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Positive Peer Culture: Women's Issues and Youth Development

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Un professeur explique une nouvelle méthode pour aider les adolescents lorsqu'ils ont des problèmes d'identification. Elle les réunit et les laisse s'exprimer entre eux. Cette approche non-sexiste donne aux filles l'occasion de devenir indépendantes.

A recent issue of *CWS/cf* devoted

to "Woman, Nation Builder" (Vol. 3, No. 1) contained an article "Secretaries are Nation Builders Too" which expressed a teacher's concern for her students and described her efforts to prepare them for the realities of the future. As a teacher, I share the author's concern, identify with her soul-searching, and applaud her efforts. Audrey Ellis's contact with

adolescent women is within the context of business education. Her perception of students' needs and her efforts to meet them are, therefore, informed by "working-women's issues": career preparation, discrimination in the workplace, sexual harassment, conflict resolution, and assertiveness training. What she is really doing — she proclaims — is fostering among her students a positive self-image and a belief in the value of women's skills and abilities, as well as an awareness of the need for their accepting responsibility for their future well-being. Business education is her vehicle.

Ellis's analysis of her students' needs and how to respond to them indicates the relationship between the school and society: society's ills

converge in the schools. By responding to them, the school can change and shape society.

Current research is calling more and more for this to happen. For example, a recent report by Marlies Suderman, *Sex Differences in High School Course Choice and Achievement: Cause for Concern?* (Research Centre, Ottawa Board of Education, 1979) found that, because of sex-role stereotyping, girls are limiting their future options (by their choice of courses and achievements) to a greater degree than boys while in high school. The report concluded that "many components of the school system have to be changed: teacher and administration awareness of the problem, choice of curriculum materials, classroom practices, guidance practices, and other components."

Ellis's experience is a fine example of what the classroom teacher can and should be doing. In striving to help her students become more assertive, more career-oriented, more aware of discrimination in the workplace and better equipped to deal with the economic realities of the future, she is meeting the need for change head-on.

But what of the "other components"? The school impinges on the life of its students beyond the classroom and many opportunities exist there for the system to respond to the challenges facing it today.

My contact with adolescent women occurs within two different contexts, the classroom and a Positive Peer Culture (PPC) youth-development program. Originated by Harry Vorrath, PPC is a system for developing positive youth sub-cultures. It has achieved wide-spread success in a range of settings across the United States and more recently in Canada. Since my perception of the needs of adolescents and my aims for their development are very much the same as those of Ellis, I suggest that the PPC program provides an example of what the schools can do to prepare young people for the future.

Peer influence has long been recognized as a powerful force among young people. Positive Peer Culture is a systematic approach to developing and utilizing the poten-

tial of this force. Indigenous student leaders — negative and positive, male and female — are identified and taught to use their leadership skills to help themselves, their fellow students, their school, and its community.

One mechanism the PPC uses is the group meeting. It is here that the student leaders (in groups of eight or nine) receive instruction in problem identification, problem-solving techniques, and values clarification. Here the student leaders work out their own problems and also meet with students who are not group members to help them. Present at the meetings is an adult group leader whose job it is to teach, to facilitate, and to help keep the discussion on track.

Beyond the group meetings the mechanisms are role-modelling and involvement. The student leaders interact with their peers in such a way as to teach the values of caring, self-help, and mutual responsibility; they challenge peers whose behaviour hurts themselves and

PPC does not have a feminist orientation *per se*. The problems and issues addressed by the students are adolescence as a life-stage, class and cultural differences, and social change. The belief that young people can and should be involved in bringing about positive change in their environment underlies the model. It is a youth-development program in a broad sense.

Within this broad focus, opportunities to address women's issues occur daily. Some of the attitudes and behaviour exhibited by many of the girls stem from sex-role stereotyping. Some of the implications of this for my students follow.

The student who is skipping classes or who is missing a lot of school is said to have an "attendance problem"; the student who is failing as a result of lack of application is seen as having a "poor attitude" or "poor study skills." What is often the case, however, is that the young woman has no future goals beyond a vague plan to

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others; they involve other students who are in a position to help with a particular problem; they work with teachers and non-group members on projects that meet the special needs of the school and its local area.

Positive Peer Culture is not a treatment program. It is the teaching of the values and skills required in being a good friend, parent, neighbour, and responsible adult. The role of the adults is to teach students to accept and handle responsibility. By solving their own problems and by helping others, the student leaders are discovering and building positive self-concepts and enabling their peers to do the same.

get a short-term job, get married, and have a family. School is not seen as relevant to this expectation, a traditional, social prescription for girls.

Boy-girl relationships are also an indication of the way many girls perceive themselves. Sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds have told me, "He's the boss" or "He's my life"; they centre their lives around their boyfriends' plans and goals. They view themselves as the necessarily dependent partner in a relationship.

The identification and selection of female students for leadership in the group has shown that girls are not as readily perceived as leaders as are the boys. Nor do girls as

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readily perceive themselves as leaders. Three years ago, when the PPC program was first established, there were twice as many male leadership groups as female. (This year, there are an equal number of each.) My experiences with in-group training reinforce this fact. The girls readily accept the idea of caring — a "feminine" ideal — but some have difficulty developing the skill to confront, to challenge, to initiate, to decide independently, and to take responsibility for decisions. Initially, they tend more to be soothers or to look at others to solve or control a situation.

These examples of the cumulative effects on female students of societo-cultural influences show a lack of awareness of alternatives to the traditional view of a woman's place. The present and future costs, to such girls, in personal vulnerability and unfulfilled personal development of living out that traditional view need not be listed here. Perhaps the greatest price is the elimination of choice from their lives if the challenge to change is not met.

Beyond affording the opportunity to address women's issues, PPC is, in concept and operation, non-sexist. Both girls and boys are given equal responsibility as leaders. The groups are segregated for the practical reason that both sexes more easily approach peers of the same gender with certain concerns. This does not prevent a boy from being referred to a girls' group and vice-versa.

Outside of group meetings, the student leaders work together as equals. They hold each other accountable, support each other's commitment, co-operate in organiz-

ing and running special school and community projects. As leaders, they are new role models to their peers: girls are seen to be capable and independent in non-traditional areas; boys are seen to be caregivers. These meetings help to overcome the problems related to sex-role stereotyping that hinder the development of both boys and girls.

As mentioned earlier, the school system can help change and shape society in the way it performs its task of developing today's youth into tomorrow's adults. In meeting this challenge, many methods must be brought to bear, both inside and outside the classroom. Ellis's classroom and the PPC program are only two examples of how this can be done.

What each of these approaches does right is to focus on individual development and self-help, that is, to utilize the dynamics of a participatory community. Ellis established a participatory community in her classroom by helping her students define and prepare themselves as potential working women. The key to the participatory-community concept is the opportunity it affords for self-maximization. The benefits accrue not only to the individual involved but, in the end, to society.

Adolescence is (none too soon) a time for students — male and female — to be charged with responsibility for themselves and their peers as well as with a sense of their own importance in the total scheme of things. Whatever one's frame of reference, be it women's issues or education (can the two be separated?), the future lies with today's youth. What we do with them determines our collective future.

bleus de mine

Ailleurs les écrits sèment.

Que temps se perd à vivre
de peu
Que tant se perd!

Alors je crie aussi cette fois
et hurle de tout silence
les mo(r)ts m'attendent
et font
du bruit de leur gage.

Sur la neige fondue à penie
coulée
sous la neige dorée le deuil
de glace vivante me tiendrais
et debout
de glace moulée.

Jamais plus de pas (ni plus
de marche)
jamais d'été au manque
et tant que dure l'état
tant que pleure
viendront les mots
et couleurs d'ombres.

De livres à l'un les phrases
pèlent.

Aux lettres ma bouche
et bleus de mine
D'amour les sangs coulent
et tracent de langue
ce mot uni.

Que sache cela et retienne!
J'écrirai comme pierre qui
roule.

Anne-Marie Alonzo