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Sex Bias in Primary Social Studies Textbooks

RICHARD W. O'DONNELL*

FEMININE activism is becoming increasingly evident in today's news media as women attempt to change their stereotyped, traditional roles of wife-mother-secretary-teacher or nurse. Individual complaints, backed by militant feminist organizations, have resulted in newspapers' listing employment opportunities with no reference to sex; and in litigation against industries, unions, educational institutions, and religious institutions. When salaries of faculty members were made public information in a student newspaper this year, many female faculty members in one major university expressed anger that the salaries revealed alleged discrimination against females of equal qualifications and rank as males.

To members of the women's liberation movement, discrimination by sex is equal to

racial discrimination, resulting in psychological, social, educational, and economic harm. Various organizations, for example, National Organization for Women (NOW), Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), and Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCHES), have provided sufficient clout that approximately one-fourth of the 12,000 charges of discrimination in employment brought before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission each year involve discrimination because of sex.¹

Juxtaposed with action for women's

¹ Helen B. Shaffer, "Status of Women," *Editorial Research Reports* 2 (5): 568; August 1970.

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liberation made known by the news media is a concern in professional educational literature for occupational preparation,² information on tomorrow's jobs,³ career guidance counseling programs,⁴ and references to the National Committee on Employment of Youth.⁵

Among the various subject areas in the elementary curricula in our country, social studies uniquely and consistently lists such objectives as: "... helping young people grow in their understanding of and sensitivity to the physical and social forces at work around them in order that they may shape their lives in harmony with those forces"⁶; "... to enable them to lead productive, happy lives..."⁷; "... to help pupils accept change and deal with it thoughtfully and intelligently."⁸ Two of the goals listed

² Walter N. Gantt. "Occupational Preparation in the Elementary School." *Educational Leadership* 28 (4): 359; January 1971.

³ "Tomorrow's Jobs." *Today's Education* 61 (1): 44; January 1972.

⁴ "Exploring the World of Work." H. Wilson Corporation, 555 West Tuft Drive, South Holland, Illinois 60473.

⁵ *National Committee on Employment of Youth*. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969.

⁶ John Jarolimek. *Social Studies in Elementary Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971. p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

by the Civic Education Project team for effective citizens were: "... readiness for economic life; and compassion and sensitivity for the needs, feelings, and aspirations of other human beings. . . ."⁹

At the 66th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 30-September 2, 1971, in-depth study and reports were presented on "Sex Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children." Among the conclusions reached was that by the time children are four, they realize the primary feminine role is house-keeping, while the primary masculine role is wage-earning.¹⁰ Pictures in books play an important role in early sex-role socialization and provide children with role models of what they will like to be when they grow up.

In presenting the concept of role expectancy behavior, Jarolimek, a leading elementary social studies educator, indicates it is based on a set of internalized values, beliefs, ideals, and attitudes the individual develops through the years.¹¹ He further believes social studies education has a vital role in having young pupils encounter ideal-

⁹ Donald W. Robinson et al. *Promising Practices in Civic Education*. Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1967. pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ Lenore Weitzman et al. "Sex Role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children." A paper prepared for presentation at the 66th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, September 2, 1971. p. 1.

¹¹ Jarolimek, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

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Textbooks		1. Social Sciences Concepts & Values, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970	2. Your School & Neighborhood, Ginn & Co., 1966	3. People & Their Social Actions, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967	4. People & Their Actions, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967	5. Communities & Their Needs, Silver Burdett, 1969	6. Living as School Friends, The Macmillan Co., 1969	Total 6
<i>Dominant/Central Figure</i>								
Male	Non-Animated	10	4	3	1	5	2	25
	Animated	145	83	105	120	40	36	529
Female	Non-Animated	2	0	0	2	3	0	7
	Animated	51	28	18	49	5	44	195
<i>No Central Figure</i>								
Male	Active	32	37	39	13	47	21	189
	Passive	1	0	0	0	5	0	6
Female	Active	24	7	4	2	15	7	59
	Passive	0	0	0	0	4	0	4
<i>Not Applicable</i>		104	61	111	103	100	47	526
<i>Occupations (Adult Depiction)</i>								
Male		59	40	83	49	41	21	293 (83%)
Female		13	13	10	7	8	9	60 (17%)

Figure 1. An Examination of Sex Bias in Primary Social Studies Textbooks

ized types—persons who illustrate by their way of life the values society rewards and likes to see in its citizens.¹² Thus, role models not only present children with future images of themselves, but also influence their goals and aspirations.

This study was undertaken to see if pictures in primary social studies textbooks (the elementary subject preparing citizens for effective lives in a democracy) are sexually discriminating in role distinctions (the concern of the American Sociological Association).

Procedure

Books selected for this study came from the 1971-72 approved textbook list of a large suburban school district near the nation's capital. This district has over one hundred elementary schools and has been known in educational literature as a progressive, prestigious school system. Only books listed as "basic texts" were used because the approved textbook manual stated they provide the best coverage for the current curriculum. Basic social studies texts for grades 1 and 2 were examined.

¹² *Ibid.*

For purposes of this study, each picture was examined in the following categories as defined.

A. *Dominant or Central Figure.* The person in the picture who commands the viewer's attention by size, role, relative location, action, is the focus of the attention of others in the picture; or is the only person in the picture.

1. Male

a. Non-animated—person showed no active, lively expression in his facial or body gestures or no active role was evident.

b. Animated—person showed action, lively expression in his facial or body gestures, or was in an active role.

2. Female

a. Non-animated—person showed no active, lively expression in her facial or body gestures or no active role was evident.

b. Animated—person showed action, lively expression in her facial or body gestures, or was in an active role.

B. *No Central Figure.* No person met the criteria for dominant or central figure.

1. Male

a. Active—person(s) active, moving physically, or engaging in a task requiring skill or intellectual alertness.

b. Passive—person(s) not active, not moving physically, not engaging in a task requiring skill or intellectual alertness.

2. Female

a. Active—person(s) active, moving physically, or engaging in a task requiring skill or intellectual alertness.

b. Passive—person(s) not active, not moving physically, not engaging in a task requiring skill or intellectual alertness.

C. *Not Applicable*. No person(s) met the criteria for: dominant figure, no central figure; person(s) not discernibly male-female-active-passive, or there were no people in the picture.

D. *Occupations*. Those roles as depicted by adult role-models as best described by the writer.

Because judgment was involved in interpreting the pictures for each category, the writer enlisted the help of two faculty members and a dozen graduate students in classifying randomly selected pictures from several of the texts using the categories as defined herein.

From the 40 randomly selected pictures used, total agreement was attained in all but four. It is assumed that because of a 90 percent agreement reached with faculty members and graduate students in a categorization check, the findings of the study are reliable.

As shown in Figure 1, there was an imbalance in all categories of pictures selected for this study. In the Central Figure category, 73 percent of the pictures containing a central figure depicted males, and 27 percent females. Where there was no

central figure, 76 percent of the pictures depicted males in active or passive roles, while females were depicted as active or passive in 24 percent. In the categories of Central Figure and No Central Figure, the findings in the world of primary social studies texts selected, boys are shown active approximately three times as often as girls.

The findings in occupations (shown in Figure 2) depicted males in 83 percent of the occupations and females in 17 percent. In their 17 percent, service occupations such as housewife, nurse, secretary, teacher, waitress, librarian, and stewardess predominated to reinforce the traditional patterns of female success. Following this pattern, depictions of active girls dealt with service activities at home directed toward pleasing and helping their mothers, fathers, and brothers. Males were never depicted in domestic duties of child care, dishwashing, or home cooking.

In highly paid and prestigious occupations there were 72 males and one female. Occupations requiring intellectual capabilities, athletic ability, mechanical skills, political acumen, strength, bravery, and administrative leadership were held by men. In no picture was there a female principal, physician, scientist, musician, politician, member of the clergy, judge, space program technician, or professional athlete. Though the real distribution in the professions is inequitable, the adult models presented in this study were even worse.

Textbooks	1.		2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		Total Per Occupation	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
School principal	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	6	0
Physician	5	0	0	0	6	0	1	0	1	0	3	0	16	0
Scientist	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	0
Professional entertainer	1	0	0	0	2	1	2	0	3	0	0	0	8	1
Musician	0	0	0	0	5	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	7	0
Politician	1	0	3	0	5	0	3	0	1	0	1	0	14	0
Clergy	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	4	0
Judge	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Space program technician	1	0	0	0	5	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	8	0
Professional athlete	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	4	0
Total per book	11	0	7	0	28	1	12	0	6	0	8	0		
GRAND TOTAL													72	1

Figure 2. Highly Paid or Prestigious Occupations

Conclusions

The publishing industry has shown, in recent years, its rapid inclusion of minority group members in pictures and stories. Texts selected for this study were not necessarily the most recent edition of the publishers included and may not be representative of future emphasis and values. The school district chosen may have been revising the social studies curriculum and changing the approved textbook list for the school year 1972-1973 at the time of this study. However, these are the approved texts which were being used to best provide coverage for the district's current curriculum.

Considering the movement for women's rights, which may herald considerable change in our future life style, the publishing indus-

try and social studies educators must present images to elementary students in their formative years that will help them fulfill their human potential and truly prepare for effective citizenship in our democracy.

A most important criterion in evaluating elementary social studies textbooks is what effect they may have on children.¹³ Using textbooks that are biased presents limited role models to female students which could affect their goals and aspirations. Policies and standards used in the evaluation and selection of primary social studies textbooks should be reviewed and revised to eliminate this bias. □

¹³ Arthur S. Nicholas and Anna Ochoa. "Evaluating Textbooks for Elementary Social Studies: Criteria for the Seventies." *Social Education* 35 (3): 290; March 1971.

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