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Gender and curriculum : a case study

De Meillon, Linda Anita

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The research briefly looked at various syllabi pertaining to the various subjects. The general aims of the syllabi were identified as well as the currently used and widely prescribed text-books within this curriculum. The texts studied are:

Austoker, J. et.al. (1974)

Biology for Transvaal Schools, Std. 8.

Basson, M.A. et.al. (1983)

Vlot Afrikaans vir St. 8.

Boyce, A.N. (1960)

Legacy of the Past, A History for Std. 8.

Kempen, I.G. et.al. (1976)

Modern Typing.

Rumboll, F.C.H. et.al. (1972)

Comprehensive English Practice 8.

Schmidt, M.M. et.al. (1980)

On With the Apron, Housecraft for Std. 8.

Swanvelder, C.J. et.al. (No date)

Senior Geography for Std. 8.

The analysis of the texts was divided into the following areas:

a) CONTENT.

This was a line by line examination of the entire text, identifying certain aspects:

(i) Statements reflecting obviously sexist assumptions.

(ii) The contributions made by and the representations of the experiences of women.

(iii) Sex stereotypes - to see whether stereotypal portrayals of men and women are built up.

b) TEXTUAL FRAMEWORK.

This consisted of an overall evaluation of whether women feature or are cited in other areas like the index, footnotes and bibliography of the textbook.

c) ILLUSTRATIONS.

These were studied to assess whether there is a balance in sex representation within textbooks.

d) LANGUAGE.

This involved the identiciation of male pre-nouns and the generic masculine forms.

Once the above information was listed, it was placed alongside the various aims of the syllabi pertaining to the par'icular texts. The general aims of the syllabi were scrutinized and parallels or contrasts were drawn between the aims of the syllabi and the information gathered from the prescribed textbooks. All the interpreted evidence was grouped into the following areas:

(i) Women's femininity and their sexuality.

(ii) Women's concerns in the home.

(iii) Women's part in the family.

(iv) Women and work outside the home and their dual role.

(v) Discriminatory language.

(vi) Women's status generally.

(vii) The negative associations women experience and their invisibility.

It was felt that the above areas could be grouped together more succinctly, so the above information was classed together into the following themes:

a) 'Femininity'.

b) The part played by women in the home and the family.

c) Women and the workplace.

d) How women are seen in broader social arrangements.

Thus, the quasi-quantitative method of content analysis was used as a means to determine the emphases which occurred frequently in the texts and syllabi examined and the qualitative method was used to describe the ideological forms present in the texts. By using content analysis these four themes were found to be prevalent in most of the texts. These four themes or codes will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE PREVAILING THEMES EVIDENT IN THE TEXTS

This chapter will focus on the images of women in the texts (previously mentioned) showing how women are characterized, how they are portrayed, what their experiences are shown to be and what kind of status they enjoy. Using the methodology of content analysis, the chapter focuses on the evidence of gender codes being represented and how the ideology of the texts is constructed through various instances of practice.

The previous chapter has already touched upon the construction of an ideology by a dominant group. It has been argued that those in this dominant group exercise the power to select consciously or unconsciously certain types of knowledge for the curriculum and leave out others. The selection of certain knowledge and the representations used are the reflections of a particular ideology in texts. In this study a pervading ideology of gender is evident in textbooks and in this ideology, which is perpetuated by the texts,

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four 'themes' have been identified. They are: the notions of women's so-called 'femininity'; women's biological and domestic role in the family; women's contributions in the workplace; and lastly how women are generally seen in broader social arrangements. These themes do not stand isolated; they are interrelated and reinforce one another and together contribute towards constructing the prevailing ideology.

Not all themes are found in every text; some texts emphasize particular areas more than others. Some texts refer to various themes either explicitly or inferentially. The re-occuring themes have been pinpointed and the texts have been separately discussed under these headings.

(a) WOMEN'S 'FEMININITY'

The notion of femininity portrayed in texts includes a number of aspects, such as beauty and personal grooming; being fashion-conscious; showing forms of helplessness, frailty and weakness; being gentle, soft-spoken and meek; and enhancing features of the face and body in order to be sexually attractive or invite romance. These notions make up the ideology of women's attractiveness and availability, and to together, to suggest that women have an 'ability' to

'better' themselves. Women can do this cosmetically as well as by nurturing a 'correct attitude' towards attractiveness. In this way they also better their chances of being attractive to men, or being employed, or of being accepted in society, and they are encouraged to adopt a personal code in desirability.

Salzman-Webb (1971) in her study on women's vocations in America, also mentions the personal code women are shown to adopt and states that women's so-called availability has become a commodity. She argues that women have been able to 'succeed' in life by selling their sexiness. Women are expected to be pretty, not as smart as men, be sexy and not compete with men in any way. Their 'status' lies in their sexuality and 'utilizing' it ensures their 'success'.

These notions are to be found in the standard eight housecraft text, On With the Apron (1980). Two chapters are devoted to facial beauty, posture and the application of make-up, entitled:

24. Personal appearance and grooming. (1980:253)
25. Choice of clothes. (1980:253)

In fact, this text has a wealth of references pertaining to the notion of personal appearance. This is probably not unusual, seeing that the subject of housecraft is gender-specific and that its aim is 'equip' girls in their tasks as wives and mothers in the home. The text assumes throughout that women are to take care of their appearance and their manners. (The notion of correct manners will be dealt with later on.) The chapter devoted to appearance and grooming serves as a preamble to chapters and sections entitled, "Choice of clothes", "Good Taste", "Clothes that suit your Personality", and "..... different types of figures". Illustrations depict girls washing their hair; gazing into the mirror; showing correct postures, that is, how to sit, walk, stand and bend; applying make-up; dressing fashionably and equally importantly, wearing clothes that conceal various 'imperfections'.

The chapter on grooming is introduced with a paragraph which includes the following statements:

> To be well groomed and attractive is within reach of any girl ..... you may be blessed with a good figure ..... (and) have the most beautiful

> features, but unless you care for them well and emphasize them with correct make-up, hair-style and colours, very few people will notice your pretty face .....
>
> (1980:253)

Thus, being actively involved in creating or moulding one's personal appearance is also an aspect of femininity. Women are encouraged to spend time on themselves and to pay attention to their grooming. Thus being "blessed" in terms of "figure", "features" and "face" are insufficient in themselves. It is the task of "any girl" to "care for" and "emphasize" them by taking an active interest in them.

The chapter on grooming is then sub-divided into sections entitled: "Personal grooming", "Personal hygiene", "Effective improvements in personal appearance" and "Posture". Subsequent sections are: "Make-up", "Choice of cosmetics", "How to use make-up", "Lipstick", "Rouge", "Eye-shadow" and "Use of perfume". This illustrates the point that women are urged and advised to be effectively and practically involved in their appearance. The implication is that their

'potential attractiveness' lies in their own hands rather than in the body in its untouched form and that they must develop a type of prowess in creating it. Feminine beauty is a 'creation' and women are to be taught the skill of transforming themselves. Beauty lies in 'emphasis': the creation of an image with lines and tones and fragrances; the creation of a mask.

A key in this text in terms of content analysis, is "attractiveness". Thus we are told:

> An attractive appearance depends on a well-groomed face, a good figure ..... (1980:253)
>
> Remember, good grooming is the basis of attractiveness. (Ibid.)
>
> For complete attractiveness ..... improve your appearance ..... these provide the necessary finishing touches to a completely attractive girl ..... (Ibid.)
>
> A young girl looks so much more attractive if she sits down and gets up gracefully ..... (1980:257)
>
> This correct posture contributes

> so much to an attractive appearance
> that every girl should learn from
> childhood to be posture-conscious.
>
> (1980:258)

Attractiveness is also implicitly suggested, as in the following two quotes:

> The girl with a good erect posture not
> only looks better but also feels better
> ..... Notice the good and weak points
> of your figure ..... emphasize the
> good qualities .....
>
> (1980:255)

This sense of attractiveness permeates the chapter and even filters through to the next chapter on the choice of clothing. The opening paragraph reads:

> Every girl wants to be pretty and
> attractive. All young girls are
> pretty, each one in her own way,
> but some know how to accentuate
> their good features, therefore
> they look more attractive. Every
> girl can have an attractive
> appearance if she consciously

> tries to bring out her good features
> and to disguise the weaker ones.
> (1980:266)

When choosing clothes, women are expected to model themselves on an ideal and strive to achieve it. Once again the activeness of constructing femininity is evident and women are advised to work at it. The elusive 'attractiveness' is the 'quality' that girls must aspire towards:

> Camouflage your figure faults. (1980:268)
> The small, delicate type of
> woman looks very feminine in
> garments with soft pleats ... (1980:267)
> The athletic, energetic type
> ....., a few feminine touches
> are needed to add more femininity
> to this type. (Ibid.)
> Vertical lines ..... give the
> impression of slenderness. (Ibid.)

'Femininity' here, should imply softness and being low-toned, a gentleness and weakness. All these 'qualities' refer to the ideology of women's frailty which appeals to 'hardy masculinity' by being weak and submissive and complementing the notion of male protection because of their strength. (This is a theme I shall return to.)

As mentioned earlier, active involvement in personal grooming also implies that appearances can be enhanced cosmetically; again the body is to be changed or disguised to 'create' an ideal type:

> Keep the armpits and legs free of hair. (1980:254)
> Learn to manicure your nails. (Ibid.)
> Hide defects in your features. (1980;258)

But another point to focus on in the ideal feminine type includes the meeting of certain standards. Femininity not only demands the creation of a physical form out of the 'raw material'; it also relies on a notion of 'inwardness'. Women can 'achieve' attractiveness externally but they can also acquire it by adopting a correct attitude and behaviour. The implication is a sense of inner and outer control working together and reinforcing each other to construct an ideal type of femininity.

A girl can 'develop' an outward sense of attractiveness and desirability if she nurtures a 'correct' and positive image and attitude and displays friendliness and co-operation. Manners, attractiveness and etiquette appear to go hand in hand. In On With the Apron (1981), the

chapter on personal grooming includes subsections entitled: "Ugly Habits and Bad Conduct", and "Good Manners". A sense of attractiveness is 'acquired', as the following 'tips' suggest:

> A pretty, friendly face is a great asset ..... (1980:261)
> Only a friendly, helpful and unselfish girl .... can be truly attractive and charming. (Ibid.)
> The main cause of bad posture is laziness and a 'don't-care' attitude ..... draw in your stomach and buttocks ..... (1980:255)
> Avoid unfriendliness and 'don't care' facial expressions becoming a habit, as these make you unattractive. (1980:261)

A set of 'don'ts' is evident as a kind of antithesis of the ideal feminine type:

> Do not play with your fingers or bite your nails. (Ibid.)
> Too much make-up makes a girl look common. (1980:258)
> Avoid the habit of going shopping barefoot. (1980:253)

> Walking barefoot is only permissible
> at holiday resorts. (1980:275)

In some of the texts in the Humanities Syllabus, references to notions of femininity are made either indirectly or in passing. In Comprehensive English Practice (1972), the following sentence appears:

> Straightening up their hair is all they
> ever do. (1972:330)

This sentence refers to women's active task in grooming themselves so that they look physically attractive. Also, it implies that grooming is a priority and that women spend most (if not 'all') their time attending to it. Other sentences referring to women's appearance occur in comprehension passages or extracts from novels:

> Young women from offices, who smell
> of scent and powder, and wet pixie
> hoods and hair ..... (1972:311)

Once again, "scent and powder" refers to the notion that beauty lies in creation of an image; women are taught the skills of 'transformation'.

> But her voice, Betsy's voice, was

Author De Meillon L A
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