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Gender and curriculum : a case study

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becomes part of a 'common code' which is transmitted by the school organization.

MacDonald (1981a) argues that when a child enters school he/she is challenged by a very specific set of gender relations, or what MacDonald terms a gender code. The school's gender code sets up categories of masculine and feminine which are often similar to those class-based definitions of masculinity and femininity within the family as well as the sexual division of labour. The work of the school is to transmit notions of appropriate behaviours for each sex and this becomes converted into appropriate academic disciplines for different sexes. Thus, it appears to be 'natural' that boys and girls study different disciplines.

It is important at this stage to refer briefly back to the two bodies of theory discussed in this chapter. It is important to note that the evidence of what is presented in school texts and most aspects of the curricula concerning women is the same for both theories. What is different however, is the way in which the evidence is interpreted and explained. Sex-role theory's explanation is based on sex-role stereotypes and the notion that an individual can bring about change

to the situation, for example by education. The political economy approach acknowledges the ways in which women are presented in society but its explanation refers back to the social structure; in other words, it is important to note that changing representations of women will be part of broader structural change.

Thus socialist feminists (see Barrett, 1980) like sex-role theorists have explored notions like 'subject channelling'. Barrett points out that girls are channelled into taking subjects that are related to their future domestic work and these subjects include needlework, cookery, domestic science and housecraft. Boys are channelled to take woodwork, metalwork and technical drawing. Much of the pattern of subject channelling by sex is established in terms of teaching staff; this often results in girls going into arts and social science subjects and boys into science and technology. The teaching profession is also divided by gender and it is divided hierarchically because women are not represented proportionally the same as men in senior positions. Gender codes are being transmitted in schools.

A rigid representation of gender is prevalent in children's textbooks (Davin, 1979) and studies also show that textbooks not only express an ideal of conformity to domesticity for girls (Berlotti, 1975), but that they reveal a pervasive ideology - that of the legitimacy of the status quo (MacDonald, 1981a). But before the importance of the school text is discussed, it will be useful to review the political economy perspective briefly and see whether this theory offers an adequate account of gender inqualities.

In contrast to sex-role theory, political economy theory can be criticized as being too functionalist and mechanistic. It describes systems without accounting for individual experiences within structures. Also, the same criticisms that have been levelled at Althusser can be levelled at socialist feminist perspectives which base their theories on Marxist analyses. Theories of class and class reproduction are not unproblematically transferable to concepts of gender, as has been highlighted in the discussion on the socialist feminist perspective in chapter one (see also Arnot, 1981; Hartmann. 1976; Barrett, 1980).

However the strengths of this perspective are that it enables one to look at social structures and historically changing concepts, as well as theories of gender and ideology. Its treatment of ideology is more thorough and provides a foundation for this particular research on the part played by schools in promoting gender relations as well as specifically how texts reflect gender ideology.

GENDER CODES IN CURRICULA AND TEXTS

Turning to the issue of school texts, a number of researchers have explored the relation between the ways knowledge is selected, structured and transmitted by schools and the principles of social, political and economic control in society (Bernstein, 1977; Bourdieu, 1971a, 1971b; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; and Young, 1971a, 1971b) This research has indicated that schools help define certain groups' knowledge as legitimate, while other knowledge is considered inappropriate as school knowledge (Taxel, 1981). Most of these theorists would agree that educational institutions are active agents of cultural and social reproduction. Many of those doing research on schools and schooling have recognised the importance of the school's part in granting legitimacy to the knowledge of certain groups and the part this plays in granting legitimacy to the

dominance of certain groups and the subordination of others (Williams, 1961). They have sought to demonstrate how certain social groups 'control' knowledge and thus secure a particular ideology.

Young (1971b) argues that socially valued knowledge (which is the knowledge taught in schools) is a means of social control. What is taught is socially determined, because those who are in a position of controlling knowledge determine consciously or unconsciously what enjoys importance in school curricula. Young argues that knowledge can be sub-divided into high and low status knowledge. The latter is knowledge which is non-academic and the former embodies academic disciplines, abstract thought and literacy. Access to these areas of high status knowledge is limited, thus the knowledge becomes successfully controlled. Though Young's work is criticised for a relativist approach to knowledge, it is nonetheless important in terms of the social relations expressed in curricula.

School texts, according to MacDonald (1981a), are characterized by their seemingly untouchable nature. The textbook is important in the educative process because it is regarded as standard;

it is a measure by which the accuracy of something is judged, and in this way it becomes authoritative. School texts present knowledge in a seemingly objective way and purport to be value free. They are also prescribed and are thus used widely with a notion of authority. Schools use selected,(that is, prescribed)texts for the purposes and aims of the syllabi and in this way the curriculum is 'controlled' within the syllabus and the texts prescribed for it.

When discussing gender, it is important to look at the ways in which literature presents women. If the views presented by textbooks are supposedly universal and yet exclude the interests and experiences of women, then the views are limited and restricted, and in line with Young's analysis; there are implications for understanding the processes of social control.

In looking at school texts in terms of gender-coded ideology, three processes can be seen. Firstly, texts can be seen to presume the existence of a sexual division of labour and they also perpetuate different gender characteristics. One way in which gender codes can be seen in textbooks is the type of occupations which women are portrayed as fulfilling - this leads on to the second point. In most cases women are portrayed

in positions which are extensions of domestic work and which are occupations that are low in pay, prestige and skill. Thirdly, gender codes are evident in texts in the way women are 'made invisible' by not being acknowledged of referred to; sometimes women are only acknowledged in relation to men. Each of these will now be discussed fully.

In the school texts studied, women are portrayed as mothers, nurses, teachers, maids and governesses which are traditional and women's occupations. Often women are portrayed as being passive as well as being helpmates and observers of male activities. Research has shown that schools play a vital part in gender differentiation (see also Sadker and Sadker, 1980; Furman, 1980; Birgimah, 1982). Secondly, women are often defined in terms of how they stand in relation to men. Simone de Beauvoir's well known notion of 'the other' is also pertinent here:

> ..... she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other.
>
> (1961:16)

Thus, according to de Beauvoir, women do not acquire status by their own merit. It can probably also be explained for example, in women's marital status and even their social position like being a mayoress or a prime minister's wife; women's interaction with men determines their status in society.

Another interesting aspect to mention is that of omission. Studies of children's literature such as Lobban (1975b) and Weitzman et. al. (1972), have identified the 'invisibility' of women (see Spender, 1982). Sadker and Sadker (1980) have also shown patterns of omission, that is, the absence of women in texts. This point will be specifically highlighted in the following discussion on language.

An important way in which texts contribute towards promoting inequality is language. Language is seen as both problematic and potentially powerful in the development of alternatives or possibilities to political, aesthetic and intellectual traditions which exist (M^{c}Connell-Ginet, 1980). The issue is controversal and serves as a springboard for contentions such as whether or not men have appropriated language.

Language is a form operating in a social and historical context and feminist theorists have argued that it can serve to promote inequality by its use of the generic masculine form (Martyna, 1980; Spender, 1982). Without getting too explicit and involved in the technicalities of the English language, it is sufficient to say that English is supposed to have natural gender. People are classified according to their sex so that sex and gender supposedly correspond 'naturally'. Thus objects are supposed to be labelled on the basis of sex so that everything can be defined as either masculine, feminine or neuter.

The generic masculine however, has been faulted on its inequity in referring to all human beings as males. The term is also regarded as ambiguous as well as exclusive because it omits any female interpretation (Miller and Swift, 1979).

Dale Spender (1980) in her critique of the generic masculine, has noted that one significant factor has been overlooked; there is nothing natural about a woman being referred to as 'he' or 'man'. It is not therefore correct to assert that women are being classified on the basis of sex. If in English sex and gender are meant to correspond linguistically, then it is grammatically incorrect

to refer to a female in masculine terms.

Spender has named this omission of women the "disappearing trick", or the art of 'conjuring' in a language so that women are excluded or made to disappear. She applies a principle of reversal in order to 'make women come back again' and offers examples like, "Adolescents think only of marriage and make-up", and "Australians look good in bikinis".

The use of the male pronoun does lead to confusion and ambiguity in that it renders women invisible and promotes the primacy of man at the expense of woman. It is probably socially and grammatically correct to say: "Man is a social animal", and "Man makes wars", but can the same be said for examples like, "Man devotes about forty hours a week to housework", "Man starts menstruating at the age of about eleven or twelve", and "Man suckles his young"? These examples contradict the success of gender neutrality; the generic masculine functions neither clearly or fairly because girls must learn to apply pronouns (in their specific male ontexts), to themselves.

If therefore, discriminatory language is essentially a concern with discriminating attitudes and behaviours and if this language reflects sexism in society, then it is necessary to go a step further and see in what ways people customarily associate women with particular activities thereby mentally restricting their scope; "woman"/ "she" has a more limited connotation than "man"/ "he". Feminist theorists argue that this linguistic devaluation is part of a social devaluation. The use of generic masculine terms perpetuates a limited concept of women.

The research of this particular study has endeavoured to show how and in what ways women are portrayed in school textbooks. The research will show how texts perpetuate the existence of sex stereotypes; it also illustrates de Beauvoir's notion of 'the Other' by pointing out incidental references to women and their invisibility; it shows how women are omitted through the use of the generic masculine form. These issues will be discussed under four prevailing themes which are identified in chapter four. In the next chapter, the research will focus on the methods used in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The method chosen to scrutinize textbooks and syllabi is that of content analysis. Content analysis is defined by Zito (1975) as follows:

> ..... a methodology by which the researcher seeks to determine the manifest content of written, spoken or published communications by systematic, objective and quantitative analysis .....
>
> (Zito, 1975:27)

Zito focuses mainly on the quantitative aspect of content analysis. It is important to point this out, because this particular study has made use of the qualitative aspect of content analysis. Both aspects can be used to determine various forms (or patterns) as well as any applications within the content of a piece of written work; qualitative and quantitative analyses contrast with each other merely by the ways in which the evidence is interpreted and explained.

Zito states that content analysis can draw attention to the intention of the writer, and a further study can be made to investigate and attempt to determine whether the written from of communication has any affect on the reader or recipient. Thus there is a distinction between the intentions of the writer and the effects of the writing.

The question to ask is: are the effects of the writing necessarily the intentions of the writer? A writer may for example, use discriminatory language because he/she believes it to be grammatically correct and therefore acceptable; this could probably be termed as the intention of the writer. But the writer may use discriminatory language unintentionally because he/she may not have thought about it and may thereby be merely reflecting common ideas or social practices. Thus, the writer would be operating within the prevalent ideology and this does not mean then that it is his/her intention that the writing should promote or enhance sexual stereotypes or sexual imbalance in society.

Colin Sumner (1979) in his critique of content analysis, sees 'reading' to be a practice within

which we become aware of significance or meaning in social phenomena. However, he argues that content analysis is mainly concerned with what is communicated and not what the intentions are of the communicator; that is, his is a much reduced claim to Zito's. In the content analysis method, the only meanings which are relevant are those which are shared between the communicator, the audience and the analyst. In other words, content analysis concerns itself with denotative rather than connotative signifiers.

Sumner has a valid point in that content analysis cannot simply be seen as a neutral technique which merely cites, scores and tabulates evidence. These statistics may prove to be interesting and even verifiable, but they cannot stand on their own.

Sumner shows the contradiction which lies within the method of content analysis. It is a research practice which is directed towards "a shared universe of discourse" (1979:67), and its products can merely indicate something about the nature of this discourse. No information is given concerning things like the motives of the communicators; it is only a denotative discourse. The contradiction lies in this, that

the necessary object of the ideology of content analysis is the implicit ideology, that is, the communicator's consciousness.

The absence or presence of ideology for content analysis lies in the communicator's consciousness because the frequency of denotative signs used by the writer indicates the presence or absence of some kind of ideological consciousness. Thus content analysis has a place because it has acquired a reputation for producing reliable, quantitative evidence which can give as objective dimension to any subjective, qualitative approaches. The quantitative aspect of content analysis may appear to be a distinctive feature, but the significance of repeated denotative signs are their rootedness in an historical and social structure.

Although this research has chosen the qualitative aspect of content analysis, it must be added that content analysis can be an adequate means by which various repetitions of 'signs' can be cited. However, what is important is the interpretation of these signs; in other words, content analysis can be seen as part method whereby an ideology can be identified

in its discursive form. Quantitative indicators are superficial in themselves; social relations which provide various form of ideology are of far more importance, because repetitive signs indicate the presence of an ideology.

The empirical research of this study was conducted as follows:

The course in the curriculum studied is a humanities course worked out under the supervision of the Transvaal Education Department for a T.E.D. high school. The course is studied on a standard eight level, that is, the first year of a three year course; the pupils have by this stage made a subject choice for matric. The subjects cover a wide spectrum of cultural, commercial, linguistic and scientific areas.
The subjects are as follows:

English and Afrikaans (compulsory)
History
Geography
Biology
Typing
Housecraft

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