

Acquisition of Sex-role Stereotypes

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Les Stéréotypes sexuels et l'école secondaire

Il est question ici des stéréotypes sexuels et la part de responsabilité que porte l'école dans leur maintien. L'article décrit un cours qui est maintenant enseigné sur ce sujet ainsi que la stratégie élaborée pour amorcer un changement.

Sex-role stereotypes are consensual beliefs about the different characteristics of men and women. Traditionally, North American society has accepted different sex-role behaviours for men and women as essential to personality development and function. Mental-health professionals from Freud to the early work of Dr Spock have agreed to the positive value of sex-role stereotypes in the socialization process of children into mature, healthy adults.

Recently, however, educators, psychologists, and mental-health practitioners have expressed concern over the detrimental effects of sex-role stereotypes upon the full development of both males and females. Other concerned groups have questioned the effect of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity upon the social, economic, and political life of Canada.

An examination of the content and influence of sex-role stereotypes on individual and collective behaviour has been undertaken during the last decade. These investigations have led to the broad conclusions that characteristics ascribed to men are more positively valued than characteristics ascribed to women. And men and women incorporate both the positive and negative traits of their appropriate stereotypes into their self-concepts.

The positively valued masculine traits form a cluster of related behaviours which include competence, rationality, and assertion; the positively valued feminine traits form a cluster which reflect warmth and expressiveness. Since masculine traits are perceived as more desirable than feminine traits in our society, women tend to have a more negative self-concept than men.

When educational practices reflect social desirability and imitate the male-female roles prevalent in society, then curricula and teacher-student interactions are formulated and carried out in a context that is rich in sex-role bias. For too long the physical and emotional burdens of adjusting to cultural sex-role standards were considered individual concerns. Now the restrictions imposed by rigid conceptions of masculinity and femininity are being re-examined.

Responsibility of the Schools

The learning of adult sex roles is seen primarily as occupation-directed for males and family-directed for females. These sex-role expectations have been pervasive in elementary readers, physical-education facilities, and counselling-resource materials in the schools. These same expectations have been reflected in the structure and administration of Canadian schools where men are principals and women are teachers.

Both women's studies and analysis of sex-roles have been omitted in traditional school courses. To meet the need for new curricula, however, courses are being developed to examine the stereotyping process and sex-role socialization, and to expand the knowledge of the study of women.

With this in mind, such a course has been developed and taught for the past three years by J.W. Godwin, a Social Studies teacher at Burnsvie Junior Secondary School in Delta, British Columbia. It is an interdisciplinary course in sex-role stereotyping that can be incorporated into existing Guidance, English, Social Studies, and related humanities classes at the grade ten, eleven, and twelve levels. The lesson plans are complete and detailed, so that with a minimum of preparation a teacher should be able to implement the course, or parts of it, depending on the objectives and the time available.

Summary of a Course in Sex-Role Stereotypes

In this course students analyse the history and modern development of male and female sex roles and evaluate the usefulness of the traditionally accepted stereotypes of men and women. The course centres on student discussions with the addition of articles, films, videotapes and guest speakers; it provides a variety of learning experiences and creates a structure within which to explore the problems of stereotyping.



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Consciousness-raising exercises which heighten awareness of one's own attitudes and beliefs, role reversal of typical sex-typed behaviours, role play of difficult work- and family-conflict situations, and assertion training for direct, honest communication are included in the course materials. Instructions on how to implement discussion and use the exercises and assignments effectively are provided.

The course consists of twenty lesson plans divided into three units. Unit one promotes an awareness of the process of sex-role stereotyping and the effects of these standards of behaviour on individuals and Canadian society. The effects of media and popular culture on the stereotyping process are highlighted. The material has been selected and created to be particularly relevant to teenagers. Unit two examines the historical development of sex roles. After identifying the socialization process as it exists and tracing the development of sex-role norms, unit three explores future options for men and women in Canadian society.

Alternative life-styles are discussed and information given on vocational realities and opportunities for women. Through discussion, analysis, and evaluation, students become aware of how they choose their values and how these affect their future.

Currently the course is being researched in three British Columbia high schools to determine its effectiveness in changing students' sex-role orientation (masculine, feminine, androgynous). As well changes in their attitudes toward vocational, educational, and intellectual roles of women and their dating, sexual, and marital relationships are analysed. Since the course has been taught for several years, it also will be possible to investigate other long-term effects of a course in sex-role socialization.

Conclusion

Teaching this course in Canadian socialization has proved to be a rewarding worthwhile experience. Students have responded eagerly to the subject-matter and the degree of trust and openness that has been established in the classroom reflects the meaningful and relevant nature of the course material. The exploratory nature and the creation of sex-role standards seems to produce a feeling of warmth and community unique in secondary schools. Most of the teachers and students involved in this course have confirmed the course's effectiveness in changing students' stereotyped attitudes and behaviours.

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