

Look, children, look, see the sexist story."

How Dick made it ... and Jane didn't

by Naomi Brooks

"It has long been understood that a highly positive self-concept is essential if optimal growth and development is to occur. There is a striking absence of stories plotted and peopled so as to nurture a positive self-concept in young girls."

"Young females will find little if anything to inspire their admiration, respect and appreciation or emulation of girls and women. Readers therefore contribute nothing to a girl's concept of herself as a worthwhile valuable human being."

These were the conclusions reached by a recent report of the Ad Hoc Committee Respecting the Status of Women in the North York (school) System. The committee was set up in December 1973 to research the teaching materials used in the Toronto North York school system, to research the necessity of women's studies courses and to look into the question of hiring women staff members. This report received widespread coverage in the Toronto newspapers, including a full-page article in the Toronto Star headlines "Look, Children, Look, See the Sexist Story."

The report is a very strongly-worded critique of the educational system. The writers were so shocked by the sexist and also racist nature of the textbooks that they entitled it "The Rape of Children's Minds."

The goal of our educational system is supposedly the development of human potential and individual growth. Much is said about the "objective" nature of what we are taught in the schools. But as the report points out, numerous surveys of school textbooks tell a different story.

"There is a growing body of literature reporting the findings of variously designed surveys conducted to examine textbook content," the report states, "Regardless of how, by whom, or where the studies are conducted, there is a single striking conclusion: readers reflect and perpetuate a biased society."

"The aforementioned surveys have established conclusive statistical and overwhelming, descriptive evidence of the high in-

cidence of bias towards males in readers, and of role stereotyping. The findings of our study concur with the above."

The report then proceeds to document in a very concrete way how the schools are socialising young people into believing the sexist and racist lies which permeate this society.

The report centers on a survey of the four most commonly used reader series in the North York schools in grades one, two and three. In all, there were 38 books representing four publishers.

These textbooks blatantly reflect society's concept of women as the inferior sex. This is very clearly shown in the statistics the report gives. Out of 4,975 pages (a compilation of all the books mentioned) 2,456 center on the activities of men whereas only 364 pages center on women. Women's secondary role in all aspects of social and economic life is reinforced by the readers. Of the characters portrayed in the books, 717 of the primary characters were male, whereas only 253 were female. Two hundred and four of the background characters were female as compared to 140 males. The themes of the stories constantly enhance males. Women are made fun of and their adventures usually end up in tears. Here are some of the examples cited in the study:

Janet visits a farm and is totally uninformed about what she will see and experience. She expects to be afraid and is terrified by a baby calf. Upon recovery she admits to being "silly". Ronnie, the same age, also goes to the farm. Upon arrival he is told to find Wiggles, with no hint about who or what Wiggles may be. Completely confident, he sets out around the farm making intelligent guesses and interacting with various persons. He never once asks for assistance in solving the puzzle.

John and Janet are the same size. Janet falls backwards when startled by a hen, but John is bowled

over from behind by a huge pig. Janet can't carry an armload of vegetables, but John can lasso, from a great distance, a slim headband from the mouth of a running dog. John makes and sails a boat while the girls watch. When the girls ride a horse, John is in the front controlling the reins.

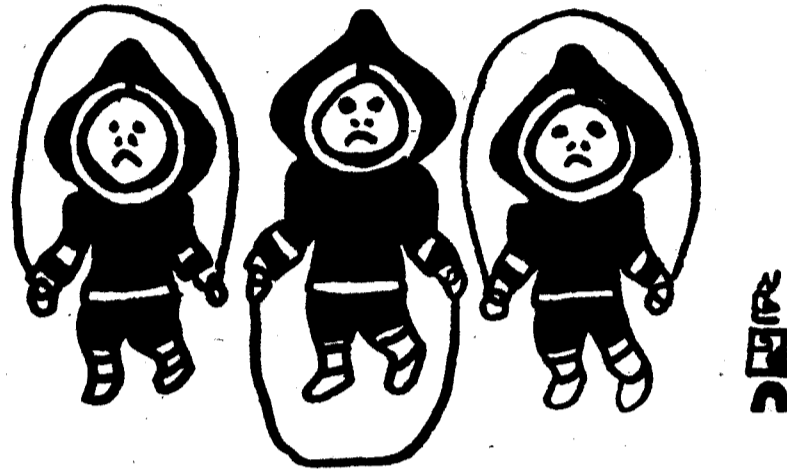
As is typical, women in the texts are not treated as persons. As the study comments, "If readers depreciate young females, they almost obliterate women." Mothers are primarily background figures appearing occasionally for a minor problem. Mothers are housebound and kitchen-bound. One mother in a story did get away for a few days - to have a baby."

The report gives some very striking examples of the peripheral role women play in these books. They are almost treated like pieces of furniture, in the following examples:

Father arranges an ice-fishing trip with a son and daughter in mother's presence. No one addresses her, nor does she speak.

At breakfast, Dad speaks to mother about a newspaper item he is reading. His comments trigger a conversation with their son. No word from Mother.

These readers serve to teach women from day one to accept the lack of equal work opportunities and to limit their job aspirations. Men are shown as having 139 different occupations ranging from air control personnel and zookeeper to electrician and professor. Women are portrayed in only 14 different occupations. These range from teacher and dancer to cashier and seamstress. Such stereotyping by the school textbooks presents women with the narrow options that are open to them in society as a whole. The texts do nothing to encourage women to become involved in occupations other than those



traditionally labelled "female"

"Married women who aren't mothers, or women who aren't married appear infrequently," the report notes. "Independent women appear not at all. Unattached women don't have to manage alone."

Even the clothing shown in the illustrations reinforces sexist attitudes. Girls rarely wear anything other than a dress no matter how restrictive or inappropriate they are for the occasion. In one story about two children playing in the water, the boy is in swim trunks, his little sister is in a sunsuit, and another girl the same age as the boy is in a sleeveless sundress. The report points out that stories like this give the message "that girls' bodies are objects of shame, that it is indecent for them to be exposed." On the other hand, the stories convey the message that "Boys' bodies are natural, their to be enjoyed, tested and developed."

While the report was only to deal with sexist stereotyping, the racist nature of the texts so incensed the researchers that they included a special section on this. The stories at times viciously ridiculed, mocked and derided Black people - showing them as quaint and inept. The report states: "There is as little in readers to nurture a black child's self concept as there is to nurture a girl's self concept. Worse still, children's minds are being cluttered up with twisted images and malicious untruths."

Native people, like blacks, were granted only "token" representation and the way in which they were portrayed reflected "a negative attitude on the part

of the authors and editors."

The report outlines a series of recommendations to begin to overcome these problems of sexism and racism in the schools. It recommends that all texts and other teaching material be analysed for their sexist and racist content, and the necessary revisions made. It calls for accredited women's studies courses and makes some suggestions as to their format. And it puts forward the need for equal hiring and promotion of women.

The report also calls on the North York Board of Education to hold a conference of high-school women in early December this year on the topic "Liberating the Female Potential"

High-school women should take advantage of this conference, and use the occasion to press for the concrete implementation of the recommendations of this report.



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