

EDUCATING PROFESSOR TO ACCEPT RITA AS AN EQUAL

A few weeks ago I went to the conference on women and education management in Vienna. Organised by the renamed Staff College at Coombe Lodge near Bristol, with Council of Europe additional funding. It was called Equal Advances in Education Management. Yet it left me thinking about just what advances, if any, have been made and from which vantage point.

It was clearly a cause for major celebration, that a conference could collect together so many women at relatively short notice and at the Hilton in the heart of Vienna. More than 150 women participated, from Britain and several other European countries, east and west, ranging from Scandinavia to Turkey and Yugoslavia, as well as a handful from North America and Australia. And we were all in so-called management positions within education, from the early childhood level to higher education and governmental positions.

On the other hand, there were many women conspicuous by their absence, women in managerial positions in education or committed to the cause of equal educational opportunities. But perhaps the conference organisers' intention was not so much representativeness as to hold a brain-storming session on the possibilities of women's involvement in education management.

The prospects did not look particularly rosy. Taking a long historical sweep – say since the end of the Second World War – women have been involved increasingly in education management, especially in further and higher education, but it is in this part of the system that

there has been most expansion.

In secondary education, the ebbs and flows of women's involvement have been somewhat contradictory and more subject to political vagaries. A number of the speakers at the conference pointed out how recent reorganisations of the system had inadvertently – at least for the Dutch minister of education – resulted in the loss of women's managerial positions in education. Certainly the evidence from England indicates that to be the case, especially of girls' education. Nor have recent reforms of higher education improved the lot for women as senior or even middle (education) managers.

The conference was more about what could be done about the situation than careful analysis of the factors contributing to or constraining women's equal advances. Of course, it could be argued that such analysis has been carried out ad nauseam. But most feminist and other social analyses focus on women's role in the family, caring not only for children and elderly relatives or those with disabilities, but also for husbands, as being the main constraint on their equal involvement. Such factors as well as lack of adequate alternative care were raised by many speakers at the conference, including, somewhat surprisingly, Angela Rumbold as the valedictory plenary speaker.



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However, even in countries where these questions are more adequately addressed than in England – in particular, Holland and Scandinavia – women often reach a glass ceiling well before they have achieved their potential. Only one woman plenary speaker ventured to explore what the reasons for this might be. An American speaker, Charol Shakeshaft presented an argument based on the sexual politics in education management rather than the more familiar ones of the politics of the family and gender relations.

On the basis of more than 15 years of accumulated research and

teaching experience in educational administration, she argued that women were excluded from positions of seniority and management in education because men could not cope with their sexual feelings. She had found that men would make excuses for not employing women in managerial positions that related to their feelings about working with women whom they might find sexually attractive rather than about the women's ability or otherwise to do the job.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that men feel more comfortable in the work context with male than with female colleagues. I have heard it said many times that key academic decisions have been taken during an ostensible toilet break.

This hidden agenda of sexual politics – and both men and women's feelings about it – seems to me to be the crux of the matter and it needs urgently to be addressed if the slender advances that women may have made, especially in management, are to be sustained. At last these delicate and difficult issues are beginning to surface. During one evening at the conference a group of eight women had a meal together and slowly, as we began to relax and get to know each other, started relating anecdotes about forms of sexual harassment that had happened to us. These incidents, either in the family or at

work, had had long and lasting effects on women's relationships with men, and especially male colleagues, which were difficult to raise. One woman, who had had to deal with a lot of child sexual abuse in a school context, suddenly started talking of a painful incident that had happened to her as a teenager that she had never felt able to share before, let alone with the pupils in her charge and who might have gained from her intimate knowledge, rather than just her very obvious empathy. It had had effects on how she worked with and treated her male colleagues.

Other anecdotes that I have heard reinforce for me how equality between the sexes in the workplace is intimately bound up with the far more difficult and intractable question of sexual relations or sexual politics. The other day I heard a Jewish woman, who had been brought up in a very religious and yet egalitarian American high school, waxing angry about her exclusion from power and decision-making, despite her considerable and superior knowledge to that of many men. Part of her anger, it transpired, had to do with her teenage experiences of sexual harassment at school, over such petty issues as the length of her school skirt.

To me, the value of the Vienna conference lay as much in the new questions it raised as in the solutions prescribed to rather tired and old problems. The challenge of the 1990s will be to try to get to grips with these tricky issues of sexual politics in the public world of the workplace and education, particularly through the education system.