

CAN WE FIND MORE DIVERSE ADULT SEX ROLES?

THE role of the school in the shaping of young people is recognized as a powerful and effective one. By the time children reach high school age, their perceptions of the world and their place in it have been relatively firmly established. The problem under consideration here, the education of women, is one of particular significance for educators since children spend so much of their time between the ages of six and sixteen in the school. During this time, young people see the world through the eyes of those who are presented as experts and as persons whose judgments are to be respected. The world we present, complete with membership of all adults, is the context within which children decide who they are and who they are to be. The focus here will be on providing curricula which allow as wide a choice of adult roles for children as possible.

Curriculum is a word which is defined in many ways. For our purposes, it will be used in reference to the school and all parts of schooling that function together to form the school environment. Elements of curriculum are the specific content of courses, the courses themselves, the materials utilized in schools, the "extracurricular" activities, and, most important, the people who operate the schools.

The phrase "diverse adult sex roles" is a wide-open one. It focuses not only on occu-

pation, but also on the roles of men and women in all aspects of life. Because a person's choice of occupation is a primary determinant in the role he or she plays, it will be the main focus in the discussion. Other aspects of role to be discussed are the personality characteristics associated with the various sex roles in our society and the structure of the family. It must be emphasized that perceptions play an important part in the choices made in the area of adult sex roles. A person, perceiving something to be true, operates as if it were true, regardless of the "facts" as someone else might determine them.

Instructional Materials

The most evident element of curriculum to the outsider in a school is the collection of materials used in the course work. This includes primarily the textbooks and supplementary materials such as films, games, and other written materials. Textbooks are the most widely used format for conveying information from the elementary school through the high school. This medium has long been a major vehicle in restricting the options presented to children. The presentation of adult women and men has been restrictive and limited.

School environment and instructional materials that fail to educate for more diverse adult sex roles limit the options of both women and men.

Several studies of children's reading textbooks (one resource all children use) have demonstrated the biased information given. In *Dick and Jane as Victims*, boys were found to be presented as active, masterful creatures while girls were passive, dependent, and weak.¹ These definitions of male and female were combined with a wide discrepancy in the alternative occupational choices presented. Many more choices were available to boys than girls. Another facet of role choice is that, for girls, motherhood is presented as an occupational choice that excludes all other possibilities. For boys, fatherhood is a state of being that does not eliminate other choices; in fact, fatherhood requires another choice.² The findings in this study are supported by studies done in Ann

Arbor (1971)³ and Kalamazoo, Michigan (1972).⁴

In addition to the reading books, limited roles for women and men are reinforced by math book examples in which girls and women cook and sew and men and boys build and engage in sports. History texts report a history in which women are, if anything, an amusing sideshow (Carrie Nation's axe) or an appendage to the important events of an era (Women's Suffrage). In general, history is male history and the role of the woman is ignored. The role of women as wife and mother, so widely touted in the readers, is seldom mentioned, and yet they, too, moved West against many odds.⁵

The findings of bias in elementary texts are supported by the examination of materials used in the middle and high schools, especially in the texts utilized in history and

³ Marcia Federbush. *Let Them Aspire. A Plea and Proposal for Equality of Opportunity for Males and Females in the Ann Arbor, Michigan, Public Schools*, 1971.

⁴ Contact Kalamazoo, Michigan, Public Schools for a copy of the report on texts.

⁵ Janice Law Trecker. "Teaching the Role of Women in American History." In: James A. Banks, editor, *Teaching Ethnic Studies: Concepts and Strategies*. Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1973.

¹ *Dick and Jane as Victims*. Princeton, New Jersey: Women on Words and Images, 1972.

² Nancy Frazier and Myra Sadker. *Sexism in School and Society*. Evanston, Illinois: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973.

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HOW IT WOULD BE IF SOME LADIES HAD THEIR OWN WAY.



Woodengraving, Harper's Weekly, 1868

Courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Women's fight for freedom from sex role stereotyping is not of recent origin, as this early cartoon demonstrates.

language arts courses.⁶ Women again are placed in secondary positions. Their achievements are less often presented and often, when present, they are not judged "first-rate."

In the textbooks, presented to the children as bearers of truth and fact, boys are told that they must be dominant, aggressive, ingenious, sure of themselves, and adventurous, that they must have an occupation, that they must take care of girls, who always need care. Girls are told that they must be submissive, fearful, and dependent, and that they must eliminate all other interests in occupational areas if they become mothers. These characteristics are neither good nor bad in themselves. The tragedy is in the lack of alternative combinations presented.

The role of an adult is also built upon his or her concept of family. In children's reading textbooks and in many other texts

⁶ Elizabeth Burr, Susan Dunn, and Norma Farquhar. "Women and the Language of Inequality." *Social Education* 36: (8) 841-45; 1972.

at all levels, the family is implicitly a mother, a father, a sister, and a brother. In every classroom, however, at least one child will come from a family that is not "complete" or "right," and that child is taught that his or her family is "wrong." The other children simply learn that this is the only format that the family has. In addition to determining the makeup of the family, texts also determine the roles played by each member, especially the adults. The mother is only a mother. She cooks and cleans and leans on the father for decisions. The father has an occupation. He provides the money for the family and makes the decisions and is distant from the life of the family.

There are other restrictive factors in the presentation of the family in texts. Most of the families shown are nuclear families. No relatives live with them. The economic status of the ideal family is moderately well-to-do, and they live in their own home in the suburbs or in the rural areas. Few of the families pictured are representative of any

ethnic group but white, middle class, English-stock Protestants. Thus, some children are presented a picture of the family that they can never fulfill.

In the realm of the family, the schools have presented the traditional nuclear family as the only possible arrangement and defined the roles in specific terms. As educators, we have ignored the reality of the family today. Divorce, death, separation for occupational reasons, alternative family composition, and changing roles within the traditional structure are all present in the families of today's school children.⁷ In this area, education must respond to the reality of change.

Instructional materials must change if children are to be presented with diverse adult sex roles to choose from in making decisions about their futures. The changes are not difficult to make, once the need is recognized. Showing tender boys and aggressive girls, presenting women as engineers and men as nurses, letting men and women be people in real and loving ways will increase the options of children as they become adults.

The present state of such changes is difficult to assess. Supplementary materials are becoming available in large quantities at all levels. The various textbook series, however, are difficult to comment upon because of the time problem. Many of the publishers have adopted a code of ethics that promises a lessening of sexism in textual materials. Others have spoken of specific changes to be

⁷ Frazier and Sadker, *op. cit.*

made in the next edition. Time (as short a time as two or three years) will enable educators to judge the extent and effectiveness of the promised changes.

In talking to the publishers' representatives at book exhibits, one problem becomes increasingly clear. The changes will occur only if the need for change is expressed by those who buy and use the materials. The problem of educating for more diverse adult sex roles, then, is thrown back in the laps of educators themselves. It is time to examine ourselves and our own behaviors and biases.

School Environment

Children learn from the environment around them. The roles portrayed by the adults in the child's life will be the primary materials from which he or she will gather information upon which decisions can be based. The school, occupying as much of the child's time as it does, is a major contributor to the information base the student gathers, as are the personnel who operate the school. What does the child see when he or she goes to school?

In most elementary schools, the child sees the teachers who are, for the most part, women and the principal, often a man. The relationship of the principal to the teachers is primarily a direction-giving and decision-making one. The women teachers seek direction from the principal in problem situations. To an observer, in this case the child, the roles offered to him or her as exemplary



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are limited to the dominant male and the submissive female. The child does not see social interaction or businesslike equality between the adults in this world and is left with a very one-sided, basically false picture of adult roles.

The elementary school is often referred to as a "female" world, and the deleterious effect of that world upon young men has been acknowledged by many. The child enters a world in which obedient, accepting, and submissive children receive rewards. For the fractious child, girl or boy, there are many problems of adjusting to an environment in which they are "bad."⁸

As the student enters the secondary school, a period of rapid growth and awareness of future adult roles, the role models continue to provide reinforcement for those which he or she has already learned. In addition, the courses offered begin to make distinctions between the sexes and their relative abilities. The law now forbids the barring of children from courses because of sex. The problem is that children are encouraged and discouraged by the behavior of adults who aid them in making decisions. "Girls don't need shop. Take cooking. You will use it when you get married and have children." "Boys don't take sewing courses. Why don't you try shop instead?"

The course discrimination operates effectively. Girls take the arts and humanities, while boys take the math and science courses. Girls become progressively less able as boys begin to excel. In considering career opportunities, girls begin leaning more and more toward wifedom and motherhood. Boys expand even further the possibilities from which they make choices, while fatherhood, in their eyes, is even more a state of being that is rather separate from the important elements of life. Teachers' attitudes, as well as the increasing numbers of male teachers, reflect the dominance of the male in the secondary school.⁹ The images (roles) of the male and female are even more firmly reinforced in the minds of the students as they

leave school and become a part of the adult world.

Schools, therefore, encourage a unidirectional picture for both men and women. Men have careers. They have the sole responsibility of supporting their families. They are strong, unemotional, dominant, and aggressive. Women have families. They have the sole responsibility for the care of the family and it is the primary focus of their life. They are emotional, weak, and submissive. The problem is not only that this picture severely restricts the options of men and women, but it also does not reflect the reality of the world today.

The behaviors of the teacher, counselor, and administrator need to change. Probably the largest element of changing behaviors is creating a recognition of the attitudes that are held and of the need for change. Recognition of the restricted role models and role information provided in the schools is the first step toward a change. Added to these are the differential expectations that we as educators hold for girls and boys in all areas of school. Preservice and in-service programs offer the best and most available forum for creating this awareness. Minnesota has taken a major step in this direction with a human relations requirement for educators that includes women as "human." The Wisconsin program for human relations training is attempting to produce non-sexist materials. Other states and many of the teacher education institutions are beginning to move in this direction in their programs. Much more needs to be done, however, to create in educators a level of awareness sufficient to initiate a demand for changes in the other aspects of the educational environment.

In summary, the two basic aspects of schooling discussed in this article are the textual materials used in schools and the environment of the school. Change is beginning, but we as educators need to examine our own actions and beliefs before we can expect change in any other parts of the school experience that will provide children with as wide a variety as possible in terms of adult sex roles. □

⁸ *Sexism in Education*. Minneapolis: Emma Willard Task Force on Education, 1972.

⁹ Frazier and Sadker, *op. cit.*

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