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A New Inservice Training Model: SF Conference/Course on School Sexism

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A NEW INSERVICE TRAINING MODEL:  
SF CONFERENCE/COURSE ON SCHOOL SEXISM

A conference/course, "The Hidden Curriculum: Discovering and Overcoming School Sexism," was offered through the University of California Extension Division, San Francisco, in the spring of 1973. The course, two intensive weekends with intervening work weeks, was planned and administered by Wendy Roberts and Miriam Wasserman. Thirty-five resource people ran the workshops, and many of them helped to plan the course. Sixty-five female and male educators, parents, and concerned others attended.

The course was given through an established teacher-education institution for a number of reasons: it provided a guaranteed, though small, amount of money for running the course and the facilities and contacts of a university. Most important, a course with credit has the legitimacy in a teacher's mind that a conference lacks, and the university's publicity reached those an independent women's conference could

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FEMINIST PRESS HOLDS WORKSHOPS FOR TEACHERS OF INSERVICE COURSES

A group of Long Island teachers, counselors, and school psychologists has been meeting with Feminist Press staff members in a series of summer workshops aimed towards organizing a fall program for prospective teachers of inservice courses. Ten evening sessions plus two Saturdays are planned to begin early in October on the campus of the State University of New York/College at Old Westbury, in Nassau County.

The program will aim at providing women and men with information about sexism in education; with insights into their own practice as teachers, administrators, and parents; and with skills useful for changing attitudes about sex-roles. Those interested in registering should phone or write to The Feminist Press, Box 334, Old Westbury, N.Y. 11568 (516-876-3086) by September 20. There will be a small registration fee to cover the cost of materials.

WESLEYAN CONFERENCE CONSIDERS HOW TO EVALUATE WOMEN'S STUDIES

What is the general impact of women's studies? Is our investment in women's studies courses the best way to improve the higher education of women? Concerned and curious about these questions, a group of Wesleyan University faculty began in March 1973 to look into the possibility of evaluating women's studies. After preliminary discussion and research, the group decided to invite teachers of women's studies to meet with social scientists knowledgeable about evaluative research to raise the question of evaluation. With the assistance of the Ford Foundation, which made a small grant available for preliminary conferences, a meeting was held on the Wesleyan campus, June 14-17, 1973.

Fifty-two persons attended, of whom 13 stayed the entire weekend. Of the more distant participants Sacramento State, Alverno College, Case Western Reserve, Southern Illinois, Delaware, and Cornell were represented. Among the specialists called in to inform the group were Esther Westervelt, co-founder of the National Coalition on Research in Women's Education, Herbert Hyman, on evaluative research, and Marcia Guttentag, on Bayesian evaluative systems. Of note was the five-woman team from the Clearinghouse on Women's Studies. Given the size of the conference, no attempt could be made to have a truly balanced group either regionally, ethnically, or in terms of types of courses. However, the group did represent, in roughly the same proportion, fields which offer women's studies, namely the humanities, history, and sociology.

In an atmosphere of informal good feeling, the group dealt with the following issues the first two days: What are the benefits and the risks of any kind of evaluation at this time? Whom would the evaluation inform? Is it for ourselves, the Movement, the administrators and faculty who make curricular decisions, women in general, or posterity? What are the ethics of evaluation? Who should do the work? How can we have objectivity if we do the research ourselves? How can we have any understanding of the issues and consent of the participants if we do not do the research ourselves? How can we articulate the goals of women's studies where politics, cont-

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not. The result was an exciting and healthy mixture of female and male, ranging from radical feminists to concerned teachers to people who had never considered sexism a problem or an issue. The issue of feminism became part of a more general concern about creating a nonsexist environment for all children.

Throughout, participants met in three kinds of groups: whole group meetings; workshops; and constant-membership small groups. Workshops and whole-group sessions functioned mainly as input, small groups as a reaction place.

Whole-group sessions included a lecture on the state of research into sex differences; panels on teachers' experiences of sexism, on parental and community expectations, and on how to put pressure on the system; and the film Growing Up Female.

Workshops, organized in terms of school level (early childhood, elementary, secondary), included discussions of role-playing about curriculum, peer-relations, and classroom management. A few of the workshops cut across levels: physical education and games, sex education, men and boys, the politics of sexism, problems of gay students and teachers.

While all the workshop leaders, panel participants, and small-group facilitators were experts of various sorts, most were low-key, sensitive, and nonauthoritarian in style. In this ambience, people could open themselves up with the least possible anxiety about new insights and even a whole new gestalt about their social world.

The small-group work further helped to reduce the tensions and anxieties of this process. Heterogeneous mixtures of seven or eight people and a facilitator met daily to react to the experiences of the conference, to explore ideas and feelings, to talk about plans, and to relate to increasingly familiar people. In these small groups participants involved in trying to change the sexism of school systems confronted those who had never thought about sexism. Initially there was a great deal of fear, labeling, tension, and distrust. By the close of the conference, the small groups had become a model for communication that made the task of changing a school system and people's attitudes less of a "we-they" fight and more of a human one. We could conceive of communicating our new insights and consciousness to our colleagues in our own schools in a direct but nonthreatening way.

The format allowed for two weeks of working and watching time between two very intensive weekends. The sessions were arranged during the school year, so that after an initial weekend of introductory material, questioning and confronting new ideas, participants had two weeks of actual work time to digest the ideas, to apply them, to watch themselves and students in terms of the new insights and to return to the second weekend with many new questions. Each participant was asked to complete a project during the two week interval, building on something said or done during the first weekend. Most chose to observe themselves and students, and many projects took the form of trying lessons and other classroom activities or contacting administrators, other teachers, and parents about the problem of sexism in the schools. These experiences, and their accompanying reactions of shock, anger, fear, and exhilaration, became fuel for the second weekend of intensive sharing, support, and organizing.

The organizers had expected people to arrive with a range of attitudes and had hoped that the experience would move each individual up a notch, adding something to her/his consciousness, awareness, and skills in dealing with sexism in school. For most people, the experience seemed to have been much more profound than we had predicted or would have dared to hope. Much of this was due to the heterogeneity of the small group, but the structure of the conference shaped and allowed a kind of growing and learning that might otherwise not have happened.

The final meeting of the second weekend was a short whole-group session in which Wendy, Miriam, and one member of each small group delivered a summary evaluation. These comments testify to the deep personal involvement of participants:

"We all thought of groups as the best part of the day. We felt like when we came to our group we were coming home." and "Our small group saw personal growth and opening up to each other. Euphoria after the first weekend. Depression then, because of the magnitude of the problem. Members found they developed greater ease in working with women. Women who had been in the women's movement realized how much work they have to do." or "For once after experiencing a good course I'm not afraid that things will fly out the window. Our group became more democratic and giving. After two weeks, we saw changes in people's attitudes. I want to thank members of my group for being so supportive and loving. Fascinated with everyone's openness."

The almost unanimously positive tone of these comments should not be taken to mean that there were no tensions, frictions, discontents. There were. At various times people felt neglected, put down, pressured, angry, betrayed, exhausted, and misunderstood. But there was little boredom or alienation. Attendance continued high throughout the two weekends, although we made no attendance requirements.

The area that proved most difficult for us was the relationship between sexism and racism. Despite our efforts, we finally had to conclude that only a group of Third World and white women who had already developed some basis of trust, perhaps through working together, could accomplish our goals.

The structure of the course, the variety of people and forms, the learning-and-experiencing-together tone evolved ultimately out of the work of the many resource people. The organizers recommend that people who wish to replicate this conference/course begin with a small group of people working and planning closely together with one or two full-time administrative people.

We would hope at some time in the future to see a number of conferences/courses like this one, out of which might grow a network of teachers devoted to discovering and overcoming school sexism.

Laurie Olsen Johnson

Editor's Note: Each participant received a packet of printed materials. Copies of the table of contents of this packet and also of the program calendars of the two weekends are available for $2.25 on request from Miriam Wasserman, 51 Ellsworth Street, San Francisco, Calif. 94110.