# SEXISM IN THE FOURTH GRADE

#217

--Being an account of how I tried
to make fourth-graders aware
of sex roles, stereotypes, and POTOS;
and how I in turn became aware
of cooties, girl-touch,
and the illegibility of fourth-graders' handwriting.

By Kevin Karkau

The fourth-grade open classroom where I student-teach is composed of 18 boys and 10 girls. A high percentage of the students at the school have a parent(s) who is a professional, and the income level is thus relatively high. In the classroom, two students are of oriental background, 26 are white, and the teacher is young, female, and white. The classroom is "open" in that there are no letter grades given, students may work at their own pace on designated workbooks and in areas of personal interest, and they are given 15 minutes of free time in the morning and the afternoon to do as they wish. There are some structured activities, such as art and music classes. Perhaps the greatest difference between the "open" and the "traditional" classrooms is that students are freer to move about in the "open" classroom.

The inspiration for the activities brought in was the behavior of the children. There was a definite problem, in that boys and girls rarely associated with each other. The children could place their desks wherever they wished, but the result was that boys and girls did not sit together. They formed two separate lines--one for boys and one for girls--whenever they went to art class or math lab although the teacher had never asked them to do so. Boys played soccer at recess while most girls played pom-pom or tag. In art class boys and girls sat at separate tables. In math lab, they played separate math games. They teased each other when someone touched a Person of the Opposite Sex (which I will call a POTOS), formed all-girl and all-boy groups for creative writing exercises, sat in two rows for music class, and worst of all, rarely talked with each other.

The children's segregated behavior could be attributed to a "natural stage" that children go through, but I believed that the behavior was a result of socialization processes. Surely this segregation was unhealthy and limiting for those people who wished to associate with a POTOS. I decided to implement some activities with the following goals in mind: (1) making the children aware of unequal treatment given to females in society and in their classroom, (2) getting the kids to feel more free about associating with a POTOS, (3) examining how males and females are stereotyped into certain roles and the effects of such stereotyping, and (4) helping to broaden the children's perspectives of what they may do with their lives.

Change must first begin with the teacher. Teacher awareness will include substantially equal expectations for boys and girls, equal attention, encouraging the children to interact more, pointing out unfair or stereotyped treatment of females in textbooks, movies, readers, and people's attitudes, sharing of classroom responsibilities between boys and girls (running the projector, carrying books, reading aloud), playing equally with boys and girls at recess, and, if oral reading is done by the teacher, selection of non-sexually stereotyped books. Luckily, the teacher in this class was excellent at not discriminating, but there was also little encouragement to interact with a POTOS.

Learning by example can only lead so far, though. For this classroom, some consciousness-raising activities were needed. The first activity was discovered on page 33 of the tremendously helpful booklet Sexism in Education, published by the Emma Willard Task Force on Education, of Minneapolis. The purpose of the activity is to get a feel for the students' attitudes towards men and women. The mimeographed sheet that was handed out to the children is in the back of this report. Here are the instructions I gave to the class:

1. Individually I would like each boy to think of some one-word characteristics of a man, and each girl to think of some characteristics of a woman. Then write the characteristics on the mimeographed sheet. If you have difficulty thinking of characteristics, think of a man or woman you know. If you don't think men or women have any special characteristics, list what an ideal person would be like. In any case, try to list at least five characteristics.
2. From your first list, choose the characteristics that you would like and list them in the second column.
3. Now form groups of three to five people of your own sex. In your group, each one should read their lists out loud. If you don't know the meaning of a word, ask.
4. Decide, as a group, on ten characteristics that you believe are most important for a male (for the boys) or a female (for the girls) to have. Then rank these items from one to ten in order or importance. It is essential that you all participate in the decision.

The students were asked to work on characteristics of their own sex because it was felt that a freer choice of characteristics and more natural discussion of the importance of the items would result, but mixed groups and both sexes working the same sex are possible variations. This section of the activity required about one hour, and the first discussion took place four days later.

On looking over the groups' ideal persons, most of the characteristics that the groups decided on were unisexual--that is, they could be important to both sexes. But there were some differences, especially in the first column (the typical man or woman). There, the traditional views towards men and women showed up. Men were brave, strong, healthy, humorous, kind; women were gentle, pretty, good cooks, clean, and smart. In general, the children described men and women in terms of the traditional stereotypes. In the third column (the ideal man or woman), the differences were more subtle but still noticeable. Here are the seven groups' lists, with the number of people in each group in parenthesis:

FEMALES

| Group I (5) | | Group II (5) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. understanding | 6. firm | 1. active | 6. fairness |
| 2. good mannered | 7. smart | 2. work with men | 7. truthful |
| 3. gentle | 8. clean | 3. nice | 8. smart |
| 4. loving | 9. active | 4. generous | 9. humorous |
| 5. hard worker | 10. confident | 5. helpful | 10. faithful |

MALES

| III (3) | IV (3) |
|---|---|
| 1. nice | 1. healthy |
| 2. good personality | 2. true |
| 3. good looking | 3. kind |
| 4. good sport | 4. serious |
| 5. smart | 5. happy |
| 6. brave | |

MALES

| GROUP V (4) | GROUP VI (3) | GROUP VII (3) |
|---|---|---|
| 1. healthy | 1. perfect | 1. honest |
| 2. educational | 2. smart | 2. fair |
| 3. equal | 3. brave | 3. real |
| 4. friendly | 4. lucky | 4. kind |
| 5. creative | 5. brainy | 5. helpful |
| 6. active | 6. cheerful | 6. humorous |
| 7. patient | 7. nice | 7. imaginative |
| 8. well-off | 8. quick | 8. peaceful |
| 9. kind | 9. fast | 9. uncompetitive |
| 10. intelligent | 10. funny | 10. smart |

I make no great attempts at analyzing these lists, but notice that the girls tended to list qualities necessary for helping other people (perhaps defining themselves in terms of others), while the boys described qualities of a more individualistic nature.

The discussion required two class periods of about 45 minutes each. For the discussion, we all moved into a small corner of the room and sat on the floor. Almost everyone participated, except for three boys who played chess in the corner, but even they were partially listening. The plan was to examine whether males and females should have completely equal opportunities in everything, and to point out the discrepancy between the people the children had described and their behavior in the classroom. (For anyone attempting this activity, it is important to have some broad areas of study in mind, as one can easily get sidetracked during the discussion.)

Two lists were written on the blackboard (numerals I and V) and we discussed the question "to which sex does each list refer?" The children could determine easily that I referred to girls, V to boys. Next we went through the lists and put a check mark by the qualities that could apply to both males and females. Everyone agreed that all the qualities could apply, but there were disagreements over the order of importance. One boy objected strongly to placing "good mannered" (sic) second in importance. He conceived "good mannered" as meaning opening doors for women and seating women at tables. We then discussed why men perform such chivalric deeds, whether women should perform the same deeds, and whether such niceties are really necessary. The girls expressed no strong opinions about such actions, but most of the boys seemed to be repulsed by the idea of being polite to girls--probably due more to fear of being teased than a belief that girls could fend for themselves.

We next went to the third word on the boys' list--"equal"--and discussed its ramifications. How equal should men and women be? Should women have equal job opportunities? Should they have the freedom to be tough, strong, brave, active, as men are traditionally supposed to be? Should boys be able to cry freely and not be teased for it? Are there any qualities that are peculiarly masculine or feminine? What does the word "stereotype" mean? What can we do in the classroom to break down stereotypes? These were some of the questions asked in the discussion.

Everyone believed that men and women should have equal job opportunities. There was less vociferous consensus on the next question, which really asked "to what extent should people be able to behave as they wish?" General opinion among the boys was that "if girls want to act in a 'masculine' way, sure, that's fine;" but it could be seen that most boys didn't want girls to act like boys and couldn't understand why a girl would want to. When asked if boys should be able to cry freely, or play with dolls, the boys snickered a lot but said "sure, if they want to." It was clear that few of them wanted to. Females can certainly have the same job opportunities as males, but the boys were not quite ready to accept equality of personality opportunities. The girls were wholeheartedly in favor of such freedom.

We next discussed the word "stereotype." A boy read the dictionary definition--"a conventional and usually oversimplified conception or belief"--and we discussed how stereotypes work in everyday life. "How many of you have moms that work?" I asked them. "Does your dad ever cook? How many male elementary teachers and female principals have you seen?" Many children had moms that worked and dads that cooked. When the boys were asked if they ever cooked, most seemed a little offended and said "no, because we just don't want to."

I then asked the group if anyone could think of qualities that were peculiarly masculine or feminine. No one could think of any. Now was the time to bring out the discrepancy between their attitudes and behavior. "I don't understand something," I said. "Here you have listed characteristics that could apply to both men and women, you have agreed that males and females should have equal opportunities, that there are no distinctly masculine or feminine qualities, yet in the classroom and at recess, boys and girls hardly ever associate with each other. Why?" No one replied, so I moved the discussion to a more concrete area--that of sports. If equality in the sports area can be achieved, other areas quickly follow. I asked the class why girls didn't play soccer more at recess--was there any discrimination on the boys' part? Some boys were upset at that thought and quickly defended themselves. "They can play if they want to," said the boys, "but they just don't want to." I asked the girls if they felt free to play soccer. Most replied affirmatively, but said they simply didn't want to play soccer. But one girl who played soccer occasionally brought out some real reasons for the lack of female participation. "First of all," she said, "the boys never ask us to play. Then when we do play, only boys are chosen to be captains. And girls don't get the ball passed to them very often, and when a girl scores a goal, the boys don't cheer." I asked the boys if that was true, and they argued a great deal, but finally agreed that the girls had legitimate complaints.

Next I asked the class if they could think of other areas in their classroom where girls were treated unfairly. No one could think of any, so I pointed out the way they were currently sitting. It was as if a wall were separating the sexes--girls on one side, boys on the other. The children looked around as if they had never realized the separation before, then let out a collective sigh of amazement. I then asked them why they formed two lines whenever they went out of the classroom. Some of the boys said that the teacher had told them to do so. But the teacher and the girls quickly corrected that statement. The teacher then asked if previous teachers had told them to form two lines. No teachers had, which showed that the segregation by sex was voluntary, and thus deeply socialized into the children by their experiences outside school.

The first discussion ended and the children went out for recess. There were some immediately noticeable results. Eight girls played soccer, more so than ever before. There were at least three occasions where boys and girls talked to each other. One girl kept touching a boy she liked, teasing him about his hair, but really seeking for some sign of interest. When the students returned and lined up for art class, one girl formed the girls' line on the side where the boys usually stood. "Hey, that's the boys' side," said some boys, whereupon the girls dared the boys to stand on their usual side. The boys weren't quite ready yet to stand close to girls, so that day two lines were still formed.

For the second discussion, the goals were to discover reasons why boys and girls interacted so rarely, to make them more aware of their behavior and its limiting effects on people, suggest activities where the kids could interact more with a POTOS (such as helping with classwork, integrating the art tables and lines), and, if they seemed ready, initiate a reward system (M&M's) for performance of integrating activities. All but the last goal was accomplished, as I decided that rewards would be punishing to those people who were not yet ready to interact freely.

One major reason why males and females don't interact so naturally in our society is that an overemphasis on physical attraction interferes. When a male and female are simply talking to each other, to many this connotes that a sexual attraction exists, even though there may be none. The problem manifests itself even in the fourth grade. I asked the class "why don't you talk with or even go near a POTOS more?" The answers--"People will think you're 'in love' with the person," said many girls; while for the boys, "if you touch a girl you get 'cooties' or 'girl-touch'" (a mysterious quality which can only be removed by saying "no gives"). Obviously, those who act on their feelings are subject to ridicule or embarrassment, in the fourth grade and in society. So I asked the kids why people say such things, and why they themselves take the sayings seriously. There were no explanations, except that people have always done it, and everyone agreed that the sayings were not necessarily true, but that it was difficult to ignore the laughter and ridicule. Getting this point into the open helped to ease the tension in interactions with a POTOS. Everyone believed privately that talking with or touching a POTOS signified next to nothing in itself, but as long as the group enforced its opinion on interactions, it was difficult to disregard the group.

I next attempted to show some negative effects of sexual stereotyping through personal experience. When I was in grade school, I would become very frustrated at failure and break out in tears. Crying only made me feel worse, though, because I was a boy, and boys weren't supposed to cry. This previously untold revelation was difficult for me to relate, but the kids seemed to understand completely. Hopefully it made them realize that expression of emotion should not be limited to one sex.

In the third section of the discussion I asked the children if they could think of specific activities they could perform in the classroom to help reduce the separation between the sexes.

"Invite the girls to play soccer," said one boy. "Stand in the boys' line," said a girl. After that, though, there were no other suggestions, and although many people were interacting more with a POTOS, some were clearly uninterested in the whole issue. I decided to simply list some activities they could do with a POTOS, but not reward people with candy (simply praise) for doing the activities. The list included sitting near, helping standing in line, talking playing sports, saying something nice about a POTOS, and not laughing when people associated with a POTOS.

There was a group of about four boys who seemed to take no interest in the subjects of sex stereotyping and interaction with a POTOS. The reason was fairly simple. In changing their behavior to a situation where unlimited opportunities for living one's life are available, many people lose their security of an already-defined role. The boys didn't understand the long-term benefits of such a change, and felt threatened by loss of their male status. Perhaps even worse, they were afraid of being coerced into changing their behavior. They didn't want to talk with girls or play sports with them, and when someone talked to them about changing roles and interacting with a POTOS, they turned their minds off in fear. Individual attention and explanation is necessary for such people, but they must also be given the option of not changing.

The next logical step, since the class as a group was not completely prepared for natural interaction, was small group discussions. I brought in some advertisements that showed women and men in stereotyped manner, and prepared some questions on the effects of advertising. Two discussions of about a half-hour each were held over the same material, with volunteer groups of six people each. I had previously asked the four boys who seemed uninterested in the subject to volunteer, and two of them did so.

The ads showed women in passive roles, concerned with beauty and pleasing men; while men were shown in tough, outdoorsy roles, such as racing, canoeing, and herding horses. Such ads can be found in almost any magazine; my sources were Glamour, Cosmopolitan, Esquire, and Newsweek. The general goals were to show the overemphasis on beauty in advertising, how sex and glamour are used to sell products, and how ads reinforce stereotyped attitudes about men and women. The points came across well, as everyone understood and could think of other television and magazine ads that furthered sex typing.

But more important than the discussion that day was a change in the children's behavior. Four days had elapsed between the second discussion and the small group discussions, and in that time the girls and boys occasionally played together at recess, and another good discussion over an article in the weekly news-magazine had taken place. The article concerned sex roles, and the kids were strongly critical of some unfair views in the article. I state these facts to illustrate how long it took for some fundamental behavior changes to occur.

Anyway, after the small group discussions, two girls decided to integrate the boys' line. The lines were just forming and the two girls stepped behind two boys, while I was the only male in the girls' line. Immediately the two boys left the line and tried to stand behind me, but some girls arrived first. The boys looked around, realized they would have to stand next to a girl, and as the rest of the class arrived, the lines dissolved into one big integrated line. There was much excited teasing and talking between boys and girls as we walked to the art room, and once there, boys and girls sat together at tables, although not too closely. It was gratifying, to say the least, to see such behavior changes.

Two days later, another major change occurred in the classroom. The same two girls who integrated the lines moved their desks into a boys' group (after asking the boys first). Other girls quickly followed suit and asked to join boys' groups. I suggested to two girls that they ask two of the shyest boys in the classroom to sit with them. The girls were also too shy to ask however, so I served as intermediary and persuaded the boys to sit with the girls. After sitting all year in a corner of the room, the boys moved to the center of the room and sat in a group with girls. There was a tremendous amount of noise and confusion with the desks scraping on the floor, and boys and girls talking, teasing, and flirting with each other. At recess, everyone played pom-pom (a traditionally girls' game at the school). By the end of the day, there were three integrated groups of ten, five, and five people, plus various other all-male groups.

An activity on jobs was partially implemented. The students were asked to write on the following subject: "Imagine you are grown up. Describe a typical day." The purpose was to discover if boys conceived of their adulthood in terms of career goals, while girls conceived of it in terms of domestic life, as in the Iglitzin-Fiedler study ("A Child's Eye View of Sex Roles," Today's Education, Dec. 1972, pp. 23-25). If so, a study of job opportunities would be helpful in expanding the children's awareness of options. But the essays did not turn out well; some children did not understand whether to write about a job they might be doing or just a typical day's activities; others expressed no ideas about their future; while others had spring fever and couldn't write much. So nothing further was done with the subject.

Another discussion was held to examine the children's feelings towards the changes in the classroom and to suggest or entertain ideas for further change. The consensus was that people enjoyed the opportunities for increased association with a POTOS, felt more free to interact, and teased others less when they interacted with a POTOS. But there were no further suggestions for change, except to try individually to be less sensitive to unjust ridicule.

For the final week, two movies were shown to the class. The first one, Psychological Differences Between the Sexes, portrayed men and women in a stereotyped manner and attributed personality differences between the sexes to natural occurrences, not socialization processes. For example, men were typified as being blunt, tending toward direct action, and naturally stronger. Women were shown as more concerned with physical appearance, took general comments personally (more sensitive to criticism), and were more romantic.

I asked the children to write some reactions immediately after the film was over. Here is a sample of their comments:

> It was not true about a man is stronger than a woman. Because there was a woman who could rip a coat of chain mail with her bare hands.
>
> It isn't always true that just women think about what is said about another person. I do sometimes.
>
> It was stupid because the man was doing all the work and the lady was picking up little sticks.
>
> I don't think girls are like they said. I am not like that at all.

We then discussed the film and the classroom in greater detail. The most interesting information from the discussion was that while teasing people for associating with a POTOS had decreased within the classroom, the change had not transferred to outside the classroom. There, the children still experienced teasing that was difficult to ignore. I asked them why other people teased them. There was a long silence, then one girl gave exactly the right answer--"because they've probably been teased too." We decided that the best way to handle such a situation was to either ignore it or explain to the other person why it was wrong to tease someone for associating with a POTOS.

Two days later the kids saw another film entitled Anything You Want To Be. It concerned a girl's career goals (doctor, chemist, class president) and what she actually ended up doing (nurse, mixing baby formulas, class secretary). People kept telling her that she could be anything she wanted to be, but because she was female, the dreams never came true. Even after two showings, the children had a difficult time understanding the idea, as the movie was full of fantasy, sutblety, and symbolism. Also, being young and in a liberal community, the children had not yet experienced society's full oppression against women. Perhaps the ideas contained in this movie will make more sense to the kids as they grow older.

The last activity was a student evaluation of the changes in the classroom. Twenty-four evaluations were turned in, and as can be seen, a high percentage indicated that they felt more at ease in various activities with a POTOS:

1. Since the activities and discussions began on sex stereotyping and male and female behavior, how much at ease do

you feel with people of the opposite sex in each of the following situations?

a. talking with them — much less 1 less 0 same 7 more 11 much more 5

b. standing in line — much less 0 less 0 same 9 more 6 much more 9

c. sitting next to them — much less 0 less 0 same 8 more 9 much more 7

d. helping (in any way) — much less 1 less 0 same 11 more 8 much more 4

e. playing at recess — much less 1 less 0 same 13 more 5 much more 5

f. touching — much less 1 less 0 same 11 more 8 much more 4

2. In the classroom, do you think there is more or less teasing when a boy and a girl associate (talk, touch, etc.)?

much less 9 less 10 same 1 more 1 much more 0

3. Outside the classroom, do you think there is less or more teasing when a boy and a girl associate?

much less 3 less 5 same 11 more 5 much more 0

4. Have any of your ideas about men and women changed?

yes 12 no 10

5. If your ideas have changed, please describe at least one change (more if you can).

6. Please use the space below to list any other comments you may have about the activities--use the back of this paper if necessary. Please think hard. Thank you for filling out this evaluation.

For the last two questions, only nine people wrote about a change in their ideas or commented on the activities. But the attitude changes towards men and women seemed to be healthy, and the comments were all favorable. Here are some examples:

5. Most boys in the class don't mind sitting with, talking to, and touching girls.

At least in our classroom I think everyone likes people more.

They seem to like each other more now because of standing in line together, etc.

6. I think these activities have helped a lot.

I think you have changed the class a little but it helped.

I think outside the classroom is the same--girl-touch, being teased, and so on.

I liked it except the discussions.

I think boys and girls should get jobs just as easy and they should be equal.

Student evaluations must always be taken with a grain of salt, however, as young children tend to answer as the teacher wants them to. There is also the possibility that they will misunderstand the questions, and where are the comments of the people who were uninterested in the activities? But taking into consideration the behavior and attitude changes in the classroom, there is no other interpretation then that these evaluations represent fairly accurately the increased association of boys and girls on a more natural basis.

There have been some definite and seemingly permanent behavior and attitude changes. There is more communication between the sexes, boys and girls feel freer to sit, talk, and play together, and they are more sensitive to sexual stereotyping. The five goals stated at the beginning of this report were accomplished with most of the class. For those who didn't become more free to associate with a POTOS, there was nothing completely wrong with that, either. They must certainly be allowed the option of not associating with a POTOS, as the goal was not to force people to interact, but to expand their opportunities for interaction.

For anyone attempting similar activities, here are some suggestions:

1. Keep an overall view of your goals and ways of implementing them, but also be flexible enough to match the children's moods.
2. Don't go too fast, and be ready to backtrack. Children learn at different rates. (The activities described required only about eight class hours, but it took fifteen days for behavior to change significantly).
3. Be very sensitive to the interactions between the boys and girls. Try to understand what a change in role means for a boy and a girl, and provide some viable role alternatives.
4. Devise some relevant questions for consciousness-raising periods. Tailor the discussion to the problems of the classroom, not just society.
5. If something has affected you deeply, share it with the students. They'll sympathize and perhaps reveal some of their own experiences.
6. Never coerce the students to act in a manner which is clearly not to their desires.

In a way, these activities have required the children to act in a more mature way than adults do--to ignore a person's gender as a measure of ability, to allow people to define their own role, to tolerate various behaviors--but that is exactly the point of education. The value of such education can be seen in the increased associations between boys and girls in the classroom, in their more sociable personalities, and in their positive comments about the activities. The difficulties of the project, such as lack of interest inside the classroom and non-understanding outside the classroom, are only symptomatic of what the children may face in the future. In that sense, the final value of the project depends on the degree to which the ideas I've attempted to communicate can help the children in their future.

| CHARACTERISTICS OF A WOMAN (OR MAN) | WHICH OF THE CHARACTERISTICS DO YOU LIKE? | IN YOUR GROUP, SELECT 10 ITEMS FROM THE COMBINED LISTS THAT ARE MOST IMPORTANT, RANK THEM, IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE |
|---|---|---|
| | | 1. |
| | | 2. |
| | | 3. |
| | | 4. |
| | | 5. |
| | | 6. |
| | | 7. |
| | | 8. |
| | | 9. |
| | | 10. |

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