Problems and Pleasures of PreK-12 Involvement in NWSA: A Report after the 1980 Convention

Martha Schultz
and to preserve feminist literature. We formed a Librarians' Task Force to coordinate our program proposals for next year's NWSA Convention, to develop a voice for our concerns within NWSA, to sponsor projects relating to the development of reference sources about women, and to work with the feminist caucus of the American Library Association.

NWSA provided an important forum for feminist educators to debate, explore, synthesize, and shape new ideas about women—a process in which librarians were actively involved.

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Problems and Pleasures of PreK-12
Involvement in NWSA: A Report after the 1980 Convention
By Martha Schultz

Women's studies is the educational strategy of a breakthrough in consciousness and knowledge. The uniqueness of women's studies has been its refusal to accept sterile divisions between academy and community, between the growth of the mind and the health of the body, between intellect and passion, between the individual and society.

Women's studies, then, is equipping women not only to enter society as whole and productive human beings, but to transform it. . . .

The National Women's Studies Association actively supports and promotes feminist education, and supports all feminists involved in that effort, at every educational level and in every educational setting.

—From the NWSA Constitution

The divisions or hierarchies NWSA members refuse to accept on principle still affect us as individuals. Consider the hated hierarchy at a PreK-12 Caucus meeting at the National Convention. Several women in the dorm lounge are faculty members in schools of education—education, that least prestigious of academic disciplines: still, they conduct research, publish, and are aware that they teach women's studies. Then there are project directors who write curriculum, or coordinate in-service training activities, or publish newsletters. Frequently they are paid with grant money administered by agencies whose representatives attend the Convention but are conspicuously absent from Caucus sessions. Then there are Title IX coordinators in individual school districts, discipline-oriented secondary teachers, and finally, at the bottom of the pyramid, the women who work every day in elementary or primary classrooms.

The hierarchy becomes palpable when an elementary teacher suggests that secondary teachers might not be representative of all teachers, or when someone asks for a show of hands—"How many of us really teach preK-12?" We are about 20 people at a Convention of about 1,500, seated in a nonhierarchical circle.

The existence of this hierarchy is what I see as the central problem of preK-12 involvement in NWSA; our effort as a group to break through the hierarchy provides the pleasure.

Because of these "sterile divisions" I have described, we feel inadequate and isolated. Why don't we read more, organize more effectively in our own schools and in our professional associations? Why don't we publish more, be more scholarly? Because we seldom name our activities "women's studies," many of us feel that we are on the edge of the Association's concerns. Some of us are new to feminism and learn what "politically correct" means only after some embarrassment. If these problems weaken those of us who manage to attend a National Convention, they probably keep many teachers of nonsexist education and creators of sex-fair curriculum away from NWSA altogether.

As the Preamble to the NWSA Constitution affirms, however, our business is to break through these divisions. It is easy to document such efforts at the national level. First, we have a Caucus. This means we have a visible position in Association governance and in Convention planning. It also means that we have a place to meet where no one asks, "What college are you from?" If space in the Women's Studies Newsletter were representative of grassroots involvement, preK-12 teachers would be a major force in the Association. Every issue I have seen gives us recognition of some kind.

Within the Caucus, a few hardworking individuals have taken on the responsibility of promoting feminist preK-12 education and supporting feminists involved in that effort. The Caucus mailing list after the Founding Convention in San Francisco consisted of only 36 names. At the 1979 Convention, 15 people attended Caucus meetings. This year the group was slightly larger and more visible, partly because of the implementation of two 1979 resolutions: one, that academic credit be available to encourage the participation of preK-12 teachers and counselors; and a second, that special efforts be made to involve teachers who work near the Convention site.

Patti Lather, one of the coordinators of the project that arranged for graduate credit, reported that 145 people requested information about credit options. Among the 14 persons who registered for graduate credit in elementary or secondary education from the IU School of Education, 12 were recipients of grants made available through the Lilly Foundation.

Because an individual teacher would have to spend considerable energy convincing her principal and superintendent that she should be given release time and financial support to attend a women's studies national convention, these Indiana secondary and primary school teachers were awarded scholarships to attend the Convention. Recipients were selected on the basis of their commitment to and interest in women's studies.

Scholarship winners Sherry Henson, Pat Villas, and Mary Paul also participated in...
Many of these offerings—“Discussing Lesbian and Gay Issues in K-12 Grades” and “Rape Education K-12,” for example—seem unique with NWSA. The feminist perspective of sessions like these would be difficult for school teachers to find anywhere else.

While this report emphasizes Convention activities, the PreK-12 Caucus hopes to become a source of support for feminists between Conventions also. One strategy that increases our sense of power is working with local colleagues on Convention programming. “Feminist Shock: Challenge in the Southwest,” involving five Arizona teachers, is an example. As we become more of a national network, we can plan joint workshops at the conferences of other professional associations and begin to form ties at the regional level. Also, NWSA’s contacts with the Department of Education help us to know more about federal policy. Through efforts like these, our sense of isolation and powerlessness will decrease as it has each year since we became a National Association and a Caucus dedicated to the transformation of schools and society.

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Scholarships for Teachers at the NWSA Convention

By Sue Elwell and Patti Lather

Despite the fact that approximately 70 percent of those being trained in schools of education are women, most schools of education, as Florence Howe has recently pointed out (Harvard Educational Review, Special Issue on Women, vol. 49, no. 4, November 1979), have been resistant to the impact of the women’s movement. This situation underscores the mandate of NWSA to reach out to public school educators, who play a crucial role in either perpetuating or countering sex stereotyping and the low aspirations of women.

The plan to involve more PreK-12 teachers in the Second NWSA Convention began with the development of a course for graduate credit in elementary or secondary education. Credit was to be earned through Convention attendance and followup activities designed to help teachers integrate feminist pedagogy into their classrooms. We were successful in securing a grant from the Lilly Foundation which paid for publicity, and for Convention and graduate credit costs for 12 Indiana public school teachers.

The 12 teachers were women who were diverse in age and race, and in their teaching assignments. They also varied in their previous exposure to feminist thought and sex-fair educational practices. Each responded to Convention sessions on both a professional and a personal level, as reflected in the following comments from the session overview sheets handed in at the conclusion of the Convention:

How can I evaluate this session except in terms of my personal experience? I have become much more aware of my ignorance of Native American psychology.

This was a very beneficial session. I was quite excited to find out that a Sex and Race Desegregation Assistance Center is in Indianapolis. The handouts on the learning centers will be very useful in my curriculum next year. I can’t wait to use them.

Despite my experience as the Title IX chairperson in my building last year, I learned much from this session. The law had never been explained to me as clearly as in this presentation. With this knowledge under my belt, perhaps I now have the ammunition to effect change.

It was a very positive experience for me, seeing teachers like myself take initiative to do workshops in the area of sexism awareness because I am heading in that direction myself.

This session provided concrete examples of how sex equity may be taught in the classroom and provided us with specific lesson plans designed for various grade levels and subject areas. It was wonderful to