In Elementary Schools: A Case Study - The Woodward School

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In the spring of 1970, feminism was introduced into a small, private school in Brooklyn, New York. Woodward School students, 60% white, 40% black, primarily middle-class but with many on scholarship, range from nursery school age through eighth grade. The school is progressive, relying on open classroom teaching in lower grades and on individual attention to older students.

Feminist change at Woodward was begun by a few women who had been in consciousness-raising groups. Through informal communication, a group of at first ten, then as many as thirty women began to meet to discuss what was happening to their daughters at school and to define their goals: an end to sex-role stereotyping and the beginning of real freedom of choice for boys and girls.

The first priority was to raise the consciousness of the staff and administration, since it was not possible to request educational change of teachers unaware of their own attitudes and behavior. A general meeting was held, first with the director, and then with the entire staff. For the next six months, the group held small consciousness-raising meetings focussed on educational topics for staff members individually invited. The Feminist Book Collective presented a tape and slide show on stereotypes in children's literature for the staff and the P.T.A. At the end of the first school year, an afternoon workshop with staff offered papers and videotapes on such topics as cultural and societal stereotyping, female psychological development, women in literature, and women in history.

Some immediate changes in the school were quite concrete. Several teachers joined their own consciousness-raising groups. There was more communication among the staff about sex-role attitudes. Parents were no longer listed on class lists as Mr. and Mrs. John Jones: it was now Mary and John Jones. And the proverbial "class mother" became truly the "class parent" (one third men).

Changes in classroom practices were more slow and groping, but real. Teachers organized consciousness-raising with children (in the form of classroom discussions) when appropriate matters arose such as boys wanting to exclude girls from activities or social groupings, boys feeling ashamed to play with dolls, girls feeling afraid to build with blocks, older boys bringing in Playboy, older girls being reluctant to go swimming.

Teachers began examining and even altering their classroom reading choices, selecting more books about girls and commenting on blatant sexist biases in otherwise good books. A feminist studies shelf was planned for the library and the librarian began trying to combat ingrained attitudes of boys and girls towards book choices. An elective karate class was introduced, half the students were girls. Staff members consciously refrained from exclaiming to little girls, "How pretty you look today." Girls were pushed, urged, and coaxed into extending themselves into areas of activity previously neglected. They were also given specific concentrated help both to build confidence and to teach them how to perform those tasks for which they had been unprepared.

Most of the changes came about relatively easily in the lower grades, in part because young children seemed more teachable or reachable than older ones, in part because of the flexibility of the lower school curriculum. We have, therefore, devoted the second year of the group's activity primarily to exploring ways of reaching older students. The Feminist Book Collective has presented their tape and slide show to the sixth through eighth graders with a follow-up discussion. The group and the staff decided together that female studies should be an integrated part of all classroom teaching rather than separate units or courses. A female studies project elective, however, for those older girls particularly interested will be planned for next year in the hope that those students will carry their raised consciousness and new knowledge back to the classrooms to generate further change. We plan to organize field trips and invite women speakers to the school in order to introduce students to a broad range of women's roles. We plan also to collect a library of oral taped histories of women. By now, we have succeeded in raising the consciousness of administrators, teachers, and parents, but the translation of this new awareness into new educational practice has been more difficult. There is no model to follow. We are working to change ancient patterns and, of course, we have just begun.

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