

# Being a woman teacher

**By Linda Peterat with assistance from Marian Dodds, Richard Fairbanks, Ellen Hall & Susan Horner**

*Awareness of gender inequities in education has been with us for the past two decades, yet inequities still remain between girls and boys in the education they receive in schools. This is the sixth in a series of articles which examines gender inequities as they occur and may be changed in home economics classrooms.*

## **Being a Woman Teacher**

He was tall and physically more mature than the other grade seven boys in the "Life Science" class I taught. I could usually expect something unusual from him before, during or after class to specifically get my attention or demand some reaction. One day he hung about after class while I gathered my books and prepared to leave the classroom. He handed me a slip of paper and asked what does this word mean?" I paused and uncrumpled the paper on which he had written prophylactic", I tried to respond as though it were any other word, suggested he look it up in the dictionary, and changed the subject. This was a little incident that has been recalled many times over the years, as I wondered about this student and what thinking led to this kind of action. What perceptions and feelings lie beneath the outward and unusual behaviours of this particular boy/student.

Since this little experience, I have heard 'tales' from other home economics teachers about condoms placed in the book about to be opened, on the desk, or over the doorknob about to be used. While the unexpected such as tacks on chairs have always been tricks played on teachers, what are the messages behind these sorts of sexually toned messages perpetrated by boys on women teachers?

About ten years ago, I wrote an article unearthing some of the beliefs which influenced what I understood as a triple devaluation and oppression of women home economics teachers. The first of these was that schooling originated as an institution to serve men/boys. The way knowledge was defined, pedagogy practiced, institutions structured, and the purpose of schooling established, were all with a vision of men's needs and interests. Women only won the right to higher education a little over one hundred years ago, and women's presence in educational hierarchies has not changed the foundational ideologies and norms. Home economics as a form of education for women also gained acceptance in the same time era, and while it has gained a marginal acceptance in schooling (as an elective), it has been ineffectual in changing the broader vision of knowledge and the purposes of schooling.

While women educators have been a majority in education, they have largely occupied positions with little power and influence on policy, and have clustered in elementary schools and "non-core" subjects. Recent figures show that women make up 66.2% of teachers and 19.8% of principals in the school systems in British Columbia (Ministry of Education, 1991). In secondary schools, women are clearly in a minority, making up 35.2% of the teachers and constituting a minority in men-identified school subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies. Women teachers tend to be present as a majority in marginalized secondary school subjects like home economics, learning for living, and the visual arts; and the less marginal subjects of languages and English (Ministry of Education, 1991, p. 9).

Boys reinforce through the incidents described above, the marginal acceptance of women in education. They remind women teachers that they are perceived as body and not as intellectual authority. Women home economics teachers experience from boy students messages that devalue the school subject which is woman identified and devalue one's self as teacher. Home economics teachers have not spoken to each other or together enough to share the kinds of experiences described at the beginning of this article. How extensive is the sexual innuendo which arises in student and student teacher interactions in home economics classes? Linda Eyre's (1992) research in a grade eight class describes how in a foods class, comments about carrots and bananas were used to denigrate the girl students and what was being taught.

While some of these comments arise in the sub-text of schooling, that is, in student comments that some teachers choose to ignore, the question remains as to whether teachers should ignore such comments which wield considerable power in the social relations of schooling.

## **What is Sexual Harassment?**

*Shattering the Glass Ceiling*, a recent publication of the British Columbia School Trustees Association (BCSTA) describes sexual harassment as "any unwanted attention which emphasizes sexual status over status as an individual, colleague, co-worker or student" (1992, p. 42). If schools and teachers take this definition seriously, then the above comments and incidents certainly can be called sexual harassment and cannot be ignored. The BCSTA publication goes on to argue that sexual harassment constitutes sexual discrimination and that the obligation lies with school boards to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace. "If sexual harassment occurs, school boards ... may be found liable and be subject to penalties" (1990, p. 60). The BCSTA publication also states that school boards must ensure that their employees (and students) are able to work in a "friendly" environment that is safe and free from sexual harassment and discrimination.

## **Taking Action**

The kind of incidents described in the opening of this article are not something that teachers any longer should endure and tell only to intimate friends over coffee or a drink in a safe setting. Nor can teachers turn a deaf ear to

the sexually derogatory comments students make to each other on the playground or in the school hallway. It is time to name and give voice to these experiences which in the past individuals had to endure in silence. The impact of these comments and incidents are neither friendly nor benign in the lives of the girls and women to whom they are primarily directed. Women leave teaching feeling it is just not the place for them, girls' self-esteem and individual aspirations are diminished; the power of Men over women secured.

School districts and schools have a responsibility to have gender equity and sexual harassment policies in place and committees in place to monitor such Policies. Do your schools and school districts have these? Are you a member of such committees? Do you know what policies your school has? Have you discussed and examined such policies with your students? If there are not policies and committees in Place, do you see ways of initiating them?

Taking action to work for women's rights in schools has never been easy because women are required to wage their struggle from positions of great personal vulnerability and little power. However struggles to demand justice must continue. In your school and your district it is important to seek out those who may be allies. Are there women or men in influential positions who will assist in making changes? Are there other women (and perhaps men) teachers who support your interest in gender justice?

Some supports already exist. *The Status of Women Journal* produced once a year by The British Columbia Teachers' Federation is a wonderful way of identifying others with similar interests in the profession. **To be placed on the mailing list, write:** Elizabeth Lambert BCTF, 100-550 West 6th Avenue, **Vancouver V5Z 4P2.**

Susan Crowley, a primary teacher who has been active in the BCTF Status of Women Program has developed a workshop to assist districts and schools in forming gender equity committees. For more information or the possibility of arranging a workshop for your district, contact Susan at 627-1700 (work) or 624-3470 (home).

*Shattering the Glass Ceiling, A Policy Resource Manual* (1992) by the BCSTA is a highly recommended guide. It is obtainable from BCSTA, 1155 West 8 Avenue, Vancouver V6H 1C5 (phone 7342721). BCSTA will also make available copies of the Toronto Board of Education Employment Philosophy Statement and *Know Your Rights*, the sexual harassment policy of the Toronto Board of Education.

A publication we have found to be very useful provides lessons for teaching about sexual harassment as well as guidelines for developing sexual harassment policy is entitled *Sexual harassment and teens, a manual* (1992). It is published by Free Spirit Publishing, Minneapolis and is available in Canada from Claude Primo Associates, Harper Collins Canada, 1995 Markham Road, Scarborough, Ontario M1B 5M8 (price: \$23.50 + G.S.T.).

Taking action with students in your school to change conditions within the school can happen through research and action projects as part of lessons in family management, foods, hospitality and tourism, etc. Gender equity and sexual harassment are also concerns for Healthy School initiatives or a school's Leadership Club. If you have a group concerned with healthy schools, make equity and harassment issues a priority.

## References

Ministry of Education and Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism and Human Rights (1991). *Gender equity, Distribution of females and males in the British Columbia school system.* Victoria, B.C.: Author.

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