

**SEX-ROLE LEARNING
AND
THE WOMAN TEACHER:
A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

Feminist Perspectives No. 7

**by
Rosanna Tite**

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Sex-Role Learning And The Woman Teacher:

A Feminist Perspective

Introduction

When I first became involved in Women's Studies, a little more than five years ago, it was largely because of a need to deal with some dilemmas in my own life, and not out of any perceived connection between women's issues and my work as an elementary school teacher. In fact though, it was not long before I began to become almost painfully aware that teachers were a major concern of feminists, and to say that I felt a little guilty is perhaps an understatement. I suppose that guilt is not an unusual first reaction. I knew that in many ways, like the teachers featured in the literature, I was creating sex divisions in my classroom and favouring the boys for more of my time and attention, and the more I considered it, the more uncomfortable I began to feel. It was not guilt, though, which prompted this project, but rather a growing sense that most of the major studies ignore some of the harder questions by presenting a view of teachers that generally blames us for maintaining sex stereotypes, without at all considering that most of us are women, and without accounting for the ways in which we go about our work.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing features of the research is the preoccupation with a narrow definition of socialization which sees children internalizing stereotyped behaviours presented to them by their teachers. Much of this work has focussed on the early years of schooling, where the teachers are predominantly female, and where the young girls are shown to respond in stereotypical *little girl* ways, first by imitating their teachers, and later by completely identifying with our attitudes about appropriate school behaviour.¹ Few have questioned how the process might reverse itself in classrooms where the teacher is male, and nowhere is the attempt made to explain the boys' *non-imitative* behaviour as evidence of *poor* adjustment to school. Yet, the difference in the children's behaviour is important from a teacher's point of view, for it implies the necessity of a different kind of responsiveness, and a

¹ Richer, Stephen. (1979). pp. 195-203.

different relationship between teachers, girls and boys, and the socialization function of schools. To ignore the necessity of differential responsiveness, while attempting to document the processes of socialization by questioning teachers about our values and attitudes, or by watching us as we work, is to simply stress the role of women in our own oppression, as women teachers are seen, like mothers, to be primarily responsible for the internalization of sex-roles.²

Some of the more recent feminist approaches attempt to focus more specifically on the relationship between the structuring of classroom sex divisions and the sexual division of labour in the world outside the classroom. From a teacher's point of view, the new emphasis is a welcome one, for it represents an attempt to move away from explanations which focus on the teacher's attitudes, to those which study the family and labour processes which organize the work of the school, and the active role that children play in determining their own futures.³ Most of this work has been carried out at the secondary school level, however, as researchers seem clearly unable to explain the role of elementary teachers without making the traditional connection between women teachers and the establishment of sex-roles through the processes of socialization.

Another disturbing feature of sex-role research is the emphasis on *fact-finding* and the scientific observation of teachers in classrooms. In these studies, teachers are carefully scrutinized, often with video cameras, and our every action monitored and checked meticulously against lists of objective indicators, and because, in general, the findings are consistent with the view that there are striking differences in teacher handling of girls and boys, the results are very disturbing and not easily dismissed. But, few studies take the sex of the teacher into account, so it is unknown whether different patterns of feedback would emerge in schools where the teaching staff is predominantly male. In addition, the effects of student behaviour are generally ignored. Because children are influenced by their families, their communities, and the media, they enter classrooms with different behaviour patterns and

²Stanley, Liz & Wise, Sue. (1983). pp. 89-97.

³Gaskell, Jane. (July, 1983). pp. 1-38.

attitudes, and it is likely that their varied responses will affect the teacher's behaviour.⁴ Finally, more importantly, researchers who focus on teachers during instructional activities disconnect us from the reality of our work, and disregard our experiences and the context in which they take shape. And this is where, from a teacher's point of view, some of the harder questions begin to emerge.

The Work Process

Instruction is only one component of our work, and to focus on our behaviour during this one, albeit important and easily observable, teaching activity is to miss the complex set of sex-role relations which are embedded in our work process. For successful teaching requires careful planning, and the resources which the school offers, along with the constraints of time, space, and official procedures provide the planning structure in which we make the decisions regarding the allocation of our time and attention. Also involved in our planning is an intricate set of understandings drawn from our training and on-going professional development, and refined by our experiences with the children and their families. Another part of the process, which cannot be dismissed, is the teacher's knowledge and experience of classroom management -- *what works in the classroom* -- for another significant part of our work is to evaluate the children's learning and to make the results known to their parents and our superiors.

To focus only on instruction, while ignoring the planning structure, the management of our classes, and the evaluation and communication of the outcome of our teaching is to do little more than to present weak interpretations regarding our own values about the appropriate allocation of our resources to the girls and boys in our classes. This is sexist and unrealistic, for it connects us to the forces of our own oppression and separates us from the context of our work. Finally, this approach isolates us from other women and deflects attention from the social and material conditions which shape our teaching, and the experiences of girls and boys in schools.

What is needed, then, is a perspective which requires a concern for the teacher's version of

⁴Bossert, Steven T. (1981). pp. 255-264.

reality. In practical terms, this means creating an alternative conceptual framework which challenges researchers to understand the work of the classroom from our point of view. This is important because, as women teachers, we hold a unique view of the work of the school and a unique place in effecting its transformation.

Action Research

Underlying the major preoccupation with observing teachers in our classrooms is the unspoken assumption that if only we could be persuaded to adopt non-sexist attitudes, and trained to alter our patterns of interaction with the children, then the school's role in reproducing the subordination of women could be minimized. In initiating this project as an action research enterprise, I have preferred to take on this notion as a challenge. Action research provides a way of testing previous studies in a research setting, while maintaining a commitment to the teacher's point of view.

Most modern action research techniques have derived from Lewin's early idea that the best way to understand a social system is to try to change it, and that the best research is research which leads to solutions for practical problems.⁵ In the case of schools, action research implies co- investigation of problems which have relevance for both teachers and researchers. The project may be initiated by a researcher who has already formulated questions for study, or by a teacher who is confronted by a particular problem or question for which research might offer some solutions. In some cases, the task of developing questions and formulating objectives or experiments is done collaboratively, with all participants contributing their own knowledge and skills. This involves an alternating cycle of reflection and action, implying the necessity of flexibility in research design and in the development and monitoring of intervention strategies.⁶ Either way, action research attempts to address the teacher's practical problems while contributing to the learning goals of the researcher.

In this case, because I was concerned to maintain a research stance which calls upon researchers to develop a sensitivity to the teacher's situation, while securing their active

⁵Lewin, Kurt. (1948). pp. 202-203.

⁶Kelly, Alison. (1983). p. 5.

efforts in the development of improved teaching practices. I chose to employ a collaborative model, even though I was both teacher and researcher. If this presents an early critique of it, then so be it. As a teacher, I know that no changes will be made until the barriers are removed which separate us from other women, and researchers from "the researched".

The five other women whose views will be discussed here have been my colleagues for a number of years in an elementary school of some three hundred children. None of them had been previously engaged in any study of women's issues, nor had any of them ever tried to systematically eliminate sex-role stereotyping in their own classrooms. I asked them to be part of the project only because I had respect for their competence and experience as teachers and because I felt that they would accept new ideas. The group included a Kindergarten teacher, three grade teachers (including myself) of grades one, two, and four, the French teacher, and the Teacher-Librarian. Because all of us work together in one particular school, I cannot claim that our views are widely shared by other teachers. As such, the project must be seen as a case study for the purpose of investigating the sex-role themes which are embedded in the teacher's work process, and for testing the possibilities of action research in schools.

Because I was interested to observe teachers actively engaged in the critical examination of their own practices and in the planning and evaluation of new strategies, in the hope of uncovering some of the sexist features of the work process, I began by inviting the group to an orientation session, in which I presented some of the ideas from the research literature. It was my hope that this session would alert the teachers to some of the classroom practices which are seen to sustain sex-role stereotypes and reveal whether or not they would be sufficiently interested in the problem to become engaged in it. As it turned out, the response was enthusiastic, and all of the teachers left the session eager to begin. Over the period of the next three months, we met together for another five discussion sessions and worked together to identify problems, to develop strategies, and to evaluate the outcomes of changes we were making in our classrooms. As it turned out in practice, there was some initial difficulty in identifying problems, and I surmised that this was not unusual for teachers who had given the problem little thought prior to the first discussion session. It was interesting, though, how one problem seemed to lead naturally to another, and soon the process I had hoped to establish, an alternating cycle of reflection and action, was in place. Although I was unable to personally

observe the teachers at work in their classrooms because I was at work in my own, I was able to observe them in the staffroom and in the hallways, and during assemblies and special school events. In fact, we spent many coffee breaks together discussing the issues, raising more than one eyebrow among other members of the staff. Throughout the study, I maintained a journal of my observations and, with the permission of the teachers in the group, I tape-recorded our formal discussion sessions.

The Cycle In Action

A major task in the early stages of the project was to introduce the teachers to the problem and to sensitize them to the classroom practices which are seen to sustain sex-role stereotypes. I had hoped to accomplish this during the orientation session, but in practice, the process was ongoing throughout the project. Every discussion session invariably included some informal chatting about personal problems and women's issues in general. In fact, early in the project, personal anecdotes seemed to be a feature of almost every discussion of classroom issues. But I soon began to notice that the women were coming to the meetings with articles clipped from newspapers and magazines, eager to share some new insight, and I began to realize that they were beginning to draw a strong connection between the world of adult women and our work with children in classrooms. Early in the project, for example, reflecting on the characteristics of the children in our classes inevitably led to some personal, usually humorous, story. Later on, the same observations would often spark angry comments about the difficulties women face as adults.

The initial difficulty with introducing the group to the issues led to a slow start in terms of identifying problems and resolving to formulate some solutions. From the first session, only one difficulty, expressed by the grade two teacher, seemed to capture the imagination of the others. In describing her work for teaching a unit of study called, "All Kinds of Jobs", she noted that her children expressed very fixed, rigid views about occupations and that most of the jobs which the children listed were traditionally male-dominated and of little interest to the girls in her class. Our group discussion centred around ways to help her change her children's attitudes about adult work roles. My attempts to inject other issues into the discussion evoked little response.

The impact of the project on the teachers' work in the school was nevertheless noticeable almost instantly. On the day after our first session, all of the classes were working on a co-operative mural depicting the construction of our school addition. Two of the teachers in the group, with no prompting or prior discussion, noticed that there were no females in the picture and came to me with their observations. During recess, we agreed on a plan of action, and by the end of the day, two women and one cement truck (owned by "Alice") were added. It was not easy though. When we asked our children to put some women into the picture, they were initially unwilling because, as they reasoned, there were no women on the actual building site and it was only after lengthy discussion that the children relented. The children's reluctance, together with the response of the rest of the staff, who generally viewed the whole affair with some amusement, made the day a hectic one.

Perhaps because of the experience with the school mural, the group remained convinced that the teacher's role in eliminating sex-role stereotypes should centre around efforts to teach young people to be more flexible in their ideas about adult work roles, and during the second session, the teachers were eager to share their suggestions for a new approach. The grade two teacher was pleased that a careful search of the new resources depicting women in non-traditional roles allowed her to present a different image of women, but she was disappointed that she was unable to present real-life models in the form of guest speakers. A notice sent out to the community produced only one woman while more than ten men answered the call. This sparked a discussion about our own views of adult work roles, and in general, the response was to reflect a concern for boys who aspire to traditionally female work roles when the pay is so poor and the status of the jobs seems so low. When two of the other teachers, who had polled their classes informally, expressed similar disappointment about their children's views, we resolved, in spite of our own confusion, to begin a search for new books and films, and to initiate some discussion about it in our classes.

Because I was still anxious to generate some discussion of general classroom practices, I turned the group's attention to the research literature which suggests that teachers treat girls and boys to a variety of different classroom experiences. Not without guilt, we agreed that we do pay more attention to our boys, and that girls and boys do seem to have different experiences of school. The French teacher talked at length about her concern for girls who

don't participate in review games with enough enthusiasm to ensure good consolidation of vocabulary. She complained that the boys played with so much enthusiasm and so aggressively, "...even cheating, if necessary...", that much of the time, it seemed that she was only teaching to the boys. She wondered how she might foster more active participation on the part of her girls, and after discussion, the group offered suggestions for manipulating the social make-up of the teams. None of us felt that we could justify eliminating team games, especially for the purpose of review, because of their effectiveness for consolidating skills. She decided to try some new grouping methods and to report to us about her progress at the next session.

The decision to attempt some group manipulations centred next on the Kindergarten teacher, who had mentioned that her children seemed to separate themselves by sex for almost all activities, and that, at the "building centre", girls and boys invariably create and build different kinds of things. She seemed somewhat reluctant, though, to experiment with her groups, claiming that the building centre served an important function in the Kindergarten curriculum, and that it seemed to be working well. As a teacher, I could sympathize with her reluctance. It takes a lot of time and effort to organize groups so that everything is running smoothly, and it never seems like a good idea to disturb the children when things are going well. As a researcher though, I was disappointed because I was anxious to discover what would happen if we began to make some changes based on our new interest in gender issues. When she came to me later on in the week to inform me that she had tried a new grouping system, I was delighted. And when several of the others sought me out to report that they were thoroughly enjoying our sessions, I began to look forward to our next meeting. By now, I too had something new to report.

I had decided that I would make an issue of the use of sexist language in my classroom, and so I had been regularly correcting the children for the incorrect use of generic terms. When one young girl handed in her "Mammals" project, apologizing that she had named the enemy of the deer as "man", I became curious and questioned her about it. She explained that she had taken her project home for her mother's help in proofreading, and that her mother had insisted on the use of the word "man" rather than "people". "But, anyway", she said, "women don't usually hunt for deer, so I thought it would be okay." I accepted that and nothing further was said. I

nevertheless came away from the incident wondering if other parents had heard about my handling of the language issue, and how I might deal with further difficulties if they should arise. Because I was unaware of how the principal might respond to a complaint from a parent on the issue of sexist language, as I had never felt comfortable about discussing the problem with him, I began to wonder if he would support me if I ran into difficulties. When I brought the matter up for discussion by the group, I was not surprised to find that the others shared some of my doubts and discomfort. One of the teachers, who seemed particularly shaken, remarked, "Some people don't want to go through that. Do we want that kind of backlash, even from one person?"

The incident, and the group's response to my predicament convinced me that our group, supportive as we were of one another, could not work in isolation from the school administration, the rest of the staff, and the community. So I began to wonder how we might continue the project in a way that would encourage new initiatives in an environment of legitimate, *official* support. But when I proposed that we try, as a group, to have our project accepted as an official staff professional development activity, my suggestion was met with considerable skepticism. The general feeling was that our project would not command the same kind of attention as other staff objectives, because the initiative for it would come from us rather than from the upper levels of administration and that, because we were dealing primarily with women's issues, it could create quite a disturbance among the rest of the staff. Clearly, the group was reluctant to call too much attention to our project and somewhat cynical about the advantages of doing so. I shared their feelings fully, but I was frustrated by our sense of isolation, and during the third session, I became increasingly convinced of the need for more formal support.

In order to help with our attempts to collapse the children's stereotyped views of male and female roles, the Teacher-Librarian had taken on the task of searching and reviewing the resources offered by our school board. She had been looking specifically for materials which presented instances of role-reversal, as we felt that these would be best for stimulating discussion and follow-up activities for children in the primary grades. Interestingly, she had little difficulty finding materials depicting women in the work-force. In fact, many of the older films about farmers, and fire-fighters, for instance, were being replaced by new ones which

have female lead characters. But, she was unable to locate more than a handful of materials presenting an image of men in traditionally female roles, and most of those seemed useful only for older children. She informed the group that she would continue her search by contacting the board's Library Resource Specialist and the Audio-Visual Department manager. She did order one film for us though, and we resolved to use it as a basis for discussion before our next meeting.

As promised, the Kindergarten teacher had some interesting observations to share. She had tried a new method for her building centre routines in order to encourage the girls and boys to work together to formulate and implement a group plan. Here is what happened:

"...it depended whether or not there was a dominant female...in one group, there was one, and what happened was that she took over and planned the whole thing...in the morning class, the three girls separated off and the two boys separated off and they each did their own thing, completely independent of one another...the other day, I put several girls in with a boy who was not a dominant type and he bossed the whole situation and he does not with the other boys...they accepted him as telling them what to do...even though he's meek and mild with the other boys...when it came to being in there with the girls, he just took over and they let him..."

She went on to explain that in terms of curriculum objectives, the building centre was important for teaching children how to work together by planning and sharing ideas and materials. By this criteria, the new grouping system proved to be only partially successful. In terms of creating new opportunities for girls to practise leadership and control, it seemed doomed to failure.

The French teacher, who had also tried to re-organize her groups, seemed similarly unconvinced about its advantage. She had begun by instructing the children to group themselves into three teams. She observed:

"...the weaker boys went to the stronger girls...the strong boys stayed together...and the weaker girls stayed together and made a group of their own..."

She reported that the weaker girls appeared to like the new system and demonstrated more enthusiasm and willingness to play the game, but she worried that the girls still seemed to be handling all of the record-keeping, and that the weaker girls no longer had the advantage of the stronger girls' help. Clearly, our first tentative experiments with forming learning groups based on our new interest in sex divisions seemed to pose some new planning difficulties, and we began to wonder if we could turn to our support services for advice, although we weren't optimistic about the expertise of our consultants on this particular issue.

In spite of the fact that we seemed to be discovering more problems than solutions, all of the teachers seemed anxious to continue. Many of them were beginning to try new tactics without prior discussion, and they were eager to share the outcome. In one case, the grade two teacher had selected girls to be team captains for a physical education games lesson. Because the boys in her class outnumber the girls by almost five to one, the girls were put into an interesting position of authority over a relatively large number of boys. The result might be aptly described as a teacher's nightmare:

"...they gave her a hell of a time...she got very red and I could tell it was very hard for her to deal with the situation of giving them orders...she couldn't control them...this happened to be a group who are not too co-operative...it was a big job for that one girl to control those boys...one boy was crying, the other kids were beating up on him, and she was trying to get them into place...I finally walked up and gave it to them..."

This sparked an almost angry discussion about the aggressive, and often unruly behaviour of the boys in our classes, a discussion which, in various forms, was ongoing throughout the duration of the project. All of us reported feeling greater pressure from the parents for the boys' achievement, in spite of their generally weaker academic abilities and more demanding behaviour, and most had an interesting story to tell about a conversation with a parent to prove their point.

Sensing that the group was becoming increasingly committed to dealing with some of these problems, I asked if they would feel comfortable about discussing their difficulties with parents. The group's response, encapsulated in the Kindergarten teacher's comment, "They would think that I had flipped my lid.", convinced me that for us to move from making a few experimental changes in our classrooms to formulating a full-fledged assault on the problem would require a gigantic leap in our sense of personal confidence and professional autonomy. And so I proposed again that we work to have our project identified as a staff professional development activity. After some discussion, everyone agreed. The grade one teacher summed up the problem neatly:

"...I talk to them (the children) about what is appropriate, but if someone questions me on it, it's just my own feeling, and if I push it too far and it goes beyond me, it just falls flat because it is not a policy of the school...when it's just you deciding that you think this is better for your class, it can get a bit dicey...you have to feel very confident...you have to feel that you have very good reasons..."

Between the third and fourth discussion sessions, a staff meeting was called for the purpose of setting the professional development objectives for next year. This is an annual event. Our plan was to propose that our project be named as an objective for the purpose of stimulating a staff effort on sex-role issues, and it was decided that this would be my job. As it turned out, the meeting was a short one, held during the lunch hour, and rushed by a deadline from the Regional Professional Development Committee. We were presented with a three-page list of regional priorities and the opportunity to add other choices of our own, but I never did make my proposal. I simply momentarily lost my nerve, and the matter was settled before I could recover.

For a group who only two sessions earlier had indicated that they were ready to work on sex-role issues slowly and with caution. "...like changing to metric...", it was surprising to me that they took it so hard. The first half-hour of the next session turned into a complete expression of utter disappointment. When I suggested that we establish ourselves as a permanent committee and work to gain the official approval of administration, I was more than pleasantly surprised to find everyone in full agreement. With that matter apparently settled, we began our meeting. Two of the teachers had reports to make, and two other new issues were raised.

The Teacher-Librarian had made her promised calls to the Board Library Consultant and the Media Services Manager, but neither had anything new to offer, although they reported a recent increase in requests for the same kind of materials. Our grade two teacher had brought the problem of resources to the Primary Resource Specialist, and she reported finding it initially difficult to discuss:

"...I really had to explain to her what I meant...she didn't really seem to understand what I was looking for...she couldn't understand why I would be looking for items showing men in traditionally women's roles...she seemed surprised..."

Disappointment about the lack of resources, complicated by the fact that a Secretaries' strike had forced the cancellation of the one film we had ordered, led to a discussion of how we might create some material of our own, and a number of the women proposed making a new activity booklet to accompany the "Jobs" unit. We also began to wonder how we might encourage women to visit our school as guest speakers, and decided to begin a file of business and professional women in our community.

It is interesting that when we were discussing the availability of resources, and I brought to the group's attention some of the publications from the Education Ministry and from our Teacher's Federation relating to sex-role issues, none of the teachers were familiar with any of them. The publications, dealing with sexism and stereotyping in education, were booklets designed for teacher use and all have been in circulation for at least five years. That the teachers were not aware of them may seem surprising, especially when it is considered that the group is made up of highly qualified and experienced teachers, who have been very actively involved in committee work at the in-school level and within the region throughout their careers. I had to admit, however, that, with the exception of one guideline for the purchasing of non-sexist reading materials, I had received all of my copies from my Women's Studies classes, and that I couldn't recall ever seeing them in any of the schools in which I've worked.

The grade two teacher raised a new item. She reported that she was beginning to realize the sexist nature of some of the storybooks which she regularly reads to her class, and she was torn between trying to change the wording in them and tossing them out altogether. She worried about the fact that most of the older books were all about boys and their adventures, and that they, "...really put girls down," but that she was hesitant to discard them because of their other merits. This was a concern of all in the group, perhaps especially for the Teacher-Librarian, and they looked to me for advice. Together we skimmed through one of the publications I had presented earlier, a Resource List from the Education Ministry, and discovered that many of the books were already in place in our library. The Teacher-Librarian promised to order more of them and to duplicate a list for staff use. In addition, we discussed our role as teachers for instilling in our children critical reading and thinking skills, and resolved to begin bringing items of a sexist nature to the attention of the children for discussion.

It was the French teacher who brought up the issue of the use of the computers. She was concerned that, in our school, the men organize the scheduling of them, bring new programs to the attention of staff, and train boys to move them from room to room and explain their use to the younger children. We discussed some possibilities for rectifying the situation, but left the meeting with the issue unresolved.

Excited by the group's growing sensitivity to the issues, and somewhat overwhelmed by their

determination to establish the project as a permanent committee. I went to the principal and spoke to him about our new idea. After some discussion, he offered his support, and agreed to make a change in the school policy handbook and to bring it up for discussion at the next staff meeting.

The group was delighted! I had surmised that no real change could take place without official support, and if the number of new problems and new ideas which emerged out of our fifth session could be used as an indicator of our new resolve, my assessment was correct. Perhaps one of the most surprising initiatives was the suggestion that we begin to involve some of the parents, by inviting mothers to work with training some of the older girls to monitor the computers, and by offering to make a presentation about the work of our committee to the Home and School Association.

Many other new planning initiatives emerged from this session. We decided to begin work on revisions of the "Jobs" unit to see it reflect some of the issues which we had discussed, and we resolved ourselves to learn more about computers so that we could challenge the male domination of them. We decided to continue our search for resource materials, and to do some personal study of the issues by ordering materials from our Professional Library. We felt that, as a legitimate committee, we might even be able to *insist* on the training of girls for monitoring the computers and the Audio-Visual equipment. And, because we felt too, that it was important to establish visibility as an official committee in order to heighten awareness of sex-role issues as a legitimate area of concern for our staff, we resolved to raise an issue for discussion at each and every staff meeting next year. In addition to all of that, we continued to discuss our difficulties with controlling the behaviour of our more unruly boys, and our problems with manipulating groups in order to give our girls some advantage, and two new items were raised for the group's evaluation.

The search for new resources had not been very successful, but the grade two teacher did come across one very interesting item at a publisher's display. She was so excited about her success with it, that she was anxious to share her observations:

"...it's on values and the kids have loved it...there's an election and there's a woman candidate and in the end, when she wins...I have twenty-two boys and five girls, and the entire class cheered when she won...afterwards we made up two charts of what girls and boys could do, and the charts were identical...it's one of the best things I've ever done with kids...these kids have come a mile."

This evaluation excited the group. Here was our first real indicator that, as teachers, we could actually teach children non-sexist attitudes, in much the same way that we deal with other values. The group decided to recommend the book for all grade two classes at the next staff meeting, and to continue our search for other, similar materials.

In contrast, my story seemed very discouraging. I had been, during the course of the project, teaching a research unit called, "The Earth". I decided on nine sub-topics for group research projects and asked the children to sign up for the topic of their choice. I cautioned the children that they would have to work co-operatively with the others in their group and to make a final presentation to the class. As it turned out, eight of the nine groups were single-sex groupings. They worked well together and seemed to enjoy it immensely. Only one group, and that one consisted of two boys and two girls, experienced real difficulty with the assignment. They immediately split themselves into two working groups, and fought with each other over the materials and the organization of the project. I worked with them constantly, determined to bring them together in a co-operative effort. After three forty-minute sessions, I gave up. I did tell them that I expected to see one final presentation and that they would lose marks if I detected a duplication of effort. Their final product, I had to admit, was excellent, but for me the message was clear. They did not enjoy the project, and they felt that I had been unfair. I couldn't help but wonder how I might have handled the problem if they had split on the basis of colour or religion, and so I mentioned it to the other teachers in the group. The response that, "...it's not the same as prejudice...", and, "...it's just a normal part of their development...", left me unconvinced. I resolved to study the issue further, and our last unofficial meeting came to an end.

As promised, the principal asked me to speak about our project at the next regular staff meeting, and a new "Gender Issues Committee" was formed. Appropriate changes were made in the the school policy handbook, and our group, together with three new members, came together to set our goals for the next school year. So, as it turned out, the last meeting of our group project in fact became the first meeting of the new Gender Issues Committee. Our three new members appeared to be somewhat confused and I was encouraged to see that our group members brought them up to date easily on the issues and problems which we had identified. Because all of us were aware of the considerable impact of committee work in our school for

formulating new ideas and new directions for the staff, it represented, for us, a happy culmination to the project.

Discussion

When researchers begin with a conceptual framework which takes, as its base, a sensitivity to the teacher's work situation and formulate a research model which calls upon teachers to change their practices, they can expose some of the school mechanisms which maintain sex stereotypes, without blaming teachers for modelling sexist attitudes and treating children differently. This is because they can focus on the features of the school which maintain the status quo, while offering support to teachers who want to resist them. In the case here, for example, I can question the teachers' personal values in ways which draw attention to the mechanisms which nurture them. And I can consider how the teacher chooses to allocate her time and resources, while recalling the context in which those decisions are made. By turning attention to those contexts, and the ways in which teachers draw meaning from them, I can begin to get at some of the issues which have been ignored by the traditional focus on the teacher's values and her work in the instructional setting. In practical terms, this means underlining the central importance of the teacher's personal experience of the relationships and the events which she encounters in the classroom, and in the preparation and evaluation stages of her work.

Planning For Teaching

The personal dilemmas teachers face when challenged toward a new concern for sex-role issues are not insignificant. They must begin to draw a connection between their work in classrooms and the problems women face as adults, and begin collapsing some of their values and views about what girls and boys should do. That this initiative came from me is interesting. None of the teachers had ever been presented with any official information on the subject in the course of their considerable work experience. This is not to say that they were completely unaware of women's issues, only that for them, the issues seemed fixed in the personal difficulties of their own lives and only peripheral to their work as teachers. The group's initial reluctance to discuss sensitive issues and our discomfort with bringing difficulties to the attention of the principal is rooted in our perception of what is relevant for

our work. When a three-page document of priority items includes not one whisper of sex-role issues, it is reasonable for us to assume that these problems are not of central importance. This becomes clear when it is considered that it was only after the principal's support was assured that the group began to tackle the problem with characteristic professional vigour.

One of the group's greatest concerns was the sexist bias in the learning materials designed to support the required curriculum study of occupations. A careful search turned up few resources, and the Resource Specialist, whose job it is to help teachers interpret and implement the objectives of the curriculum, offered few suggestions for presenting the children with a more balanced view of adult roles. Perhaps this shouldn't have surprised us. In the world outside our school there was little evidence to support our suggestion to the children that men and women could do the same jobs. They saw no women on the school construction site and they were presented with only one female worker as a guest speaker to ten men. Our attempts to convince the children that it should be otherwise seemed futile. It seems hardly surprising that some of us began to wonder if we were doing the right thing in making an issue of work roles.

It is hard to imagine a questionnaire or other instrument which could adequately reflect the teacher's personal confusion and reluctance to challenge school priorities. Yet, this is an important issue, for underlying the teacher's values and attitudes is an implied set of ideological influences which become visible only when challenged in the real-life setting of the school. This becomes clearer when attention is turned to the classroom.

Teaching

There are few findings which disturb researchers more than the one which sees teachers offering more of their time and attention to the boys. Yet, few researchers have taken the time to develop an understanding of the instructional process. In Ontario, at least, instruction is seen as a process of interaction, in which the teacher and child are partners. While the teacher must take responsibility for the general direction and sequencing of the learning activities, she is required to initiate these as a response to the child's needs, readiness, interests, and capacity.⁷ This becomes important when we consider sex differences:

⁷Ontario Ministry of Education. (1975). p. 17.

- "...the girls don't want to play games..."
- "...the boys love to play team games..."
- "...academically, in the early grades, the girls are superior, they shine..."
- "...in Kindergarten, the boys build trucks and towers...the girls make castles and houses..."
- "...the boys are the ones you can expect to have trouble..."

The task of initiating appropriate learning activities as a response to the children's needs and interests becomes a serious challenge to teachers who are engaged in trying to undermine sex divisions. Again, though, it is in making that challenge, that the features which influence the teacher's decisions regarding the allocation of her time and attention become more visible. For the grade one teacher, for example, who observed.

"...in grade one, the girls come in and they want to sit and print, the boys don't want to print..."

the direction for change is unclear. The dilemma for her is to choose new teaching procedures which will foster greater participation among the boys without disturbing the happy state of her girls. It is a challenge which she faces with little assistance from the support services or from professional development activity. All of us in the group could talk at length about workshops we had attended for learning how to better motivate our *difficult* children, but the major complaint about workshop leaders, reiterated time and again throughout the project, that,

- "...they have this glowing idea what teachers should be doing..."
- "...they forget what it's like all day with twenty- eight..."
- "...they never tell you what to do with the other twenty-five..."

led us to be less than optimistic about their expertise in helping us to select appropriate learning activities which are of interest to boys while maintaining the active participation of our girls. One of the major tasks of the new committee, we felt, would be to bring this issue to the attention of the board services to whom we regularly turn for support.

In the meantime, of course, we still had to run our classrooms, and to say that the children defied some of our attempts to make changes is to put it mildly. In some cases, it created chaos.

And as one teacher aptly put it. "...it doesn't look good if someone is wandering by in the hallway...". Another thing that *doesn't look good* is an untidy classroom, and how to encourage the boys to do their share of the clean-up is a problem which she talked about at length:

"...sometimes I'm at fault, because if you want something tidied up in a big hurry, well you know who can do it...sometimes for the sake of convenience, you tend to rely on the girls...at the end of the day, you don't want to say that you spent forty minutes tidying up something just to prove a point..."

Clearly, we feel pressure from parents and administration to maintain order in our classrooms, and our awareness of the boys' greater difficulty in adjusting to the tasks and routines of classroom life, we feel, requires us to give them more of our time and attention. But it is more than that. Good teaching also requires careful judgement about when it is appropriate to intervene in the children's conflicts, and when to let them settle matters for themselves. In clashes between girls and boys, the girls rarely make their point and usually turn to their teachers for help:

"...when the woman from the museum came and she separated the children into groups, my group was all boys except for two girls...they were pushed right out of the circle...they were supposed to pass the tool around the group and they passed it right over the girls...the girls just sat there looking at me sadly, waiting for me to do something about it...so what do you do?"

This question, raised by the grade two teacher, was one that came up time and again, in various forms, throughout our discussions, and it was one for which none of us had an easy answer. We had all regularly intervened in similar situations over the years, but now we worried that continuous intervention on the part of the girls would simply foster dependence and result in even greater sex divisions. The teachers' perception of hostility between the sexes as, "...just a part of their normal development," seems to be one of the major psychological precepts which underlie teacher handling of classroom incidents. Its validity may be disputed, but it is nevertheless entrenched, and teachers who challenge it may well do so at the risk of others thinking they had, "flipped their lids", and at the cost of their credibility as kind, fair, and judicious teachers.

It seems hardly surprising that teachers feel somewhat threatened by traditional classroom interaction studies, which can detect and document differential treatment, but which rarely consider the extent to which such treatment represents a necessary and compelling component

of our work in responding to the differing needs of our children. For our discomfort with some of the new methods which we attempted throughout the duration of the project is rooted in our perception of what constitutes appropriate professional practice. When the matter is taken further, and the teacher's work in evaluating the outcomes of learning, and in communicating the results to the parents is considered, then the ways in which these perceptions take shape becomes more visible.

Evaluating and Communicating Outcomes

The act of reflecting on the value of learning activities is another fundamental part of the teacher's work. In its more formal form, it is accomplished with worksheets and tests, but because teachers are seen as having a responsibility for assisting children with their personal and social development as well as with concepts, information, and skills, much of the evaluation is done in a personal reflective manner. This may involve observation of the children at play, or during discussion sessions, and usually includes a kind of self-evaluation, as the results of learning activities make themselves known. We are encouraged to assess our teaching procedures in this way, and to re-define our goals and change our methods where necessary. But, when we find, as the teachers in our group did, that the girls and boys often come away from class lessons with different views about what was taught, then we find that the way toward improvement and strengthened teaching is a confusing one. The question for reflection becomes not, "How can I get better results?", but "Improve what, for whom, and how?". The Kindergarten teacher's problem with the building centre is a good example. The advantages of manipulating the grouping at the centre were unclear. What did become clear once she tried it was that it was more difficult and less effective for accomplishing the objectives for which the building centre exists. It is true that she might, through a process of trial and error, arrive at a grouping system which would work in order to provide girls and boys with equal experiences of the learning activity, at the same time as it accomplishes the curriculum objectives. But the point is that it would be a trial and error method, not one for which any established guidelines or evaluative techniques exist. This was also the case for the French teacher who tried many new grouping systems throughout the course of the project. She saw it only as, "...an experiment, just trying a few things...", and was unconvinced about its advantage. In contrast, the Teacher-Librarian's urgency to purchase new materials once

she was presented with an established listing of recommended ones indicates the impact of *official* information on the process of evaluation for improved teaching.

If there is a need for more official information regarding sex-roles, and a resetting of school priorities, there is certainly no lack of less formal pressures to maintain the status quo. The perception of the teachers in the group, that the parents have differing expectations of the school for their children according to their sex, was supported by hard experience. Consider the following:

- "...who are the people who are upset all the time?...the fathers, because they want their sons to be able to earn a living..."
- "...if the girls aren't doing well, they don't mind..."
- "...if my boys aren't doing well, it's trouble...we have more complaints about boys, they want their boys to do well..."
- "...I had a father who said, 'If you fail him, you will cost him \$35,000...you're taking one year of his life away from a job.'..."
- "...I had a girl who was not achieving well and her father said, 'We might get the problem solved, she might grow up to marry a millionaire.'..."

The point is that teachers are required to nurture good relationships with the parents in the school community. This is part of our professional work. Those of us who are attempting to undermine sex divisions in our classrooms may well be challenging established value systems in our community. My experience with the problem of sexist language in a young girl's science project illustrated this to me clearly. There is nothing wrong with that of course, but wise teachers who need their jobs do well to check out the system for a safety net. Perhaps in forming an official committee, we were doing just that.

Conclusions

By engaging teachers in the process of reflecting on new ideas, establishing interventions, and evaluating outcomes by the same criteria we regularly use for reporting achievement, action research provides the opportunity for extending the understanding of the school's role in sex stereotyping beyond the traditional emphasis on the teacher's personal values and the interactions in her classroom. For the teacher's role is a complex one. Developing a sensitivity to it requires moving beyond the teacher's practices, as they appear to classroom observers,

and beyond our values and attitudes, as we might express them on a questionnaire. for example. to find the features of the school environment which seem. to us. to be relevant for our work. It requires, for instance, an understanding of how we seek the information which we use to guide our work, how it is selected and presented to us, and how we make sense of it for ourselves. It requires an understanding of the demands that are made on us for curriculum objectives. for good relationships with our community, for quiet, tidy, and orderly classrooms. To understand the complexity of the teacher's role is to develop a sensitivity to our values, to our confusion about them, to our reluctance to challenge generally accepted notions in the face of threats to our professional credibility. It is to have a sense of our distress when a child charges, "That's not fair." When researchers can achieve this kind of sensitivity, they can begin to fully appreciate the ingredients which go together to create and maintain sex stereotypes. To be sure, the ingredients may vary from school to school. but when it is considered that few other schools have "Gender Issues" committees, and that our school now has a new one, then researchers can begin to grasp the possibilities for action research in schools.

When I initiated this project as an action research enterprise, it was because of a need to find an approach which would focus on changing teacher's practices, while directing attention to the social and material conditions which shape our work. Feminist research in schools must do both, I think. For teachers need to be brought into the fold. We need to be introduced to new ideas in an atmosphere of equality and collaboration, encouraged to express our own point of view, and offered the opportunity to participate in the feminist vision of social change, in ways which see us, not as part of the problem, but as part of a new solution.

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