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EDUCATION, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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This article suggests that changes in the family and economy are more crucial than changes in education in ending gender inequalities in the adult occupational world.

A number of authors have discussed the influence of educational experiences on gender inequality in the adult occupational world. They note stereotyped stories and illustrations in textbooks and testing materials, sex-typed expectations of educational success, differential participation of men and women in higher education, women's underachievement in school and their lack of achievement in mathematics (Lipman-Blumen, 1984; Richardson, 1981; Weitzman, 1984). While probably none of these authors would assert that changes in education would be sufficient to end gender inequality in the adult occupational world, they all imply that students' experiences in education significantly influence the gender inequalities they will face in the adult world.

If this were the case, we would expect gender differences in academic achievement, especially in mathematics, to be marked. We would also expect to find evidence of at least some linkages between classroom interactions and materials and gender inequalities in later life as well as a connection between educational attainment and areas of study and adult occupational success. In other writings (Stockard, 1984, 1985) I have suggested that differences in the educational experiences of males and females are generally minimal and that the association between gender differences in education and gender inequalities in the adult occupational world is probably much more tenuous than commonly believed. In this paper I briefly review this argument, describe my own explanations of gender inequality, and then examine the implications of my argument for change efforts advocated for schools in this country and the roles of school administrators.[1]

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P_82

Gender Inequalities in Education and Occupations[2]

While many of the analyses of gender inequalities in education imply that women face more problems in academic achievement and underachievement than men, careful examination of the literature suggests that just the opposite is in fact the case. Females have higher grades than males throughout school, from the elementary years through college and in total grade averages as well as in specific subjects such as English and mathematics. Girls are better adjusted to school, have fewer learning disabilities and behavior problems are less often referred for remedial work. Only a small part of the difference in teacher's referrals can be explained by a tendency to underreport girls' problems. In addition, girls, not boys, less often underachieve in school or fail to earn grades commensurate with their ability (Stockard and Wood, 1984).

Differences between males and females on standardized tests of achievement are also small, even in the much discussed area of mathematics. Not all studies of "math anxiety" indicate that females suffer from this malady more than males (Resnick, Vieke, & Segal, 1982), and analysis of gender differences in the scores of 17-year-old students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) examinations[3] demonstrate that the variation in scores by region of the country, race, parental education, and size and type of community is larger, often by many times, than the variation by sex (Grant and Eiden, 1982). In addition, gender differences in mathematics achievement are small when compared to differences in adult income. The average mathematics Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) score of females is approximately 90% that of males (computed from 1980-81 data, CEEB, 1981), and the median mathematics NAEP score for 17-year-old females is 96% that of 17-year-old males. In contrast, the median income of all women full-time year-round workers in 1982 was about three-fifths of that of all full-time, year-round men workers.

Apart from academic achievement, much of the attention in the literature on gender inequalities in education has focused on what social scientists call the "hidden curriculum," the subtle messages about gender roles found in textbooks, examination questions, and interactions between students and teachers. Analysts of curricular materials have documented an overabundance of references to males and suggested that the stereotypes in curricular material reinforce students' views of sex-stereotyped roles and thus their career aspirations (Weitzman and Rizzo, 1974; Saario, Jacklin, & Tittle, 1973). Studies of classroom interactions have noted that males tend to receive both more positive

and more negative sanctions from their teachers (Jackson and Lahaderne, 1967; Becker, 1981), and some authors speculate that these interactions help reinforce various personality characteristics of males and females. Again, however, close analysis suggests that it is difficult to establish logical linkages between the hidden curriculum and gender inequalities and differences in adult life. The overrepresentation of boys in curricular material may actually stem from attempts to motivate boys to learn. The greater attention boys receive in the classroom may actually reflect attempts to control their behavior and encourage their achievement. While there may be an as yet undocumented more direct negative effect of the hidden curriculum on students, at this time it appears that any effect that negative portrayals and interactions may have on adult gender inequality is undoubtedly subtle and not immediate.

Besides academic achievement and the hidden curriculum, some observers of gender inequality in schools have pointed to gender differences in educational attainment. Again, however, the differences which appear are either very small or probably have relatively little relation to gender inequality in the adult occupational world. For instance, although there are minor historical variations, females and males within the same social class groups in this country have quite similar patterns of educational attainment. Even when the rather small historical variations in the relative educational attainment of men and women are considererd, these are miniscule compared to differences in men's and women's annual incomes. Moreover, when men and women full-time, year-round workers with equal levels of education are compared, the results always show that males earn more, often by many times, than similarly educated women. Even when variables such as work experience, training, and occupational status are taken into account, a large wage gap between men and women remains. Women simply benefit less from attaining advanced education than men do (Blau, 1984).

Although women and men workers with equal amounts of schooling have very different incomes, this could arise from the fact that in the later years of school women and men tend to choose different fields of study. Certainly the areas in which men and women specialize in college and trade schools are highly sex-typed, and these curricular choices have a high correspondence to the types of jobs which they later hold. A large part of the sex discrepancy in incomes is related to this sex segregation of the labor force and the lower salaries which are prevalent in the jobs typically held by women. It is no wonder, then, that women are encouraged to train in areas which men typically enter as a way of minimizing gender inequalities in the adult occupational world.

Again, however, the evidence suggests that even this route is not the panacea it might at first appear to be. Even when men and women have the same college major and when they enter the same profession the men tend to earn more than the women (Coser, 1981; Fox, 1981, 1984). This appears to be related to the pervasiveness of occupational sex segregation (Stockard and Johnson, 1980; Blau, 1984), and it is this sex segregation which helps justify the payment of different salaries to men and women, because they ostensibly are not doing the same work (Malkiel and Malkiel, 1973). In addition, it is necessary to consider the long-range implications for the society when women are encouraged to move into traditionally male-typed jobs without any corresponding movement of men into traditionally female-typed jobs. Job opportunities tend to be shaped by economic forces and needs other than the available labor pool, and it remains to be shown how men could be enticed into aspiring to lower-paying female-typed jobs.

Explaining Male Dominance and Gender Differences In Educational Experiences

How then do we account for the fact that males, who often do less well than females within schools, manage to do so much better in the adult occupational world? Why are the jobs which men hold so much more highly rewarded than those women hold? The analysis which I and my colleague, Miriam Johnson, (Stockard, 1985; Stockard and Johnson, 1979, 1980) present suggests that the answer probably lies not in focusing on education as a social institution, but by examining the economy and the family, social institutions which may be more closely linked to the sources and perpetuation of male dominance and gender inequality. This analysis also suggests that it is important to deal with psychological motives underlying the perpetuation of male dominance and the socialization processes which children experience. Because male dominance is strongly reinforced in the male peer group, we suggest that it is important to devise ways to strengthen ties between males and females that are not necessarily sexually oriented and that can compete with the bonds of the male peer group.

Interestingly enough, analyses of gender differences in academic experiences have a striking parallel to this analysis of the basis of gender inequalities in the adult occupational world. The picture sketched above of gender differences in education is not one of blatant inequality and women's low academic achievement, but primarily one of general equality, females' academic success and high achievement, and

males' behavior and achievement problems. Analyses of males' academic problems suggest that many of their difficulties can be traced to the commonly held perception of schooling as a "feminine" domain, an area where only "sissies" would conform. A central part of males' view of themselves as males appears to involve a rejection of femininity, or "not being female" (Stockard and Johnson, 1979). To the extent that schooling and conforming to the role of good student is seen as feminizing, boys tend to reject this role. The male peer group appears to play an important part in reinforcing this rejection of the good student role (Fagot and Patterson, 1969; Best, 1983; Stockard, 1980).

Changing Gender Inequalities

Changes that should be made in schools are a popular topic, undoubtedly because education is a social institution that, in contrast to the economy or family, is relatively accessible to change efforts. To combat the generally supposed influence of schools on gender inequality in the adult occupational world, the popular media and educators encourage women and girls to pursue advanced training if they want to "get ahead," often stressing the importance of training in mathematics. Educators design courses to help women overcome "math anxiety" and to encourage promising young girls to pursue mathematics training. Likewise, girls are encouraged to enter nontraditional vocations; and counselors and teachers, as well as parents, are reminded to encourage young women to enter fields typically seen as appropriate for men. Researchers urge teachers and counselors to monitor their interactions with male and female students so that males are not favored over females. Writers of textbooks and tests are encouraged to use equal numbers of examples about males and females, to picture members of both groups in equal numbers, and to avoid sex-typed descriptions of activities.

Each of these mandates places concerns and responsibilities directly on women school administrators. In their roles as educators, they are urged to monitor the attention that girls receive in school and to provide the additional experiences deemed important for girls' advancement in adult life. In their roles as women, they may feel special pressure to accede to these demands.

It undoubtedly is very important to encourage women to get as much education as they can and to pursue areas which they may traditionally avoid. Indirectly the greater presence of women as potential job candidates in non-traditional areas can lead to pressure for possible changes in those areas. In addition, even though they represent only a portion

of the media influences children encounter, it is important to urge publishers to continue to require that sex stereotypes in curricular and testing materials be kept at a minimum. My analysis of gender inequalities in the occupational world would suggest, however, that, while each of these suggested changes may be useful in and of itself, none of them will be sufficient for altering gender inequalities in the adult occupational world. At best they will provide only a very indirect means of attacking the problems of gender inequality.

I have come to believe that educators who are sincerely interested in helping to minimize gender inequalities in the adult occupational world may find it best to focus on mitigating the devaluation of women within male peer groups. While many such interactions among students occur outside the school grounds, some (such as those on the football field, or in the locker room, or on the playground) can be influenced by educators.

The male student peer group fosters attitudes that devalue women and encourage the separation of male and female activities. While female students often choose to separate their own activities from males, their dedication to this segregation appears much less fervent than that of males, and there is no female counterpart to the devaluation of the other sex that males express.

Attitudes of the male peer group probably find their clearest expression when males are participating in extracurricular sports that are still segregated ("contact" sports) and in informal interactions both within and outside the classroom. Within these settings males articulate the sentiment that to be a "real man" one must avoid female-typed behavior. Young boys may admonish each other, "Don't run like a girl!" or "Don't be a sissy!" Adolescent boys delight in telling sexually-oriented jokes and relating often magnified sexual exploits, both of which place women in the role of sex object. These interactions reinforce the common belief among males that female activities are of low value and that males should have dominance over females.

Just as school officials outlaw racist interactions and protect those who are potentially subject to abuse by peers, educators who are concerned with eliminating gender inequalities can try to minimize sexist interactions. This can occur both at the high school level and in the early grades as students are encouraged to see members of both sex groups as valuable human beings. Because so much of males' devaluation of females appears to stem from anxieties about their own masculine identity, care will need to be taken to replace the current means of bolstering their self-images with ways that do not denigrate females.

Raphaela Best, in her book We've All Got Scars (1983), provides a facinating example of how this could be done. The book describes her experiences with a group of boys and girls from the time they entered kindergarten until they finished sixth grade. She documents boys' rejection of the regulations and norms of the school as the male peer group becomes more important in the early grades and the development of sex-role related behaviors of both the boys and girls. Disturbed by what she saw, she began to actively intervene in the children's interactions when they were in the fourth grade. Her description of this process provides an intriguing illustration of a way in which the tendencies of the male peer group to denigrate females and school-related activities can be successfully mitigated, while also blostering the self-confidence of all the children within a classroom.

A number of years ago, Patricia Sexton (1969) documented the problems which males face in academic settings and suggested, in an argument not totally different from my own, that these difficulties reflected the fact that the schools were a "feminized" environment. Her solution for the problem, however, is strikingly different from that proposed by me or Best. Essentially, Sexton, while noting the need to provide greater equality for women in other social institutions, suggests that if schools were masculinized, they would be more attractive to males, thus enhancing their achievement. My own argument is that masculinity, as it is defined by the male peer group, often incorporates an irrational and intense devaluation of women and that this tendency should be discouraged, not encouraged. (The approach which Best took toward the students with whom she worked suggests that she would at least implicitly share my opinions). The tendency of the male peer group to bolster its own self-image by denigrating that which is female is related both to the motivations underlying the maintenance of sex segregation in the adult world and the avoidance of many aspects of achievement and involvement in the world of the school.

If we as educators are to eventually diminish gender inequalities in the adult occupational world, it is necessary that we deal with the psychological motivations underlying these inequalities, and these motivations appear to be at least partly rooted in the interactions young boys experience in the male peer group. Not only, however, could the changes I advocate eventually help alter gender inequalities in the economy, it is possible that they could also alter the dynamics underlying the rejection of schooling exhibited by many boys and thus help produce a lower incidence of behavioral and academic problems among males.

School administrators can play an important part in facilitating the development of peer settings which minimize the devaluation of females. In her discussion of the change efforts in which whe engaged, Best (1983) explicitly notes the supportive role of the school principal and suggests that the changes she was able to produce would have been much more difficult to secure without such support. Much has been made recently of the role of school principals in influencing the learning "climates" of schools. I would suggest that school principals and other administrators can also do much to set the gender-role related climate of a school.

NOTES

[1]My discussion deals only with the United States because most of the writing regarding the relation between education and gender inequality has dealt with this country. In addition, the discussion does not involve differences in educational and occupational experiences of men and women in various racial-ethnic groups for the thesis of the paper probably applies to all such groups in this country.

[2]For a complete exposition of each of the points in this section and relevant citations, see Stockard (1985).

[3]Data for 17-year-old students are used because gender differences in mathematics achievement typically do not appear at younger ages.

- Jean Houston:

Women are no longer role encapsulated;
They can become what they behold.
The question each must answer:
"Am I a plastic fiddle
or a Stradivarius?"

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