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GUEST EDITORIAL

MESSAGE TO PUBLISHERS—WE NEED EXPANDED ROLE MODELS IN READING MATERIALS

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Numerous analyses of children's textbooks of the 1970's have demonstrated the pervasiveness of sexism, that is, differences in the portrayal of female and male characters which can have a negative effect on the development of either girls or boys.¹ The under-representation of females as main characters or in careers outside the home in comparison to their representation in reality is a frequent finding. When girls and women are portrayed, they are seen in a limited number of familial and societal roles which often reflect a stereotypic definition of appropriate female behavior based on such characteristics as weakness, passivity and emotionality. In contrast boys and men are seen in a far greater range of roles although many of these roles may also reflect stereotypic notions of appropriate male behavior, such as the display of strength, constant action and a lack of emotion.

Publishers of educational materials have responded to charges of sexism in textbooks in two major ways. First, they have issued guidelines for editors, authors, and illustrators to eliminate sexism and to improve the image of females in their materials. Publishers' guidelines have most often addressed the concern to eliminate sexism in language, occupational roles, personality portrayals, proportion of space allotted to women, and types of activities depicted. Fair and accurate portrayals of males as well as females are encouraged in most guidelines.

Second, some publishers have produced materials which have eliminated sexism in significant ways. In a recent study I found that two newly published elementary reading series contained a substantial proportion of female main characters, many of whom were portrayed in nontraditional, nonstereotypical roles. Stories about girls who were active, competent and assertive were numerous. In contrast, however, roles portrayed by male main characters were overwhelmingly traditional and often stereotypic. Boys continue to be portrayed as strong and silent, engaged primarily in activities stereotypically associated with

¹See for example, the following: Gwyneth Britton and Margaret Lumpkin, "For Sale: Subliminal Bias in Textbooks," *The Reading Teacher*, 31 (October 1977), 40-45; Diane W. Kyle, "Changes in Basal Reader Content: Has Anyone Been Listening?" *Elementary School Journal*, 78 (May 1978), 305-312; Sylvia-Lee Tibbetts, "Sex-Role Stereotyping in Children's Reading Material: Update," *Journal of the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors*, 42(Winter 1979), 3-9.

males, such as sports, adventure, and leadership.

While these publishers are to be commended for increasing the representation of females and portraying them in nontraditional roles, the portrayal of males in primarily traditional, stereotypical roles reflects a serious distortion. When males are portrayed according to a one-sided perspective of human behavior, boys' role choices may be limited, also, just as girls' role choices have been. This omission also contributes indirectly to reducing nontraditional role options for females by introducing a new double standard: Girls can now do "anything" (and everything) but boys should maintain power and dominance at all costs.

Traditional socialization practices encourage boys to develop aggressiveness, competitiveness, and independence at the expense of expressing a wide range of emotions or developing nurturing qualities. Males experience pressure to "prove" their masculinity by outperforming females as well as other males. They are more severely punished than girls for acting in ways which do not conform to the traditional role expectations for males. In reality, individual males exhibit a wide range of personality traits and role behaviors. Traits which are socially desirable for females and linked with society's traditional notions of femininity, such as nurturance, quietness, and emotional sensitivity, are also displayed by males and very often have positive consequences. For example, boys who do display stereotyped feminine characteristics are also more likely to have greater intelligence and creativity than boys with a higher proportion of stereotyped masculine characteristics. Therefore, males and females should feel free to choose their behavior from a wide range of behavioral traits, according to the dynamics of varying situations. And no activity should be discouraged for an individual solely on the basis of sex.

Because they convey influential messages about society, reading materials are needed to show boys in nurturing and expressive roles as well as active and independent roles. Publishers' guidelines encourage such diverse roles for males as well as females. For example:

Both sexes should be shown exhibiting a full range of emotional expression. Men and boys as well as women and girls can be pictured as unhappy, dependent, angry, and joyous.³

Both men and women should be shown cooking, cleaning, making household repairs, doing laundry, washing the car, and taking care of children. . . . Males as well as females can be fearful, weak, mechanically inept, and illogical. . . . Males can be polite, cooperative, inactive, or neat.⁴

(Continued on Page 246)

³Silver Burdett Company, *Guidelines for Developing Bias-Free Instructional Materials* (Morristown, N.J.: Author, 1979).

⁴Scott, Foresman & Company, *Guidelines for Improving the Image of Women in Textbooks* (Glenview, Ill.: Author, 1972).