Embers: A Project to Develop Elementary School Readers

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By Ruth S. Meyers

In September 1980, the Council on Interracial Books for Children was funded by the Women’s Educational Equity Act (WEEA) to develop prototypes of third- and fifth-grade textbooks for teaching reading. The project was designed by Lyla Hoffman of the Council, who was interested in providing children with models of social change agents and in developing antisexist and antiracist materials to replace the much-criticized current readers. My research in reading comprehension and the effects of stereotypic thinking on the ability to develop meaning from stories contributed to the rationale for the project. This is a report of beginnings.

Though feminist and Third World educators have battled with publishers on the sexist and racist nature of children’s materials, several myths have served to shield publishers from criticism. These myths have been reinforced by research that asks male-biased questions and “proves” that boys prefer stories about boys and themes of adventure, sports, and conflict; and that motivation plays a larger role in the reading achievement of boys than of girls. Girls, it seems, will read anything. Therefore, because in grade school boys are lower achievers than girls, publishers are encouraged to continue editions that are congruent with this perception of the importance of motivation and interest. The not-so-hidden agenda is to keep boys out front.

On the issue of racism, readers conform to the melting-pot myth which perpetuates the view that all Americans aspire to the white, middle-class mode. In conformity with this myth, stories are written, supposedly for all children, out of the middle American experience. These stories are then made to “fit” by coloring faces and using names of various ethnic origins.

My own research has demonstrated that children’s achievement in reading is related to their conformity to cultural standards. Those children whose perceptions of behavior conform most to socially prescribed roles will indeed perform better on these traditional materials than on stories at variance with the norm. However, those children who are less conforming will do better than the high conformers on stories of boys and girls in nontraditional as well as traditional situations and roles. It appears that achievement is not the issue; conformity versus change is. As educators, social scientists, and parents know, school can reinforce or change behavior, and written materials are important, too, in the formation and change of attitudes.

Since 1975, the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) has reviewed new reading textbooks in addition to the new children’s storybooks it has regularly reviewed since 1968. While basal readers offer occasional biographical sketches which touch upon past discrimination, no text includes content to help children understand the current workings of sexism and racism in our society. Editors turn to existing children’s storybooks to select and adapt materials for their basal reading textbooks. Though the vast majority of children’s books do not help children learn about social inequities and about people who have struggled to create change, there are some stories, mostly from alternative publishing houses which are not sought out by basal readers editors, which do help children learn of such inequities. Our EMBERS (Equity Models of Basal Readers) project is seeking out these stories and working with feminist and minority writers of all races, as well as disabled feminists, to develop materials designed to increase young children’s knowledge of the need for equity in education and society.

On the EMBERS staff, I work with Dr. Beryle Banfield, President of CIBC, who has had a distinguished career as a school principal, curriculum developer, and specialist in urban education, and has been conducting workshops on racism and sexism for the Council, as well as for race and sex desegregation centers; and with Jamila Gaston, a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts, who has taught in New York City schools and in Che-Lumumba, an alternative school for Third World children in Amherst, Massachusetts. We have been meeting with feminist publishers, writers, and educators. We have brainstormed ideas with representatives of organizations of Chicana, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, working, disabled, and battered women. We have elicited materials through writers’ and feminist organizations. We have read hundreds of stories, poems, and biographies. We believe we have, after much reflection, begun to develop a critical sensibility for choosing materials that are consistent with a feminist approach to teaching. A feminist approach, as we understand it, prepares children to evaluate and understand value systems inherent in any work and to develop preparedness for changing realities.

Teacher manuals are being developed to accompany the
readers. These manuals contain plans suitable for third- and fifth-graders. Though there is need for feminist content in all elementary grades, we have limited our work for practical reasons to two grades. Grade 3 was chosen in particular as the grade in which children, having already mastered decoding skills, begin to read in curriculum content areas for the acquisition of new concepts. The teaching manuals provide a feminist methodology for teaching, a methodology which engages students in critical analysis and appropriate responsive actions. We are providing resource information and prereading activities to familiarize the teacher and students with the social problem content of each selection. Follow-up activities are suggested to stimulate critical analysis and further interest in the problem area. Because we want to educate children to be active participants in a changing society, we are providing guidance for responsive political actions appropriate to the age level of the two groups of children, such as letter writing, interviewing, petition planning, and leaflet writing.

The process of launching the project has been exciting and heuristic. We welcome criticism and suggestions of items of children's literature. We hope to develop a product that will aid educators to adapt feminist classroom procedures, and that will influence publishers to provide teachers with much-needed materials at the elementary level.

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**The Simmons College Summer Institute on Women in Organizations**

*By Barbara Perry*

Twenty college professors from the United States and England came to Boston for three weeks in July to participate in the second annual Summer Institute on Women in Organizations. Sponsored by the Institute for Case Development and Research, a department within the Simmons College Graduate Programs in Management, the Summer Institute was developed with a grant from The Ford Foundation. It provided an introduction to the case method as a pedagogical tool that develops analytical and problem-solving skills; training in the use of Simmons's cases on women managers; and practice teaching experience with follow-up critique by peers and Institute faculty. Faculty included Drs. Margaret Hennig and Anne Jardim, founders and co-directors of the Simmons College Graduate Programs in Management and coauthors of *The Managerial Woman*; and Dr. Herman Gadon, Professor of Management at the College of Business Administration, San Diego State University, and coauthor of *Effective Behavior in Organizations*. Arva J. Clark, Director of the Simmons Institute for Case Development and Research, was Summer Institute Director.

The Simmons Graduate Programs in Management embody a new concept in management education for women. Curriculum for the Master of Arts in Management degree reflects a fundamental concern for women's career development, as well as a commitment to the traditional functional areas. This special attention to women's objectives is achieved through unique behavioral courses developed by Drs. Hennig and Jardim. These courses are based on the assumption that a woman, because of her socialization, enters an organization with assumptions and expectations that differ significantly from a man's, and that traditional management programs have failed to prepare women to survive and prosper in what is basically a masculine culture. In this culture, "networks," the informal system of relationships that provide the learning and support critical to career development, often do not work for a woman as they do for a man because few women have experience or contacts within these networks.

The Simmons behavioral courses utilize a special body of teaching cases developed over the last seven years by Simmons's case writers. These cases were first created in 1973 when Harvard Business School funded a joint project with Simmons College to develop relevant teaching materials for the new Simmons Graduate Program in Management. In 1974, the Donner Foundation funded further case development, as did the Business and Professional Women's Organization. With these funds, Simmons founded the Institute for Case Development and Research. With the assistance of a Ford Foundation grant, the first Summer Institute on Women in Organizations was held in 1979, and the second in 1980.

Simmons's cases are unique both because they are the only significant body of management training cases with women in positions of responsibility, and because they illuminate recent research findings about women in organizations. The cases, set in a variety of profit and nonprofit organizations, interweave two basic groups of concerns: those centering around the skills needed to be an effective manager, and those having to do with managing a career. In the first group, cases deal with such topics as: interpreting the organization's expectations; moving from the role of specialist to that of manager; dealing with the evolving organization; introducing change; and developing a personal management style. In the second, more personal category are such issues as: integrating personal and professional goals; managing risk and anxiety; and relating achievement and femininity. Rarely in the cases is gender an explicit issue; rather, the cases are left open to interpretation.