

Sex Stereotypes in the Classroom

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In most countries, parents, educators and the public at large would protest at the suggestion that discrimination and inequalities exist between the sexes in respect of educational opportunities. It is still, in fact, too often held that there have always been and always will be particular and specific roles for men and women in the organization of any society. They might add that education should prepare young people for these roles.

A closer look at what actually occurs in the upbringing and education of children in the majority of countries reveals that organizational barriers have in fact been removed in many places in recent times at various levels of the formal educational process but that this is not true of the attitudinal barriers. Certain attitudes die hard among most of those on whom rests responsibility for preparing the young to contribute to society while providing them with the best and widest opportunities for personal development and realization of individual potential.

Although much progress has been made in many countries the achievements have not perhaps been as marked as they could have been because of the great influence exercised in the child's education by the home and community. It is in the home that the inculcation of ideas about sex roles is so effective and therefore, even before children arrive at school, they have a clear appreciation of the role they will play in the scheme of things.

This subtle but very lasting influence continues after they enter school and plays an ongoing role in their development.

And from their earliest experiences at school the role learnt so well at home is continually reinforced often unconsciously perhaps, by much of what takes place at school.

Perhaps the most marked examples of discriminatory practices and unequal opportunities are to be found in some developing countries where few provisions for

education for girls at any level at all. In 1976, it was estimated on the basis of United Nations population statistics that 79 per cent of the 712 million girls in the world under 15 years of age were to be found in the developing countries. Of these the majority live in rural areas where the problem of eking out an existence forces most families to retain girls in the home to perform the household chores and this occupies the greater portion of their time.

In addition, time for education is not considered necessary since women are traditionally seen as "producers of food as well as life-givers". As a result, very few girls have access to education or skill-training. Indeed, a United Nations report states that agricultural training for girls as compared with boys was in the ratio 14:86 although women make up one-third to one-half of the world's agricultural labour force.

Even in countries where educational opportunities do not present a problem, the old idea of giving education to the boy rather than the girl, if it comes to a choice, dies hard. This is the case in some countries of Africa where the burden of maintaining the family, particularly in rural areas, continues to rest very heavily on the women and girls. Indeed, in spite of tremendous progress made in providing education-even compulsory education-in places such as Nigeria and Kenya, the percentage of children admitted into primary schools continue to be low and the higher the grade the lower the proportion of girls.

Enrolment patterns for the 6 to 11-year old group show that in 1975 in many developing countries (22 in Africa, 2 in Latin America, 7 in Asia) fewer than half of the children were enrolled in school. The picture as regards enrolment of girls was even more dismal, with 41 developing countries enrolling few than half the girls in this age group. In fact, in 1975, there were 30 million more boys than girls aged 6 to 11 enrolled in school.

Within recent years, more and more anxiety has been expressed, especially by teachers and women, that the formal process of education should be reorganised in such a way as to provide experiences at all levels for boys and girls, based on genuine choice in which the only criteria are interest, ability and the will to succeed. No society can any longer justify, on the basis of traditional sex roles alone, the failure to provide opportunities for the full development of all its members.

It is worth noting that changes

are taking place, in real terms, in a wide variety of ways and at different rates, depending partly on the milieu and partly on the disposition of parents, pupils, teachers and society at large to acknowledge that inequalities do exist and that it will be to the benefit of all concerned if changes, properly identified, are in fact implemented.

Some of the most far-reaching changes are taking place in the developing world. This may be attributed, in part, to the desire of such countries to divest themselves of as many practices as possible which are considered to be related to their former colonial status. In addition, it is obvious that their extensive development plans are geared to the full training and use of all their human resources. For example, in Singapore, teachers report that:

Girls... are not excluded from technical and science subjects. In fact, their attendance and performance in technical workshops on basic electricity, metalwork and woodwork are compulsory in the lower secondary classes. The girls are never automatically channelled into courses with domestic science subjects. In certain schools, boys are encouraged to become members of a special home economics society for boys.

At the tertiary levels also, young women frequently choose courses in practical electronics (e.g. television and radio repairs) to the extent that it is not unusual for the proportion of women in such courses to exceed that of men. On the other hand, in Sweden, a country long recognized as being in the vanguard of positive action for sexual equality "not all parents are happy about their boys baking cakes".

A major factor in the perpetuation of discriminatory practices in several places is the fact that some of those most influential in effecting changes are unaware of how deeply engrained are their own ideas of the traditional sex roles and expectations. Hence, while they openly deplore such practices, they themselves unconsciously continue to inculcate the very things they claim to abhor.

One teacher-leader from a developing country, who is very sensitive to the "remnants of male chauvinism" in her culture, insists that "discrimination between sexes with respect to the objectives and contents of education is no longer found, except that the curriculum..... includes such special subjects as are suited to women

only, that is sewing, cooking, etc."

Similarly, while many teachers in different countries have been making vigorous attempts to remove needlework as a compulsory subject for girls at certain levels, there are others who resolutely resist these attempts.

It is probably in the area of the school curriculum, particularly at secondary level, that the unequal opportunities offered to, and provided for boys and girls become most evident and most widespread. The disadvantages arising from this perhaps most affect a particular career or occupation if the necessary academic foundation is lacking.

The consequent frustrations and disillusionment (especially when it is noted that others have the necessary opportunities) often result in a retreat to the traditional role. Further, while we are not suggesting that equal opportunities should be synonymous with identical opportunities, the common practice of deliberately planning curricula solely on the basis of sex is a direct violation of the concept of the right of the individual to education. For unless education is so designed as to fulfil the needs and aspirations of the individual as well as to provide the base for effective living in a society, the whole education exercise can be little more than a sham.

Freedom of choice should be the only factor in determining educational programmes once the individual has the ability and the basic tools of learning, is knowledgeable about the choice he or she is required to make and is motivated in a particular direction. Thus pupils who wish to follow the traditional feminine or masculine orientation should be free to do so just as they are free to take different or even unorthodox directions without being made to feel guilty or inadequate.

In the majority of societies, the traditional role determined for a boy from the earliest stages is that of family breadwinner. The education provided is, therefore, geared to prepare him for this role. Schools guide him in this direction and he is encouraged to pursue certain subjects which will provide the foundation for higher and further education. He soon discovers the specific qualifications for which he must aim.

This is particularly the case at the secondary stage when he is expected to study certain "boys" subjects such as mathematics and the sciences. On the other hand, tradition dictates that girls should pursue subjects of a more "feminine" or generally cultural nature. This, it is argued, will better equip them for their role as



The myth of a rigid, artificial distinction between "men's jobs" and "women's jobs" dies hard and is often perpetuated by social conditioning in childhood. Most schoolgirls still seem to visualize themselves as future teachers or nurses whereas boys have a much wider variety of ideas and ambitions where jobs are concerned.

housewife, mother, helpmate and assistant. Hence, girls opt more frequently for such subjects as modern languages, music and art. It is interesting to note, furthermore that even where girls are not restricted in subject choice, they have been so conditioned that many reject the "boys" subjects in order not to appear "unfeminine" and possibly even, subconsciously, to avoid competition with their male counterparts.

There are other considerations, too, which often limit choices where there may seem at first glance, to be no curriculum differences. In some countries, there are still only single-sex educational institutions both public and private. It is not uncommon in such institutions to find fewer facilities for certain subjects than in co-educational institutions.

In many girls' schools, provision for the study of science and mathematics is not as extensive as in co-educational or boys' schools, whereas in boys' schools, modern languages, music, drama and other cultural pursuits receive less than adequate attention. It is also worthy of note that funds and facilities for physical education for boys, in both single-sex and co-educational schools, are usually much greater than those provided for in girls' programmes. In addition the emphasis placed on organizing and projecting physical education activities for boys can very readily be judged by the

attention given to this facet of school work in the media in many countries.

Single-sex schools do, however, continue to have a number of advocates even in societies where equalization of social roles between the sexes is at a very advanced stage. It should be recalled that in places where strong religious traditions prevail, such as are to be found among Muslim people, girls either receive an education in single-sex schools or not at all.

Still, arguments stressing the harm which single-sex schools can do to the functioning of the individual in adult life continue to be put forward ever more vigorously by several groups, especially teachers and young people themselves. That they are making an impact is evident in as far as curriculum differences have lessened quite considerably in an increasing number of countries.

It is also encouraging to note that greater care is being taken in the preparation of reading schemes at all stages, in an effort to eliminate the marked sex differences which were so typical, especially in the earlier years of schooling. In addition, reports indicate that many secondary schools are responding favourably to changing attitudes on the part of parents and employers and under pressure from the young people themselves.

Closely allied, to the problems caused by differing educational programmes between the sexes is the matter of career and vocational guidance.

First, it would seem that insufficient attention is given to this in many school systems. Second, guidance is often provided by persons whose attitudes and traditional orientation to the world of work perpetuate and extend the obvious inequalities and latent discriminations in the curriculum.

It is fair to admit that in an increasing number of countries, there have been efforts to furnish information about a wider range of occupations for girls but the tendency to underplay certain types of careers for both boys and girls along restrictive sex lines is still prevalent. There is some evidence, too, that unduly early specialization combined with a guidance programme initiated at too late a stage tends to result in the choice of a career normally distinguished by a sexual stereotype. This has been further reinforced by school systems which make no effort to change the status quo.

The efforts of schools could be greatly assisted by employers who should be actively involved with the school and other community groups in providing a better understanding of the problems and of the need for change in sex stereotyping as far as employment is concerned.

It is obvious that teachers play one of the most important roles in the full development of the individual child. It is therefore, critical in any consideration of how discrimination operates within the school for their attitudes, perceptions and expectations to be examined as to the part played in differentiation processes. To recognize that these have far-reaching effects is not to detract from the contribution that the majority of teachers make to the overall process of education.

However, teachers, like all other human beings, are the products of the societies in which they have lived and reflect the conditioning inherent therein. It is, therefore, to be expected that, unwittingly perhaps, they pass on to their students the ideas and attitudes which are part of their make up.

At the early stages of formal education, the vast majority of teachers are women. Thus, they are very likely to expect their girl students to behave, learn and respond in the manner which is second nature to themselves. They also expect the boys to respond and to show interest in the way they have "known" that boys behave.

A study carried out among Canadian secondary teachers revealed a "tendency for teachers to use their own behaviour as the norm for their particular sex on the dimensions 'ac-

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tive-passive' and that these internalized norms fit the socialized stereotypes (male-active and female-passive)". Further, it was pointed out in the same study that "teachers observe noticeable traditional sex role differences in the class-room and feel that students want to be treated accordingly. This evidence suggests that teachers may be shaping sex role behaviour along traditional lines".

Thus teachers provide learning experiences in keeping with pre-determined concepts. For example, boys are provided with mechanical toys and girls are provided with things which pertain to a domestic role. The differentiation in treatment is even manifest in what pupils are required to do around the classroom and school.

A group of African teachers observed that in some places, especially in rural areas, the girls "are treated as if they were there to serve the male students and teachers". Further, in order to ensure success for the boy who is being prepared for higher studies and for earning a living, the teacher devotes more time and attention to him than to her girl students.

It has also been observed that girls whose scholastic achievements are comparable to those of boys, are more likely to be influenced by social pressures and are often diverted from their goals because of misgivings and lack of confidence resulting from teacher attitudes. It also happens quite frequently, whenever restrictions have to be made in the provision of programmes or facilities for programmes, that girls' programmes are the first to be considered.

The discriminatory practices which are due to teacher attitudes are those which will be the most difficult to change. There are those who believe that they will only disappear with time as societies themselves respond to change. While there is, of course, validity in this argument, teachers can assist in accelerating changes by recognizing their need for reorientation and by being ready to carry out their own personal self-examination to ascertain how their attitude and perceptions are in fact determining the development of their pupils.

It is to be hoped that action will then follow to dissipate those attitudes which may be having a less than desirable effect. Teacher training institutions should also make it an integral part of their programmes to help students to appreciate this problem and its implications and provide adequate opportunities to overcome it during this vital pre-service period of preparation.