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# The Gender Issue

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*The male experience is the standard not only in education but, more generally, in all of public policy. We must change the culture of schools — and the curriculum — to reflect both women's and men's perspectives.*

NEL NODDINGS

Feminists often charge that the culture of schools, especially of secondary schools, is masculine (Grumet 1988). It's true that without realizing it, most of us look at gender issues in education with the masculine experience as the standard. What recommendations might emerge if we used the feminine perspective as our standard?

## Men's Culture as the Standard

Because white men have long held most of the highly regarded positions in our society, we naturally use their experience when we think about gender, race, or ethnic equality. In an enlightened democracy, we want everyone to have access to the education and jobs formerly held by the favored group. Thus, some years ago, Congress passed legislation designed to provide more nearly equal resources for women's and men's sports in schools.

Considerable attention has also been given to attracting more women to mathematics and science. Indeed, observing a substantial lag between women's and men's participation in mathematics, researchers began to work on "the problem of women and

mathematics." They did not ask what women were doing or how they had made their various choices. Rather, they assumed there was something wrong — with either women or schools — because women were not participating as men do in mathematics.

The male experience is the standard not only in education but, more generally, in all of public policy. It is supposed, for example, that women want access to the military and, even, to combat roles, and of course some women do want such access. Most professions monitor the number of women entering and see this number as an important social indicator. For the most part, this attention to equality is commendable, and few of us would suggest relaxing it.

Problems clearly arise, however, as a result of using the male experience as the standard. Law, for example, has long used a "reasonable man" standard to evaluate certain actions. In recent years, bowing to gender sensitivities, the standard has been renamed the "reasonable person" standard. The new title seems to cover men and women equally, but it was developed over many years almost entirely from male experience. Much controversy

has arisen around its application to women. Consider one example.

If a man, in the heat of passion, kills his wife or her lover after discovering an adulterous alliance, he is often judged guilty of voluntary manslaughter instead of murder. If, however, the killing occurs after a "reasonable person" would have cooled off, a verdict of murder is more often found.

What happens when we try to apply this standard to women? When a woman kills an abusive husband, she rarely does it in the heat of the moment. Most women do not have the physical strength to prevail in such moments. More often the killing occurs in a quiet time—sometimes when the husband is sleeping. The woman reports acting out of fear. Often she has lived in terror for years, and a threat to her children has pushed her to kill her abuser. Many legal theorists now argue that the reasonable

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man standard (even if it is called a reasonable person standard) does not capture the experience of reasonable women (Taylor 1986).

Another area of concern to feminists is pregnancy and job leave. If women's lives had been used as the standard from the start, feminists argue, one can be sure that job leaves for pregnancy would have been standard procedure. But because men do not become pregnant and men have devised the standard, women must accept such leaves as a form of sick leave.

Many other examples could be

given, but here I want to look at education and raise some questions rarely asked. For example, instead of asking why women lag behind men in mathematics, we might ask the following: Why do men lag behind women in elementary school teaching, early childhood education, nursing, full-time parenting, and like activities? Is there something wrong with men or with schools that this state of affairs persists?

### Women's Culture as the Standard

Faced with the questions just asked, it is tempting to answer facetiously that

"these jobs just don't pay," and of course there is some truth in that. But elementary teaching often pays as well as high school teaching, and yet many more men enter high school teaching. In fact, neither teaching nor nursing pay as poorly as many occupations men enter in considerable numbers.

If we admit that pay is a significant factor, we still have to ask why work traditionally associated with women is so consistently ill paid. Why has so small a value been attached to work we all admit is important? It is hard to escape the conclusion that some men devalue work they have never done

## The National SEED Project

CATHY L. NELSON

The National SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project on Inclusive Curriculum provides K-12 teachers an opportunity to renew their teaching selves and consider what gender-inclusive and multicultural curriculums might look like. The project seeks to engage teachers in curricular and systemic change by bringing issues of race, gender, class, and ethnicity into their classrooms. In seven-day summer workshops, SEED leaders prepare to facilitate monthly three-hour seminars for other teachers during the following school year.

Since 1987, SEED has held seminars led by 198 teachers in 32 states and 7 Asian countries. To date, more than 2,500 educators have participated. Peggy McIntosh, Associate Director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, and Emily Style, English teacher and Diversity Coordinator in the Madison, New Jersey, School District, have co-

directed the project since it began.

At the workshops, project leaders and consultants speak from many disciplines and reflect diverse ethnic backgrounds. Sessions immerse participants in recent scholarship on inclusive education, model teaching strategies to link content and pedagogy, and are grounded in the experiences of participants.

In 1988 I became part of a SEED community of 35 learners who teach. Looking at the textbooks of our lives was essential before imagining school climate and curriculums that would more accurately reflect our diverse world. During our first moments together as a community of scholars/learners, we read aloud our personal versions of Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," drawing upon the gendered and remembered voices from our own pasts. The first stories we told were our own. The first voices we heard were our own. Immediately we recognized the authenticity and power of our own lived experiences.

Conversations continued through-

out the week, formally and informally. We read and discussed recent scholarship reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of women's and ethnic studies. We were exposed to a growing body of scholarship that calls into question traditional content and practices in schools. Initially overwhelming, the many books, articles, films, and videos shared by the consultants ultimately brought into focus much that my own education had not included.

A particularly useful metaphor developed by Emily Style suggests that an inclusive curriculum provides students with a balance of *windows*—to frame and acknowledge the diverse experiences of others—and *mirrors*—to reflect the reality and validity of each student.<sup>1</sup> My own K-12 education excluded the experiences of women, all people of color, and people with disabilities. Before I could change my own teaching, I had to recognize how entrenched I was in replicating a past that had provided me and most of my students with few windows and mirrors.

themselves and do not wish to do.

If women had set the standard when schools were founded and curriculums designed, what might our students be studying today? Perhaps schools would be giving far more attention to family and developmental studies. It also seems likely that these studies would not be regarded as soft, easy, or merely elective. A rigorous study of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age would be coupled with a generous amount of supervised practice in care of the young and elderly. The maintenance of caring relationships might be a central topic.

An objection might be raised that these are all matters to be learned at home — not in school. But, given the dramatic changes in social conditions since the end of World War II, fewer children seem to be learning about these subjects adequately. It is questionable whether most ever learned them adequately at home. Family relationships — human relationships — are at the very heart of life, and yet they are considered peripheral to serious learning. With family life at the center of the curriculum, we could teach history, literature, and science more meaningfully than we do now.

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Seminar leaders shared materials and strategies to facilitate curricular change, including Peggy McIntosh's theoretical work on curriculum<sup>2</sup> and invisible systems of privilege.<sup>3</sup> Experienced project leaders described the various ways they approached their seminars.

When I returned to my school district, we issued an open invitation to our K-12 staff and neighboring district personnel to participate in SEED and provided \$1,000 for materials. Twenty teachers responded. Together we rediscovered and reactivated the curious learners within ourselves, giving one another the gift of time for adult conversations and ending our professional isolation.

At the monthly seminars, we expanded the perspectives we bring to our classrooms by looking more closely at the courses we teach. Risk-taking became expected behavior, and we shared how the content and processes are changing in our classrooms.

For example, at one seminar a middle school teacher revealed that the 8th grade English curriculum included no books with female protagonists. That soon changed. Another teacher with a graduate degree in English real-

ized that his own education had never required him to read a book by a woman and only two books by African-American men.

Also, the tradition of discussing people of color only as victims of dominant cultures contrasted sharply with our new understandings, as we read together works by Zora Neale Hurston, Michael Dorris, Ignatia Brokér, Amy Tan, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, and other authors of color.

During our discussions, some teachers recalled preservice education programs that had directed them to "select materials boys will read, because girls will read anything." The process of learning to teach inclusively includes *unlearning* as well.

I am proud to be part of a network that respects teachers and regards us as central to improving education. The project has been critical in the process of becoming the teacher I want to be. Perhaps SEED's greatest strength is bringing teachers together in conversation with one another within and across disciplines and districts. At the project's core is a fundamental belief that, given the opportunity, teachers will inspire,

motivate, and learn with one another. Trusting the adult learners teachers are. Learning to listen to our own voices as well as others. □

<sup>1</sup>E. Style, (1988), "Curriculum as Window and Mirror." In *Listening for All Voices: Gender Balancing the School Curriculum*, pp. 6-12, (Summit, N.J.: Oak Knoll).

<sup>2</sup>P. McIntosh, (1983), *Interactive Phases of Curricular Re-Vision: A Feminist Perspective*, and (1990), *Interactive Phases of Curricular and Personal Re-Vision with Regard to Race*, (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women Working Papers No. 124 and 219, Wellesley, Mass.).

<sup>3</sup>P. McIntosh, (1988), *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies*, (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women Working Paper No. 189, Wellesley, Mass.).

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A curriculum based on women's experience would occupy volumes, and I obviously cannot present a comprehensive description here. But several large areas of study might be significantly transformed if women's experience were the standard. Before we look at a few, one important caveat should be entered.

Women, like men, are all different. It is misleading to talk of a unitary

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"women's experience" or "women's culture." Nevertheless, strong central tendencies affect women's experience. Whether or not particular women became mothers or were involved in caregiving occupations, they all faced the expectation that a certain kind of work was appropriate for women. Women's culture has emerged out of these expectations, the work itself, and resistance to it. When I speak of women's culture, I will be referring to this common experience.

### **Education for Citizenship**

Usually when someone mentions education for citizenship, we think of courses in civics or problems of American democracy. A "citizen," in one traditional view, is a person of recognized public rank—someone entitled to the "privileges of a freeman."

Learning to take up the duties of a "freeman" is certainly important, and schools have long been charged with promoting this learning.

But there is another side to citizenship. Citizens are also inhabitants of communities, and here their duties are more positive and voluntary than those prescribed by law. Neighborliness, helpfulness, and politeness are all characteristics of people we like to live near. These are all qualities parents, especially mothers, have long tried to inculcate in their children. Given the massive social changes of the last 40 years—among them the reduction in time many mothers have available to teach their children these qualities—it may be that schools need to pay more attention to them.

Another neglected aspect of citizenship is manners. I am certainly not talking about which fork to use for a particular course at dinner, but I do think that we should educate for social life as well as intellectual life. We are alarmed when high school graduates cannot compute simple bills and the change they should expect. We should also be alarmed when they do not know how to dress, speak, or comport themselves in various settings.

Much more can be said on this subject, of course, but my main point is to draw attention to what we see when we consciously use women's culture as the standard for our educational assessments. Looking at citizenship, we see our mutual dependence on neighborliness, the graciousness of good manners, the desirability of good taste. Even when we consider what good citizens must not do, we see that people often refrain from harmful acts because they do not want to hurt their neighbors and because they want their respect. It is not always regard for abstract law that produces acceptable behavior.

### **Social Consciousness**

If women's culture were taken more seriously in educational planning, social studies and history might have a very different emphasis. Instead of moving from war to war, ruler to ruler, one political campaign to the next, we would give far more attention to social issues. Even before women could vote, many were crusaders against child labor, advocates for the mentally ill and retarded, teachers to immigrants, and, more generally, vigorous social reformers. (There are many sources of information on this topic; see, for example, Beard 1972, Brenzel 1983, Kinnear 1982, Smith 1970).

Many well-educated women in the 19th and early 20th century became involved in social issues because these were accepted as "women's work" and because they were unable to obtain positions commensurate with their educations (Rossiter 1982). Today we do not want to restrict women's activities to any particular sphere, but we should not devalue contributions

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women have made and are continuing to make to improve social conditions. Women's interest, as compared to men's interest, in social issues such as war, poverty, and childcare is revealed in a gender gap (about 20 percent) that still appears in both surveys and votes.

The point here is not so much the conventional one of insisting on the inclusion of women in history texts. More important, we must emphasize for all learners matters that have concerned women for centuries. Many contemporary feminists have this in mind when they suggest using women's culture as a standard for curricular decisions (Martin 1984, Tetreault 1986, Thompson 1986).

### Peace Studies

For centuries men have participated in warfare. The warrior has been as central to male culture as motherhood to female culture. It would be untrue, however, to say that men have promoted war and women have resisted it. Women, in fact, have often supported war (Elshtain 1987). But if we look at women's culture and the outstanding women admired within it, we find heroes steadfastly opposed to war. Jane Addams, much loved for her work at Hull House and in other social causes, firmly opposed U.S. participation in World War I. She lost a significant part of her political support as a result.

*Women against war.* Women tried very hard and very sensibly to stop World War I and to prevent World War II. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) carried a peace proposal to 35 governments, and several male leaders acknowledged the good sense of the proposal — but the war went on. The group tried again at the 1919 Peace Conference to introduce measures

designed to prevent a new war. After the second World War, Emily Greene Balch, the first Secretary General of the WILPF, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Recounting this story, Brock-Utne quotes Gunnar Jahn, Director of the Nobel Institute:

I want to say so much that it would have been extremely wise if the proposal ... had been accepted by the Conference. But few of the men listened to what the women had to say.... In our patriarchal world suggestions which come from women are seldom taken seriously. Sometimes it would be wise of the men to spare their condescending smiles (1985, p. 5).

And yet, if we consult an encyclopedia published in the late 1940s, we find half-page entries (with pictures) of Generals Pershing and Patton but no entry for Emily Balch.

In discussing citizenship and social consciousness, I've recommended not that we eliminate the male standard and substitute a female one but, rather, that we consider both traditions as we plan curriculum and instruction. On the issue of peace, however, many feminists think that more drastic revision is required. If our children and the world itself are to be preserved, the warrior model has to give way to a model that emphasizes caring relations and not relations of force and domination (Noddings 1989).

*The ethics of care.* Much is being written today about the ethics of care (Noddings 1984) and maternal thinking (Ruddick 1989). Motherhood has been an important feature of women's traditional culture, and experience in the direct care of children gives rise to interests in their preservation, growth, self-esteem, and acceptance in society. (Not all women have been mothers, of course, and not all mothers have been good mothers, but

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we select the best thinking and best examples as a standard for educational inclusion.) The logic of motherhood includes "preservative love" (Ruddick 1989), and this love should be in powerful opposition to war. Indeed, as Ruddick and others have described it, world protection—particularly protection from war—is a natural extension of maternal work.

We have to be careful not to oversimplify here. On the one hand, some men have also participated passionately in the quest for peace, but these men's voices have not reflected nor transformed the dominant male culture. On the other, women have often interpreted preservative love as a dedication to safeguarding not just the lives of their own children but a way of life. Preserving a way of life, paradoxically, has meant death for many children. But, despite the empirical fact of some women's support of war, the logic of maternal life is clearly anti-war, and the most eloquent voices of female culture have opposed war. Further, the arguments for peace advanced by women are frequently directly connected to the basic

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elements of life—love, birth, nurturing, growing, holding, creating. The distinctiveness of women's arguments and the representativeness of the voice for peace in women's culture suggest a far greater role for a female standard in education.

Women's call for peace is distinctive in another way. Many insist that peace must be studied for itself, not considered simply as the cessation of war. Peace, not war, must become central in our thinking. Further, we must not suppose that the world is "at peace" simply because major nations are not fighting. As long as substantial numbers of people live in daily fear of violence, the world is not "at peace."

*Men's violence toward women.* For feminists, eliminating the violence women suffer at the hands of men is part of the peace movement. Morgan has written forcefully on the cult of masculinity that maintains this violence—and war and terrorism as well:

He glares out from the reviewing stands, where the passing troops salute him. He strides in skintight black leather across the stage, then sets his guitar on fire. He straps a hundred pounds of weaponry to his body, larger than life on the film screen. He peers down from huge glorious-leader posters, and confers

with himself at summit meetings. He drives the fastest cars and wears the most opaque sunglasses. He lunges into the prize-fight ring to the sound of cheers. Whatever he dons becomes a uniform. He is a living weapon. Whatever he does at first appalls, then becomes faddish. We are told that women lust to have him. We are told that men lust to be him (1989, pp. 24-25).

Both men and women suffer in a culture dominated by such images. A culture that accepts—even admires—such models does not hate war; it only hates to lose wars. It does not abhor violence; it merely deplures the deglamorization of violence. Today such themes must be carefully examined in educational settings.

### A New Culture for Schools

What, then, can we do to put some of these concepts into practice? To begin, citizenship education must be broadened to include decent, responsible behavior in personal and family relationships. Both men and women have much to learn in this area. Further, social consciousness should be a central theme in social studies, literature, and science. And the study of peace must be extended beyond an analysis of nations at war to a careful and continuing study of what it means to live without the fear of violence.

Schools must give more attention to issues and practices that have long been central in women's experience, especially to childrearing, intergenerational responsibility, and nonviolent resolution of conflict. Given current conditions of poverty, crime, and child-neglect, our society may be ready to raise its evaluation of "women's work." Using standards that arise in women's culture can guide us in our educational planning toward a more caring community and a safer world. |

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