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# Sexism in Special Education

Patricia H. Gillespie and Albert H. Fink

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The Woman's Movement in the 1960's . . . and now the 70's . . . has had an impressive impact upon the thought patterns and practices of American society. Woman is successfully denying 'neo-feudal' concepts of her relationships to men, to children, to institutions. She is invalidating the social contract that would bind her to second-best. Woman is reshaping the concept of woman as it is held by others and is herself viewing womanhood from a new perspective, with redefined truths, revised psychology and with an impetus and effect that goes beyond mere faddism. While for some observers, friends and foe alike, the results appear mainly symbolic, there can be little doubt that real advances have been made. Increasingly, women are making inroads into traditional male work domains. They are demanding and receiving parity in economic opportunity and reward. Advances have not been confined to the marketplace, however, but have embraced the entire structure of relationships within society: marriage and the family, law and the citizen are also acquiring new definitions and practices.

The educational establishment is now reflecting the concerns of womanhood. Grudgingly, and even painfully, it seems to some, the large and complicated system of formal education acknowledges the existence of practices which are sexist both in conception and operation. At one level this sexism is directed, at many levels of awareness, toward the functionaries of the system. The economic oppression of teachers, who are mostly female, is an obvious expression of the phenomenon. Another benchmark is the limited career development opportunities available to women as educational managers and academics.

At yet another level, not the less dangerous for being more subtle, is the sexism directed toward the children and youth in its charge. It is this manifestation of sexism, the concepts and beliefs, the attitudes and practices about and toward children that result in sex-role stereotyping and

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discrimination, that is our primary concern and the major subject of this analysis.

Within education's mainstream, awareness of this state of affairs is now very much at the conscious level. Curricula, educational materials and programming are on an increased scale under internal and external scrutiny for evidence of sex bias. This activity is certainly a response to social consciousness; it also reflects the development of federal laws and regulations, as for example Title IX of Educational Amendments of 1972 (Higher Education Act), which have been established to assist in the elimination of sex discrimination in educational institutions.

Although there are at present many reports of sex-role stereotyping and sex discrimination in regular education, its influence upon special education and the exact nature of the phenomenon as it exists there has received scant attention. This is to some degree surprising since stereotyping, labeling, problems of categorization and classification have been the concern of special educators for many years. Within the field serious questions have been raised about the value of differential services based upon labeling practices and considerable evidence and opinion have been presented to suggest caution in labeling and classification by type of handicap as a basis for intervention. The presumed homogeneity of groups placed on that basis has simply not been supported by the learning styles, interest and gains achieved by those who have been so placed (Smith, 1968; Balow and Reynolds, 1972).

The trend in the field of special education is clearly toward newer formulations of the exceptional child and re-evaluations of the meaning of handicapping conditions (Reynolds, 1971; Quay, 1973). These developments are to be applauded. It is, however, our contention that the negative categorization phenomenon is not dealt with solely by the removal of traditional classifications of children as emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, mentally retarded, etc. The *sex label* remains, generally unrecognized for what it is. The designation of sex in our field does not have a neutral impact upon the recipient. It is a pejorative label, as damning a classification as those others which have been the primary targets of our concern, our anger and frustration. The identification of exceptional children as either male or female, our analysis will show, results in arbitrary practice, discriminating judgments and intervention decisions which limit the opportunities for personal and vocational development of those children and youth selected for special education assistance and is thus a counterweight to those efforts.

### *Curriculum and the Sexist Bias*

Curricula for special classes and in particular those for the retarded have for years been a major topic of study by educators. A multiplicity of texts, books, journals and curriculum guides has been generated which cover every aspect of teaching the retarded. Several trends may be noted in the curricula which have been developed over the past 30 years. One emphasis has been on the development of social adjustment and independent living skills

(Kirk and Johnson, 1951; Dunn, 1963; Goldstein and Seigle, 1958). This concentration on social skills is based, in part, on the assumption that vocational or post-school adjustment of the retarded is dependent upon adequate social adjustment (Dunn, 1963; Jordon, 1972).

Another trend relates to the utilization of the unit plan of teaching (Ingram, 1935). In such an organization plan “units of work or centers of interest dominate the activities of the children in the classroom” (Kirk and Johnson, 1951, p. 93). Most often, the tool subjects are taught through units of work that arise from interests of the children or social living topics, such as the home. Curriculum guides that suggest specific activities at all levels for the development of social adjustment skills, as well as topics for units of work, are published in order to aid the special class teacher in the formation of his or her program.

With the focus of special curricula on social living and on the unit approach rather than on academic skills *per se*, activities for such programs possess a high probability of fostering the teaching of sex roles one must play in order to adjust “properly” in our society. For example, a unit of the home developed by Werner (1933) and cited by Kirk and Johnson (1951) suggests activities for building a playhouse— the girls arranging their rooms to look prettier and the boys building handy shelves for their mothers. In the same chapter Kirk and Johnson present a unit on the home for secondary students which lists learning experiences for girls such as making recipe boxes, and preparing hot dishes while the boys learn such skills as repairing kitchen appliances and reading directions on job sheets. The authors also present a curriculum plan for a secondary special class which includes wood working for the boys and homemaking (sewing, cooking, and related activities) for the girls.

Recent curriculum guides and ones that are studied in teaching training programs do not seem to have any apparent mutability in the area of sex role stereotyping. As an illustration, the Curriculum Guide for Teachers of the Educable Mentally Handicapped: The Illinois Plan for Special Education of Exceptional Children (Goldstein and Seigle, 1958) differentiates by sex: girls are “to plan their own rooms at home and make curtains” (Goldstein and Seigle, 1958, p. 56), and boys are to make simple pieces of furniture. The suggested schedule for advanced classes includes athletics for boys and sewing and cooking for the girls. In addition, the unit on Occupational Adequacy suggests as a motivating activity a sewing project for the girls and a woodworking for the boys. The advanced program presented by Capobianco and Jacoby (1966) also dichotomizes vocational training according to sex.

But it is not only curriculum guides which reflect the traditional sex roles; a majority of the materials that are used in instruction do so too. For instance, recent studies of basic readers (Women and Words and Images, 1972; Frasher and Walker, 1972; Zimet, 1970; Blom, Waite, Zimet and Edge, 1972; U’Ren, 1971; Saario, Jacklin, and Tittle, 1973)

social studies texts (Decrow, 1972) and math texts (Levy and Stacey, 1973) have found sex-role stereotyping to be prevalent. These studies show that in the texts used by children in the elementary and secondary schools, women have been cast predominantly in the traditional role of mother and housewife; little girls are portrayed as mother's helpers and are seen standing on the sidelines of all the action; most action-filled stories are about boys; and biographies are seldom written about accomplished women.

Special educators have developed their own materials in addition to adopting and adapting developmental materials and programs. According to Lilly and Kellecher (1971) one of the most well known programs, at least in the area served by the Northwest Regional Special Education Instructional Materials Center, is the Peabody Language Development Kits (PLDK), (Dunn, Horton, and Smith, 1968; Dunn and Smith, 1965, 1966, 1967). This program contains much sex-role stereotyping. In Level #1 twenty-three occupations are illustrated on large stimulus cards, which are presented to the children in a variety of situations throughout the kit. Of these twenty-three occupations, only four are occupied by women. These are storeclerk, nurse, teacher, and playground attendant. Professionals such as physicians, dentists, chemists, although pictured in some instances as blacks, are exclusively men. In Level #2 sixty-two occupations are illustrated. Ten of these are pictured as women: maid, beautician, laundry worker, waitress, secretary, ballerina, nurse, teacher, dressmaker, and librarian.

Other instances of sex-role stereotyping occur throughout all levels. In describing the family in Level #1 (Lesson #9, p. 13-14) the brother is depicted as "so strong and tall" and the sister as "so pretty and small." In a poem used for this lesson, mother sweeps the floor, brother mows the lawn and sister rocks her doll. Lesson #129, Level #1 is a conversation of the following:

What things do girls do that boys seldom or never do?  
What things do boys do that girls seldom or never do?  
What things do girls say that boys don't say very much?  
What things do boys say that girls don't say very much?  
(p. 174).

Other programs in the kit or script form include developing Understanding of Self and Others (DUSO) (Dinkmeyer, 1970), a program used for the development of social skills, includes lessons dealing with explicit family roles (mother/father) and roles for boys and girls. Similar presentations are part of the Methods in Human Development (Bessell and Palomares, 1970).

#### *Vocational Training: Programming for Economic Discrimination*

While curriculum for regular elementary children provides exposure to adult work, by means of teaching units such as "Community Helper," a concern for occupations *per se* is not paramount in the earliest grades.

Among special educators, however, there is a different emphasis, a suggestion that prevocational training begins early in the child's stages of development and education and continues with increasing intensity and focus through the grades. Given the widely held assumption that social adjustment is an important objective of curriculum for the retarded, attention to vocational matters is a logical extension. Thus curriculum guides for the retarded tend to incorporate pre-vocational training which intensifies as the retarded child grows older. During adolescence, occupational training most often reflects traditional patterns of employment for males and females. Because it is assumed that most retarded females will become housewives (Dunn, 1964), choices for vocational training for females are limited. White females receive training in housekeeping or domestic services; males acquire skills in carpentry, construction work, auto service, etc.

To aid in the selection of the most "appropriate occupations" for individuals placed in special programs, inventories of vocational interests and aptitudes have been developed specifically for the educable retarded. The Vocational Interest and Sophistication Assessment (VISA) inventory (Parnicky, Kahn, and Burdett, 1968) and The Reading-Free Vocational Interest Inventory (Becker, 1971) are examples. Both of these inventories are categorized according to sex. In the VISA the following categories are included:

Males: Farms, grounds, food services, garage, industry, maintenance.

Females: Business/clerical, food service, housekeeping, laundry/sewing.

In the Reading-Free Inventory the categories are as follows:

Males: (1) Automotive (auto), (2) Building trades, (3) Clerical, (4) Animal care, (5) Food service, (6) Patient care, (7) Horticulture, (8) Janitorial, (9) Personal services, (10) Laundry service and (11) Materials handling.

Females: (1) Laundry service, (2) Light industrial, (3) Clerical (4) Personal service, (5) Food service, (6) Patient care, (7) Horticulture, and (8) Housekeeping.

By containing traditional occupational roles for men and women, such inventories do a disservice to both groups by permitting less freedom of occupational choice. Females are doubly penalized since the female roles typically provide for lesser economic return. (Frazier and Sadler, 1973).

Special educators (specifically those who receive federal funds) who engaged in programming which guide an individual's occupational goals and training according to sex may find themselves in a dilemma since the establishment of federal laws and regulations that prohibit sex discrimination in educational institutions supported by federal funds. Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 (Higher Education Act) states that:

no person. . .shall on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. . .(Association of American Colleges, p. 3)

A close parallel is found in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964). This act prohibits the hiring, promoting, and firing according to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Both of these federal acts have far reaching implications for pre-vocational and vocational training of retarded males and females. Although it is generally recognized by educators and employers that there are some occupations or professions that the retarded cannot perform as successfully as normal individuals, there can no longer be restrictions on a person's choice of occupation based upon sex alone.

#### *Male-Female Ratio in Special Education*

The very high ratio of boys to girls in special programs is one of the more interesting phenomena in special education. Farber (1968) notes for example:

Prevalance studies find more mentally retarded boys than girls. This finding occurs regardless of time or place (p. 72).

Mercer (1973), in her study of retardation in Riverside, California, found significantly more males than females on the clinical case register than in the population of the community. The preponderance of males over females occurs also among the learning disabled (Money, 1966; Shedd, 1968) and in the emotionally disturbed (Fink, 1970; Morse, Cutler and Fink, 1968).

A partial explanation for this may lie in sex-linked genetic traits, especially in lower levels of intellectual retardation (Farber, 1968) or in the syndrome "dyslexia" (Hallgren, 1959; Hermann, 1950). The classification and placement of educable mentally retarded and emotionally handicapped children may also be influenced heavily by the perceived sex role of the child. This issue has been alluded to by a number of investigators. Farber (1968) for example considers the sex of the child as one of the more important determining characteristics of parents' reactions to a retarded child. Farber cites the works of Sarason and Gladwin, (1958) who suggest that because boys have more problems in communication skills and are more aggressive, this may lead to more problems in deportment and academic skills. The aggressiveness of males could result in deportment problems only because the teacher does not approve of such behaviors. Some studies indicate that teachers give greater approval to girls and greater disapproval to boys (Meyer and Thompson, 1963) and that boys are the recipients of more control measures and harsh and angry responses from teachers than girls for the equivalent misconduct (Jackson and Lahaderne, 1971).

The cultural expectations for males and females also may influence special class placement. Mercer notes:

Could it be that society is able to tolerate a greater amount of intellectual subnormality in a woman than in a man? If only the most visibly subnormal females are referred and labeled, this factor could account for our finding that labeled females have

lower IQ test scores than labeled males (Mercer, 1973, p. 72).

### *Conclusions*

Even as cursory and selective a review as this suggests that in curriculum, in vocational training, and in special class placement sex bias exists with evidence that this is merely the “tip of the iceberg.”

The implications for this are far-reaching: all activities within the realm of special education and services may need re-examination.

Some of the more salient issues are the influence of sex bias in the following areas: (1) the identification process at the regular classroom level; (2) evaluation and diagnosis of exceptionality vis a vis instruments of diagnosis, i.e., psychological tests, educational tests, observation techniques, and interview strategies; (3) special class placement; (4) and counseling of exceptional individuals and their families by community agencies and professionals.

If in all of these areas the unexamined assumption is that the sex of the individual should be a determining factor. This assumption places in jeopardy the civil rights of countless numbers of individuals designated as exceptional.

If that is so, it is the responsibility of all those engaged in educational process to confront attitudes which make more difficult acknowledgement of the problem. This may be best accomplished through a vigorous appraisal of the myriad activities in education which advance a devastating process of sexual and thus personal discrimination.



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