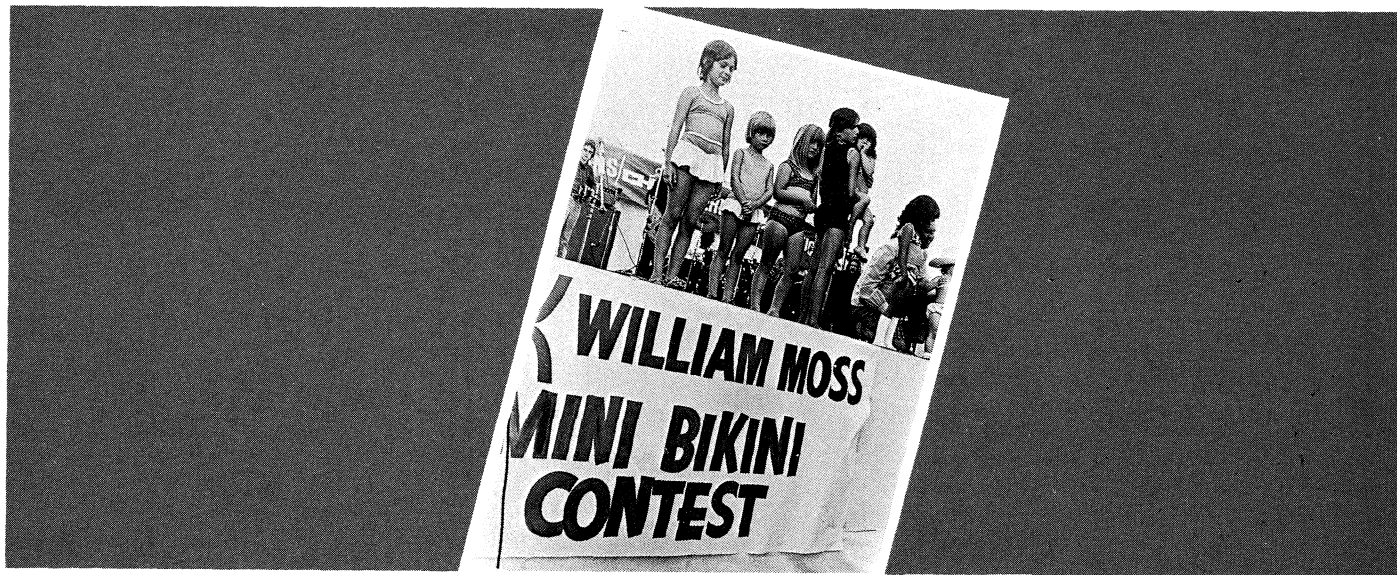


The Effect of Women's Studies in the Schools ~one Perspective

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Les études de la femme ont peut-être leur place dans la salle de classe, mais est-ce qu'il y a une porte qui s'ouvre sur les couloirs, les salons d'étudiants et de professeurs, les lieux de réunion?

It is with a certain sense of satisfaction and some excitement that those of us who have long been interested and involved in women's studies have viewed the increasing attention being paid to the many aspects of the women's studies field. The Ontario Ministry of Education has just recently published a resource guide, *Sex-Role Stereotyping and Women's Studies*, for Grades K to 13, and are planning a conference in September 1978 to aid teachers in implementation of the units provided in the guide.

Conferences on women's studies get larger and larger in an attempt to accommodate the ever-increasing number of teachers interested in the subject and the number of courses (or course units) on women. Universities, colleges, and boards of education have women's studies departments. All of which suggests that women's studies deserve and have attained high credibility.

My concern, however, is that while all this activity in the area of women's studies is going on, outside the immediate classroom or beyond the latest policy statement the attitudes of most officials, teachers, and students have changed very little. What is being learned and taught in the classroom and what is being passed in the board room is not being translated into everyday life.

In 1975 the Ontario Ministry of Education sent a booklet, *Changing Roles in a Changing World; a Resource Guide Focusing on the Female Student*, to all teachers under its jurisdiction.

The purpose of this publication was to awaken teachers to the unconscious reinforcement of stereotypes. Suggestions on how to change behaviour were included. Yet, just over a year later, the same Ministry's *Circular HS 1* casually cautioned in the opening paragraphs that 'he', of course, also meant 'she'. This statement was obviously intended to solve the whole problem of language very neatly. Throughout the body of the publication reference to every teacher and student remained as 'he'.

The Ministry has not been alone in using this technique to avoid having documents labelled sexist, but as feminists know, this practice is simply not satisfactory; the noble intentions of an introduction are quickly forgotten as one reads on. Policy statements on the need to emphasize the equality of the sexes must be put into effect throughout all communications if the message is to have the desired impact. The fact that such statements have little effect in the general workings of the schools is constantly and depressingly evident.

Consider a case in point. A high school, holding a public-speaking contest, had an assembly so that all staff and students could witness the final round of the contest. Each of the finalists spoke on a prepared subject and gave a brief impromptu speech on a topic selected by the English Department. One assigned was a line from Kipling's 'The Betrothed',

'And a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a Smoke.'

The student finalist could have denied the implication of the quote and spoken on behalf of women, but — and here I feel we see the influence of attitudes still prevalent within the schools — he said rather that, as he was only speaking on women, he wouldn't need the two minutes allotted. The audience laughed gleefully and the student went on to delight them all with similar off-the-cuff comments at the expense of women. None of the audience, male or female, teacher or student, was offended enough to object or leave; the response was one of approval.



The question here is, would this have been the response if in his impromptu speech the student had made derogatory (but intended as humorous) comments about a visible minority group? I think not. An open demonstration of racism is understood to be unacceptable; such is not the case with sexism. You might argue that this is an isolated example and it is not indicative of the general atmosphere in the schools. I wish you were right; all the evidence tells me you are not.

Skits put on in schools, for such good causes as promoting the United Appeal, continue to use the mythical stereotypes of women as the source of humour, and the terms used for women are often derogatory and rude. Cheerleaders continue to be almost invariably pretty young girls in short skirts rather than individuals, male and female, dressed for the weather and selected for their ability to cheer. Signs for school proms continue to urge the *boys* to get busy and invite the girls. Worse still, on one occasion a sign portrayed an older woman, unhappy and unattractive, supposedly a spinster because she did not get invited to the prom when she was young.

Positions of responsibility in the school system continue to be held for the most part by men, and statistics show that the number of women in positions of responsibility is decreasing. The result is that both students and teachers see a woman in authority as the exception. In this time of declining enrolments and decreasing budgets it is not possible to improve the situation significantly by promoting more women to positions of responsibility. The positions themselves are disappearing. But there are numerous situations within the schools where the capabilities of women can be acknowledged.

This is a common example: in many schools, major examinations are written in a large room — a gymnasium or cafeteria — and five or six teachers are assigned to supervise. One teacher must be in charge to instruct the students and oversee the teachers presiding. In most cases that teacher in charge is a man. Yet this would be an ideal place to give, and be seen to give, authority to a woman. In one school, the Vice-Principal responsible for the supervision schedule was asked about his practice of always putting men in charge of the examination room. He confessed it had not been intentional; subconsciously, when someone had to be given authority the Vice-Principal chose a man.

Not all teachers, all students, or all schools are guilty of assigning women secondary status, but enough of them do this

to cause concern. A group of men and women realized that word from the Ministry and statements of policy from the boards of education combined with the efforts of a few teachers was not enough. Two years ago they formed the Women's Liaison Committee with the Toronto Board of Education. Their goal is to improve the status of women in education through committees on employment, curriculum, and consciousness-raising.

Incidents of sexism reported to the Women's Liaison Committee constantly confirm the need for such a group. Students have also made us aware that there is much to be done within the schools. In 1976, a group of Toronto high school students produced a report based on a long and detailed study they had done of sexism in their school. Titled *Is Anybody Out There Listening?*, the work was considered to be such a valid criticism of the attitudes and atmospheres in most of today's schools that the Ontario Status of Women Council recently published it as one of their *About Face* series.

Numerous books have recently been published which detail sexist behaviour and attitudes in the education system and provide recommendations for solving the problem.

This measure of concern does not suggest that the issue is inconsequential. It does not, in fact, suggest at all; it states clearly that sexism is a serious problem within education. If definite steps are not taken to negate sexist attitudes in the school systems in general, all the women's studies courses and all the assignments designed to make students aware of woman's full participation in society will be isolated pockets of knowledge — interesting, even fascinating, but not applicable to the life and attitudes of individual people.

Suggested Reading:

About Face: Is Anybody Out There Listening? Ontario Status of Women Council, Toronto, 1977. And video-tape "Is Anybody Out there Listening?"

Frazier, Nancy. *Sexism in School and Society*. New York, Harper & Row, 1973.

Guttentag, Marcia. *Undoing Sex Stereotypes: Research and Resources for Educators*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1976.

Richardson, Betty. *Sexism in Higher Education*. New York, Seabury Press, 1974.

Stacey, Judith. *And Jill Came Tumbling After: Sexism in American Education*. New York, Dell, 1974.