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GENDER AND CURRICULUM - A CASE STUDY

Linda Anita de Meillon

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education by course-work.

Johannesburg 1986

D E C L A R A T I O N

I declare that this research report is my own work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Education in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

Linda A. de Meillon

L de Meillon

30th day of OCTOBER, 1986.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

The following people have contributed greatly towards the work of this research. I am very indebted to:

1. Pam Christie, my supervisor, whose enthusiasm concerning women's issues encouraged me to embark on this research. Also, her encouragement and valuable advice enabled me to learn much about an undertaking of this kind.

2. Joe Muller and Dawn Butler who very willingly gave of their time and advice.

3. My parents and my husband, Francois, who often believed in me more than I did and who supported me throughout.

4. Laura, who willingly offered to do the typing of the manuscript.

5. The One who has given me the ability and the freedom to express myself as a woman.

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A B S T R A C T

The aim of this research is to establish how women are portrayed in school textbooks. The research begins by looking at three major feminist perspectives namely radical, liberal and socialist feminism. It then focuses on literature concerning women and education. Two prominent theories concerning gender codes are highlighted before the research centres primarily on the formal and hidden curriculum and specifically, the part school texts play in promoting gender inequalities.

Using the method of content analysis the study identifies four prevailing themes which are evident in texts and which together help to build up and maintain an ideology of gender differences. These themes are expanded on in the final chapter.

The conclusion offers various alternatives to the existing problem of women's representations in curricula and suggests possible ways for further research in this area.

CHAPTER ONE:

OUTLINING THE FEMINIST DEBATE

Inquiries and investigations into the education of women have featured in research for many years. Since the second wave of women's liberation in the 1970's major literature has come to the fore. Three important feminist positions have endeavoured to explain women's oppression. These three positions, namely radical feminism, liberal feminism and socialist feminism, offer different perspectives, but it must be pointed out that feminists are united in their commitment to the removal of sexual inequality, whether it be within capitalist structures or as a result of revolutionary social change. This chapter proposes to discuss these different feminist positions in some detail. Each perspective will be defined, major contributing theorists will be pointed out as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the respective positions. This will serve as a context for later chapters considering issues of women in education and representations of women in school texts.

RADICAL FEMINISM

For radical feminists (such as Firestone, 1979 and Spender, 1982) the key concept for analysing

the position of women in society is the notion of patriarchy; the radical feminist perspective sees the subordination of women as being caused by or shaped by patriarchy. The reasoning is that male power is the basis for women's oppression; in fact, women's oppression is scrutinized within the structure of capitalism and it is argued that male power has capitalism as its product (Firestone, 1979). Patriarchy is rooted in biology (as will be explained later) rather than history or economics and it is preserved in such institutions as marriage and the family. Thus, women's position is determined by the patriarchal organization of society.

Shulamith Firestone(1979) sees the oppression of women as rooted in their 'abilities' for biological production. In other words, the fact that women are able to produce children means that their positions in the family, the home and society as a whole are directly influenced by their role as childbearer. Patriarchal power controls and places women in submission to men directly as a result of their sexuality. Firestone also argues that biological inequality has produced a caste-like system whereby men receive 'ego-gratification' from their domination over women. The biological inequality between men

and women provides the foundation for institutions which aid in keeping women oppressed.

Radical feminists argue that woman's distinguishing biological characteristic is her ability to produce children. On the basis of this she is defined as different from men. Not only that, but because she is involved in childbirth she is assumed to be responsible for the care of infants and growing children. Society places an emphasis on mothers in society; in other words, women not only bear children, they also rear them. As Chodorow (1978) states:

> Woman mother. In our society, as in most societies women not only bear children. They also take primary responsibility for infant care, spend more time with infants and children than do men, and sustain primary and emotional ties with infants. When biological mothers do not parent, other women, rather than men, virtually always take their place .....
>
> (1978:3)

Radical feminists have also argued that the notion of motherhood is not only assumed because of women's ability to bear and nurture children, it has also locked women into a limited set of choices and alternatives.

Society expects women to be mothers and once they are, they are confined to that position. In a sense, a contradiction is apparent because in one sense, society appears to elevate motherhood as the potential and eventual position of every woman but in another sense, when women become mothers their 'goal' has been reached and fulfilled. They are not expected to go beyond this. Adrienne Rich (1976) in her reflection on the politics patriarchy says:

> The institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of heterosexuality in identical with intimacy and sexual love. Both create the prescriptions and conditions in which choices are made or blocked; they are not 'reality' but they have shaped the circumstances of our lives.
>
> (1976:42)

In other words, women's possibilities for making choices about their sexuality, childrearing and mothering as well as any other spheres in which they wish to participate, have been curtailed. Patriarchy affects women's consciousness and life options as well as helping to emphasize women's sexuality and reproductive capacities.

Thus, radical feminists would argue that patriarchy controls women's options in order to keep their role as childbearer and childrearer as primary. The priorities of patriarchy are to keep the choices of women limited; women are located in the home and the family. In other words, patriarchal ideology presents motherhood as natural, so that women's involvement in any other sphere except the one of bearing and rearing children would be seen as 'unnatural' by society.

Stated simply, a male hierarchy which is maintained by placing females in subordination suggests a notion of 'male power' and cultural hegemony. Rubin (1975) explains this as arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity. In other words, male domination over women can occur in many areas; the fact that women's biological role confines them to the role of motherhood means that women's choices become limited in sexual, cultural, economic and social areas.

According to radical feminists most of what is known as 'common knowledge' is largely described and defined by men, and as a result, what women know and experience remains hidden and unexplained. For radical feminists a need

arises to make women's experiences and contributions more felt; they seek to explain the experience of 'femininity' under male power and they wish to make women and women's interests more visible. In other words, radical feminists desire to reconstruct existing knowledge so that it can reflect women's reality. Women's viewpoints are what are essential:

> It is men who have the problem, for they see little and assume they see all, they assume their experience is human experience - but human beings are not merely male.
>
> (Spender, 1982:18)

However, there have been numerous critiques of the radical feminist analysis. Ann Oakley (1972) has argued that it is difficult to perceive differences in gender within the limited constraints of biological sex differences. For example, sexual divisions of labour can occur across different types of society; an agricultural society would differ from an industrial society, so it cannot be assumed that a universal sexual division of labour as well as a universal experience for women exists. Oakley feels that the ways in which people acquire their gender identities are varied and this would suggest that gender has no simple biological origin

This leads to another very important point that Oakley makes: the difference between the definitions of gender and sex. The former definition would pertain to culture because it refers to social classifications into 'masculine' and 'feminine'. The latter refers specifically to the biological differences between male and female; that is the visible difference between male and female genitalia. Oakley believes that the connections between sex and gender are not 'natural' and that norms of behaviour, attitudes and role expectations are socially determined. Biology then, determines the direction of the differences in personality and behaviour found in men and women, but masculinity and femininity reveal themselves as social constructs.

Another important critique is the one made by Sheila Rowbotham (1979). Rowbotham discusses the term 'patriarchy' and argues that this term has been used in many ways: firstly, a way in which men control women's sexuality and fertility and secondly, a way in which to express an institutional structure of male domination. Rowbotham feels that patriarchy presents problems of its own because one needs an understanding of power relationships and hierarchy; also, explanations of

patriarchy as forms of oppression based on biology obscure the many ways in which societies have defined gender.

Rowbotham argues that it is not sexual difference which is the problem but the social inequalities of gender; that is, the various kinds of power which societies have given to sexual differences. She expresses the need for an historical approach which would disclose the changing form of male control as well as the changing forms of masculinity and femininity. Patriarchy must be defined as being historically specific by being associated with changes in the social and economic structures of society.

Critics of radical feminism have pointed out that the reasons for male dominance still remain under-theorized within the radical perspective. The emphasis of radical feminism lies in the description of the experiences of women but these experiences are merely described and not fully explained or developed. In other words, the radical feminist perspective is predominantly descriptive and not analytical; women's oppression within social realities is not adequately accounted for. The principle problem with this analysis is that patriarchy is transhistorically treated.

In fact, the reasons why the institution of patriarchy emerges is not made known in detail. It is also not understood why patriarchy is interpreted and practised in particular ways. What is needed is the development of a theory that will both describe and explain the social ramifications as well as the reasons for patriarchy. A theory is needed that would seek to account for institutionalized social structures. (Socialist feminists who have attempted this approach, have used Marxist analyses as a starting point.)

LIBERAL FEMINISM

According to Middleton's definition (1984), liberalism is the regular, justified ideology of capitalist free enterprise. In other words, the individual enjoys the right to own property and acquire wealth. In terms of this ideology a person's position is determined by the person's own worth as well as working well and productively in the social hierarchy. Liberal feminists argue in favour of an extension of this ideology so that women too enjoy these privileges if they prove worthy. Early liberal feminists (Wollstonecraft, 1792; Mill, 1869) and more recent liberal feminists (Bunkle, 1980 and

Banks, 1982) do not challenge capitalism but they demand equality of opportunity within it. For liberal feminists, women, like men, must enjoy the right to cultivate or achieve any goal through equality in education. Some liberal feminists like Friedan (1963) take this further by saying that equality of opportunity can only be brought about through the elimination of sex-role stereotypes.

It is important to note that liberal feminist perspectives operate within a capitalist framework and they do not express the need for this framework to change. In fact, what is important in this perspective is the need for individuals to change within the framework of capitalism. The liberal feminist perspective is individually based; in other words, it lies within the power of the individual to change or work towards a particular position in society. How do liberal feminists see this happening? The answer lies partly in education.

Education is given a significant role when equality of opportunity is challenged. It is argued that women's achievement will be enhanced through equal training. In fact even early liberal feminists like Wollstonecraft (1792) argued

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