

The Politics of Language: Role models for girls in literature

Clare R. Hocking

Introduction

This paper presents the view that gender role stereotyping, the absence of strong women role models in literature and the use of exclusive language have led to an undervaluing of women and girls. Acknowledgment is given to the role of schools and the part they play in social and cultural reproduction through curriculum formation and implementation. The relationship of schools to the wider society and the realities of gender relationships in terms of power and control, are central to this discussion.

The two theoretical positions from which this discussion stems are:

1. The reproduction of existing social, gender, and class relationships and,
2. The production of gender and class identities through resistance to imposed knowledge and practices.

Some critical educational theory and feminist theory is presented which shows the tensions between these two approaches.

Language is something we use daily and yet we are rarely conscious of the restraints it imposes. If language leads to misunderstanding or offends people it ceases to be an effective tool of communication. Language that is sexist has this effect. Another term for sexist language is exclusive language. Using 'he' as a generic pronoun and using 'mankind' and 'man' compounds as generic terms, excludes women and girls. We associate these terms with maleness and therefore bring to mind male images. Paechter (1998) notes that:

A dominant vehicle through which gender roles are transmitted is discourse. Therefore, the ways in which language is constructed will have wide-ranging implications for the ways in which gender relations are constructed.

Spender's research (1980), highlights that the use of male symbols and pronouns in the English language, when referring to all people, serves to render women invisible. She asserts that:

From birth we are bombarded with the belief that men are more important, and that we (women) have less authority to think and act in the world, that we (women) can only exist in relation to men (Spender, 1992:34).

(More) Appropriate Language

The opposite of non-sexist language is known as inclusive language. Truly inclusive language attempts to include all groups that are marginalised by the presumption of a norm that is white, male, and middle class. The principles of this inclusiveness are embodied in the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (1993) which states:

All programmes will be gender-inclusive, non racist, and non discriminatory, to help ensure that learning opportunities are not restricted (1993:7).

The place of language in creating, legitimising and sustaining relationships of equality or inequality is fundamental to the social practices which make up the construction of gender:

Language is a powerful tool which is not neutral or free of context. It is fundamental in shaping political and social meaning, including views of gender (National Action Plan for the Education of Girls, 1993-97:22).

Since language is not neutral, and can have subliminal influence, it is a significant force in creating the curriculum. Language is often part of the hidden curriculum. It is able to reinforce or contradict non-sexist policies. Research in the hidden curriculum addresses the belief that the official or formal curriculum statements of schools do not recognise the underlying notions of hidden or unintended consequences of schooling which lead to interference with learning, self esteem and negative effects beyond the classroom.

Spender (1983) strongly endorses this concept by stating that:

Language is not neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas, a programme for mental activity (Spender, 1983:139).

Despite some differences between critical education theory and feminist theory, the underlying concern of both is with the relationship between the individual and an oppressive social structure.

Language is central to any form of oppression. Language is the basis of communication, whether written, oral or sign. It reflects culture and values but also actively constructs them, hence shaping and reinforcing the way people think and act. Language exerts a powerful influence on the learners' vision of themselves and their world.

Gender Stereotypes

Commonly used language often perpetuates negative stereotypes, and very often women become invisible, or are demeaned and ignored:

The reason for avoiding exclusive language is that it can be used to discriminate against women not only by reinforcing harmful stereotypes but also by rendering women's presence and achievements invisible (Doyle, 1995:2).

Research studies of primary and intermediate students experience of gender bias in the curriculum indicates that women teachers, as well as men, unwittingly learn to support exclusiveness (Spender, 1983). Alton-Lee & Densem maintain that this reality is still what actually happens despite equity objectives contained in schools charters (Alton-Lee & Densem, 1992:211).

Research in early childhood centres has also highlighted the need for educators to be aware of the sex role stereotypes presented, and therefore the types of resources used (McMenamin, 1988:210). Differentiation between what is acceptable behaviour for boys and what is acceptable behaviour for girls is assimilated at a very young age. Alton-Lee & Densem assert:

It is worth considering the response of one five year old boy to a question about what his mother did: 'She does nothing: she's just a normal mother' (1992:210).

Similar research by Meade (1981), found that men were visually presented more often in curriculum resources, like picture books and puzzles, in early childhood centres, than women. When female characters were presented, they were on the whole portrayed in passive domestic and nurturing roles. The men were presented in active and paid work roles. For example, representation on jigsaw puzzles alone showed that of all characters represented 63 per cent were male with 44.4 per cent portrayed in occupational roles as compared with 5.3 per cent of female characters (in Paechter, 1998).

Models provided by books and puzzles are one of the ways in which this stereotyping is reinforced. In addition, popular culture television and magazines carry stereotypic images of the cultural expectations of females and males. They all give powerful messages about life roles, self-importance and worth of a person. Advertisements for toys, on television and in print, often portray stereotyped male and female roles. For example, girls are portrayed in pink frilly dresses playing with dolls, tea sets and ironing boards, while boys are shown with cars, war toys, trains and Lego. In this regard Sturrock (1993) claims that:

Sex equitable materials improve the learning experiences of both female and male students. Flexibility in the perception of gender roles is necessary to encourage students to make educational, career, and family choices based on their own competencies and interests rather than on preconceived sex-stereotyped notions (Sturrock, 1993:21).

An entirely gender inclusive curriculum, together with significant attitudinal change is paramount in order to bring about improvement in the area of gender equity. Attitudinal change is possibly the greatest barrier to equity because it requires consciousness raising for parents, teachers, and students, both female and male. Raising teachers' awareness of the need for change, as well as training in providing equal education opportunities for girls, must be high on the agenda.

Gender inclusive resources play a central role in providing equal educational opportunities for girls. Of course, it must be noted, as Alton-Lee & Densem (1992) observe, providing non-sexist resources without challenging children's stereotyped beliefs may only lead to children perceiving information about women as trivial and a waste of time. The classroom environment or culture is also important.

Girls and young women in schools form half of the future adults in society. Humankind can no longer afford the inequity of having half of society functioning as a negative group against which the other half defines itself and asserts its superiority.

Paechter (1998), contends that what students learn at school is taken out by them into society. Changing the climate in schools can ultimately lead to change in society, at least to some degree. She expresses the view that there is a need to work to support challenges, by both students and teachers, to dominant views of gender, gender roles and sexuality.

The counter argument in the form of talk of the 'crisis in masculinity' which seems to go hand in hand with discussions about social change for women and girls, is threatening this process of long and overdue change. Recently Bill Hagan, who facilitates a course on 'Meeting the Needs of Boys in Schools' at the Manukau Institute of Technology, said that the notion of addressing boys' issues did not mean girls would get less attention or have their needs sidelined (1999).

Where does this leave girls when the research confirmed in New Zealand by Newton found that teachers on average were interacting with boys 70 per cent of the time, compared with 30 percent for girls?

Curriculum Resources/Building Blocks

Curriculum delivery with informed choices regarding inclusive learning materials, together with building balanced collections of resources, are vital aspects of gender inclusiveness within the educative process.

Inclusive learning resources are important because they exert a powerful influence on the learners' vision of themselves and their world. Reading about other people's lives

helps students to make meaning of their own lives and to validate their own experiences. Therefore it is crucial that educators know that:

An understanding of how inequitable gender relations are maintained and reproduced requires critical investigation of the ways in which girls perceive their own powerfulness and how they act on those perceptions (Newton, 1992:148).

Perceptions of powerfulness and powerlessness are both conscious and subconscious. Talking and listening are central ingredients in learning:

Through talking we 'remake' knowledge of ourselves (Jones, 1990:25).

Studies of feminist and critical pedagogy have begun to give greater attention to the diversity of women's voices, and to the subtle ways in which women's voices remain unheard. McLeod et al (1994), believe that a primary aim of feminist pedagogy is to provide a learning environment where women feel safe and are encouraged to express their different voice.

Newton's research (1988), illustrates clearly that boys are more successful in gaining teacher attention than girls. This situation is paralleled in society where men interrupt more often in everyday conversations. Less listening and more time talking equals slower learners (Spender, 1989). People with lesser status are more likely to be interrupted than those with greater status. This strategy is used by men to exercise power and control:

Within mixed sex classrooms children learn and rehearse interactive patterns which prepare them for the adult world in which men dominate and control interactions (Newton, 1992:139).

With Newton's above statement fresh in one's mind, it is frightening to consider the vast amounts of literature which also contain cultural or individual examples where the language is totally exclusive and remote from female reality. Where the hero is predominantly male, women in the same plot are cast as damsels in distress, witches to be slain, or princesses who serve as a hero's reward.

How does a female person form a sense of powerfulness in this scenario?

Our experience quite literally is defined by our assumptions about life. We make stories about the world and to a large degree live out their plots. What our lives are like depends to a great extent on the script we consciously, or more likely unconsciously have adopted (Pearson, 1986:25).

While the hero versus the heroine in literature is but one aspect of the stereotypes that are reinforced, it is indicative of the dominant patriarchal ideology with its powerful language of exclusion. It is clear to me that the most negative influence on the female reality in literature, and in everyday usage, is language.

It is imperative for the appropriate development of the whole of society that equality is named by the words used and in the concepts conveyed. The political significance of this statement is partially seen in the work of Reproduction Theorists, who are concerned with the processes through which existing social structures are maintained and reproduce themselves.

Reproduction and Resistance Theories

Althusser (1971), addressed the role of schools in reproducing a capitalist society. He promoted the belief that it is through instruction and social relationships in the school that students learn a way of being in the world, and a view of social reality.

Later, theorists like Willis (1981) and Giroux (1983), pointed out that Althusser's analysis of schools was lacking in its analysis of relationships within the school. The research of Willis and Giroux included an acknowledgment of the reproduction of class cultures, knowledge, and power relations. Social reproduction theory is also seen in the work of Bowles and Gintis (in Weiler, 1988). Bowles and Gintis maintain that structural characteristics related to schooling reproduce existing class structure by preparing students to be workers in various classed levels of production.

However, according to Weiler, their research pays no attention to the patriarchal relationships in schools, and therefore, it appears to relate specifically to males and is orientated towards waged work (in Weiler, 1988). Bowles and Gintis saw schools as reproducing workers for the economy. In other words, producing what society needed, or what schools consciously or subconsciously perceived that society needed.

Cultural reproduction theory is more influenced by the work of Bourdieu, the French sociologist, who links culture and politics at the heart of schooling (in Weiler, 1988:4). His research focuses on the way the school system facilitates cultural reproduction. Understanding the relationship between classroom interactions and social class differences is described by Bourdieu in what he calls 'habitus'. Bourdieu asserts that the 'habitus' of the middle class constitutes cultural capital within the education system:

In the same way that the economic system operates to the advantage of those with economic capital, the education system operates to the advantage of those with cultural capital (Bell & Carpenter, 1994:127).

For example, teaching and learning in schools is undertaken within a particular 'habitus'. That is:

A particular system of thought, perception, appreciation and action, which reflects the material and symbolic interests of the dominant groups or classes within society. Working class habitus, does not carry the same status or 'cultural capital' as middle class habitus (Skelton, 1997:182).

Although Bourdieu's theoretical position does not directly address the questions of gender his concept of cultural capital can be applied to gender as much as to class. Theories of cultural and social reproduction have contributed a great deal towards critical educational theory. Criticism of reproduction theories, however, has come because of their failure to address the intricacy of individual experience, and because of their lack of acknowledgment of resistance and/or change which can be carried out by individuals or groups within systems.

Weiler (1988), refers to theories which acknowledge resistance as theories of production. Production theorists address the ways in which individuals and classes claim their own experience and resist the ideological and material forces imposed upon them.

Theorists such as Willis (1997), Giroux (1981:83) Simon (1982), and Connell (in Weiler, 1988:11) are concerned with the social construction of knowledge and the ways in which dominant forms of language and knowledge can be critiqued and seen

as obstacles to learning by undervaluing personal or individual experience and resistance to change:

Their analyses focus on the ways in which both teachers and students in schools produce meaning and culture through their own resistance and their own individual and collective consciousness (Weiler, 1988:11)

Concerns with gender are then strongly linked with the forming of consciousness. Many feminist theorists have addressed the role of schools in reproducing inequality and oppression of women through raising consciousness and resisting patriarchal institutionalisation of knowledge and language.

Skelton (1997), warns that some feminist research studies have used reproduction and resistance theories to specifically focus on women's experience in and through schooling. When examined more closely, however, schools claiming to support educational quality and practices, are actually reinforcing gender stereotypes, constituting a hidden curriculum.

Role Models for Girls in Literature

Whether the question is related to gender or class, women, and therefore girls, live in a world where women's stories have rarely been told from their own perspectives. Women and girls have not actively shaped their experiences of self and their world, nor named the great power (political, economic, social and religious) from their own perspectives. As women become more aware of how much of their own experience they must suppress in order to fit themselves into the stories of men, their yearning grows for literature of their own.

It is upon stories like *The Hero Within*, *Women Who Run With the Wolves* and *Standing in the Sunshine*, that educators and the young women within the education system today would be better nourished and nurtured. Literature like that of Coney (1983), Pearson (1986), and Estes (1992), in the text above, have both a social and political dimension because they reflect women's ability to create new ways of living in the world and show a new naming of the great powers that provide direction in this world.

Women's social concern is connected with the need to gain respect, equality and freedom in society - in education, in work, in politics and in relationships with women, men and children. This transformation is taking place as the language of inclusion, and of women's experience is written, assimilated, developed and spoken.

An impressive amount of feminist work in both pedagogy and curriculum has been achieved in the last twenty years and is on-going (Middleton, 1982, Middleton & Jones, 1992, Paechter, 1998, Sturrock, 1993).

In the story of *The Hero Within*, one is drawn to consider the interaction between the cultural stories that name women as virgins, whores, helpmates and mothers and identity formation in women. Pearson considers how healthy these images are, and in so doing identifies three heroic images for women: the sage, the artist, and the warrior. She contends that many socialisation patterns are based upon limiting stereotypes. Pearson suggests that women need to make explicit the myths that govern their lives and name them:

When we do not name them we are hostages to them and can do nothing else but live out their plots to the end. When we name them, we have a choice about our response. We can extricate ourselves from undesirable myths (such as the Cinderella myth, recently identified as creating the Cinderella complex) and/or we can respect the archetypal pattern that is exerting control over our lives and learn its lesson (Pearson, 1986:20).

A holistic and interconnecting way of looking at life is presented in Pearson's description of one's life journey as a spiral (as opposed to a linear) form by use of six archetypes - the innocent, the orphan, the martyr, the wanderer, the warrior and the magician. The role models portrayed in the imagery of the archetypes is both liberating and powerful. Women who appreciate webs and interconnectedness relate well to the journey patterns Pearson describes. Young women and girls are more clearly able to come to understand both the weaving, that is, the relational aspects which are typical in women's lives, and the language used to articulate that experience.

The same integration and connectedness can be seen in women's lives presented in the fairy tales, myths and stories in *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. Estes' writing

is indicative of that ‘taste of the wild’ which women know intuitively (whether they choose to listen or not!). Estes attributes the title of her studies of wildlife biology, and wolves in particular, and goes on to suggest that healthy women and healthy wolves share certain characteristics:

Keen sensing, playful spirit, and heightened capacity for devotion. Wolves and women are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength. They are deeply intuitive, intensely concerned with their young, their mate and their pack. They are experienced in adapting to constantly changing circumstances; they are fiercely stalwart and brave (Estes, 1992:4).

These texts provide a greater choice of characteristics of women, written with conviction, and capable of giving young women a truer picture of themselves and their potential than the negative, derogatory characteristics which are more readily available in literature and in the spoken word.

The parallels between wolves and women are very clear and expressive of reality. Both women and wolves have been hounded, harassed, and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious, overly aggressive, or less valued than those who are their detractors. *Women Who Run with the Wolves* shows how feminine wildness is both a positive, and a necessary, quality for women to carry and cultivate. Women must reclaim their true feminine power, and not remain repressed by a value system that trivialises emotional truth, intuitive wisdom and instinctual self-confidence.

From an entirely different perspective, the work of Coney (1993), in *Standing in the Sunshine*, portrays lively role models in history and today, in a way that is able to speak to young women of their foremothers who helped shape the present reality for all women. Many of the foremothers included in this text are outstanding role models of courage and determination who represent all aspects of women’s lives throughout the hundred years (1883-1993). They are REAL women in every sense of the world:

Women who want ‘men to stand out of our sunshine’ (in Coney, 1993).

Insight into these women’s lives is possible because of the wide coverage of issues from politics, health and education through to women’s work on the land, the contribution of women to the war(s) effort, women and sport, and marriage and family

life. Many of the womens' stories have an energy flowing through them that has the power to influence, change one's vision, or, at least, raise one's hopes of a more inclusive society. History is seldom told from the perspective of *Standing in the Sunshine*.

The lessons women learnt from the dominant culture often measured success and achievement through dependence and vulnerability. In contrast, Coney's retelling of history (herstory), encourages women to trust in women's experience and perspective.

Estes, Pearson and Coney provide role models for young women and girls within the educative process, not only through the literature they have produced with its wealth of wisdom and insight, but through the role models they provide in their own lives as successful, real, flesh and blood women of integrity, who offer a vision of women that is liberating.

However, Davies (1988) contends, however, that it cannot be assumed that reading feminist texts will necessarily mean that students will hear the intended anti-sexist messages. Students must be supported in negotiating new messages that are seen to contradict dominant messages:

New images and new relations must be presented in a way that the children can hear, and relate positively to, the ways of being which are intended by the author, so that the heroes and their adventures make positive sense in terms of existing conflicts, existing psychic organisation, and existing knowledge (Davies, 1988:23).

Those of us who grew up on a diet of fairy tales, absorbing a romantic vision of life, need to keep on reminding ourselves and the young women and girls within the education system today, that our own life experiences tell us that the land of castles, enchanted forests and charming princes have little resemblance to reality. Beware of the pitfalls of patriarchy that lie ready to ensnare on the journey as it unfolds!

Conclusion

The issues of gender role stereotyping, appropriate role models for women in literature and the use of inclusive language are significant sign posts on the road to curriculum and societal reform. While research data and recent statistics indicate some improvements for girls and women in countering sexism in these forms, the changes still remain tenuous and precarious.

The transformation of gender inequalities requires educators to actively develop strategies for revealing and exposing the structures which support exclusion and to break through the illusion of inclusiveness. At the personal level, the issues of gender equality are still threatening to many, both female and male, because they require change, not just to classroom practice, but to everyday private, as well as, public social practices.

Blackmore et al (1996), report that:

Gender reform arouses strong feeling of antagonism because it requires intellectual, emotional and behavioural change in individuals, as well as promoting new and different collective forms of action (1996:275).

Schools play a vital role in social and cultural reproduction through curriculum formation and implementation. The responsibility and reward of assertive action toward gender inclusiveness is both personal and political for each of us involved in the education process. The words of Adrienne Rich make this reality quite clear:

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent, or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing (in Rosaldo, 1988).

References

- Althusser, L. (1971). Ideology and Ideological state apparatuses, in *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Alton-Lee, A. & Densem, P. (1992). Towards a gender-inclusive school curriculum: changing educational practice. In Middleton S. & Jones, A (Eds.) *Women and education in Aotearoa*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Limited.

-
- Bell, A., & Carpenter, V. (1994). Education's Role in (Re) producing Social Class in Aotearoa. in E. Coxon et al. *The politics of learning and teaching in Aotearoa, New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- Blackmore, J., Kenway, J., Willis, S., Rennie, L. (1996). Feminist dilemmas: an Australian case study of a whole-school policy approach to gender reform. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Volume 28, Number 3.
- Coney, S. (1993). *Standing in the sunshine. A history of New Zealand women since they won the vote*, New Zealand: Penguin Books
- Davies, B. (1988). Gender, equity and early childhood. *National Curriculum* Issue 3.
- Doyle, M. (1995). *The A to Z of non-sexist language*. London: The Women's Press Ltd.
- Estes, C.P. (1992). Women who run with the wolves: contacting the power of the wild women. Random House (N. Z.) Ltd.
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). *Theory and resistance in Education: A pedagogy for the opposition*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey.
- Hagan, B. (1999). A matter of gender. *New Zealand Education Gazette*. 14 June.
- Jones, A., McCulloch, G., Marshall, J., Tuhiwai Smith, L., Kinagangaroa Smith, G. (1990). *Myths and realities: schooling in New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.
- McLeod, J., Yates, N., Halasa, K. (1994). Voice, difference and feminist pedagogy. *Curriculum Studies*, Volume 2, Number 2.
- McMenamin, T. (1988). *She does nothing, she's just a normal mother: The devaluing of women in a patriarchal society*. Unpublished graduate assignment. University of Canterbury.
- Meade, A. (1981). Don't take that dress off James, *Set No. 2*, Wellington: NZCER.
- Middleton, S. (1982). Sexual apartheid or androgyny? Four contemporary perspectives on women and education in New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 17 (1), 57 - 67.
- Ministry of Education. (1993). *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- National action plan for the education of girls 1993-97* (1993). Victoria: Curriculum Corporation.
- Newton, K. (1992). John says a few words, Margaret listens: sharing time in the primary classroom? In Middleton S. & Jones, A (Eds.) *Women and education in Aotearoa*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books Limited.
- Paechter, C. (1998). *Educating the other - gender, power and schooling*. London: Falmer Press.
- Pearson, C. S. (1986). *The hero within: six archetypes we live by*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Rosaldo, R. (1988). Symbolic violence: a battle raging in academe. Paper presented at *American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting*, Phoenix, Arizona.
- Skelton, A. (1997). Studying hidden curricula: developing a perspective in the light of postmodern insights. *Curriculum Studies*, Volume 5, Number, 2.
- Spender, D. (1989). *Invisible women: the schooling scandal*. London: The Women's Press.
- Spender, D. (1983). *Man made language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Spender, D., & Sarah, E. (Eds.) (1980). *Learning to lose: sexism in education*. London: The Women's Press.
- Sturrock, F. (1993). *The status of girls and women in New Zealand education and training*. Ministry of Education: Wellington.
- Weiler, K. (1988). *Women teaching for change*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Willis, P. (1981). The class significance of school counter-culture, in Dale, R., Esland, G., Fergusson, R., & MacDonald, M., (Eds) *Education and the state*, Vol 1. Lewis: Palmer Press.