrey Norris, Cincinnati, Ohio; Chairperson; Charlene T. Dale, Charlotte, North Carolina; Benjamin P. Ebersole, Towson, Maryland; Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, Washington, D.C.; Elizabeth S. Randolph, Charlotte, North Carolina; and Ann Converse Shelly, Athens, Ohio.

At its inception in 1972, the Working Group on the Education of Women was charged by the ASCD Executive Council to:

1. Conduct a training institute for selected educational leaders during 1973-74, as a first step toward forming a national task force on the education of women.

2. Develop resource packages of relevant materials, research studies, and an annotated bibliography on the education of women.

The working group recently conducted a status survey of ASCD members through the News Exchange, and is currently analyzing the data obtained.