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Closeup: An Elementary School Classroom

Jacqueline M. Fralley

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CLOSEUP: AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM

Martha Batten was beginning her sixth year of elementary school teaching when she first came into her combined fifth and sixth grade class at the Wildwood School in Amherst, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1971.

Ms. Batten spoke with us about her experiences teaching and learning with this group, and described the ways in which her own changing awareness about sexism and sex-roles led her to focus and design classwork. Although she found that peer group and other pressures to conform to stereotyped roles were tremendously difficult to break through, she was able to devise lessons and to grope towards ways of talking about sex-role issues with her students, sometimes with startling and delightful results.

One discussion in her class focused on "What is bad about being a girl or a boy?" The discussion began with the boys pointing out the importance of bullying in order to gain approval from other boys and moved to the ways in which aggressive and rambunctious behavior gets them into trouble with their female teachers. The students were aware that teachers expected students to be passive, quiet, and cooperative, behavior more typical of girls than boys. The girls explained, however, that they felt conflicts about what was expected of them. They felt that being labeled a "tomboy" when they were young had been a compliment, but now that they were nearing eleven and twelve, they felt pressures on them to be "feminine."

The girls' ambivalence turned the discussion to questions about political power in the classroom and school, since it was clear that, until the fourth grade, the girls had reaped approval for somewhat aggressive behavior and had often tended to dominate discussions as well. But by sixth grade, the boys were solidly in charge both of the classroom discussions and the prestigious student council offices. The girls realized that, when they were on the student council at all, it was always in subordinate positions. (As a result of this discussion, the girls began to see themselves as unrepresented, and they decided to form a caucus in order to get some political power and to learn to overcome their timidity about speaking in public.)

The question from which this discussion grew reflects Martha Batten's assumptions about the importance of talking with students about their own experience and feelings, and her conviction that to fail to intervene in sexist attitudes and behavior is to encourage and perpetuate the existing stereotypes. In social studies, for example, she organized an economics unit focused partially on advertising and the ways in which women are used to sell products both to men and to other women. The students brought in advertisements and examined the needs and desirable image which the media attempt to project for women and men. Then, the girls and boys met separately and discussed the pressures they felt were placed on them as female or male growing up, compiling a list of qualities they felt desirable for their own sex. They also listed what they thought to be desirable qualities for the other sex. When the class came together, and combined their lists of assumptions about femininity and masculinity, students realized that no one could fit into those

categories or reach the cultural ideals revealed by the lists. The ideal attractive image, moreover, proved to be a stereotypical one created or manipulated by the media. Their conclusions led students to discuss the special pain of adolescence when individuals are judged on the basis of qualities over which they have little control.

As a teacher, one of Martha Batten's conscious goals is to help her students to become aware of sex roles, to understand how they come to be determined, and to break through them to the extent of being able to make choices about their lives from a wide range of alternatives. Ms. Batten does not put down stereotyped behavior, she says, ". . . the later they get into that the better," remembering a time when she thought it was cute for 4th grade boys and girls to be organized into romantic couples. Those days are gone forever.

Jacqueline M. Fralley

REPORT: ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

We are a group of fifth and sixth graders in a Woman's Role Group at East Hill School in Ithaca, New York.

We've been meeting at least twice a week since October.

There are seven people in our group.

Our first project was for each person to take a famous woman and write a report on her. We wrote reports on Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Elizabeth Blackwell, Lucy Stone and Lucretia Mott. We then made a dittoed pamphlet of the reports.

There was a Women's Art Show in December, and we each contributed things and helped to run the show for a few days.

As a group we tried to define what a "sexist" or "non-sexist" book is. We may try to put together a list of what we consider good non-sexist books.

Last week we took a trip as a group to New York City and visited various places including the Statue of Liberty.

At our meetings we discuss *MS* magazine and other women's publications.

In the future we are planning to visit the homes of Harriet Tubman and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. We would appreciate any ideas of new projects our group could do. Please write to us at:

Women's Role Group
East Hill School
116 N. Quarry St.
Ithaca, New York 14850

GRUPP 8 is a new socialist women's organization in Stockholm. Women aged 20 to 40, with and without children, meet in each other's homes for a study circle on feminism and Marxist economics and consciousness raising. They are interested in feminist literature and want to exchange letters with some American women in the movement who share their interest. Contact: Barbro Kamieniecki, Slipgatan 12¹¹, S-11739 Stockholm, Sweden.