

Out-of-the-Box Education

An innovative New Jersey program takes women's studies back to elementary school

BY ELLEN G. FRIEDMAN

ASKED TO CHOOSE A NOUN and then list adjectives and phrases to describe it, the children in a third-grade class in Somerset County, N.J., pick "boy" and "girl." For "boy," a girl uses the adjectives "smelly, dirty, gross, annoying." For "girl," a boy lists pink, hair ties and Barbie dolls. The teacher rewards the children for doing the exercise correctly and does not comment on their gender stereotyping.

But Brittany DeNitzio, 22, an undergraduate student majoring in women's and gender studies (WGS) and education who is observing the class, vows that when she has her own classroom she will do things differently. In her view, it would have been better for the children to simply list their favorite colors and activities on the board, thus expanding their preconceived notions of what boys and girls enjoy.

DeNitzio is enrolled in a pioneering program at the College of New Jersey that may signal a next stage for women's and gender studies programs: the training of teachers. If it catches on across the country, the program could positively affect children's cultural imprinting as well as provide greater professional opportunities for WGS majors.

Students at the College of New Jersey take the WGS major along with an elementary/early-childhood

or special-education major, and courses are designed to meet the requirements of both programs. In the mandatory children's literature course, for instance, students look at how femininity, masculinity, family and race are represented in children's books. They learn that even a book about ducks can contain subtle cultural messages: Most animals in picture books mimic human social behavior, and they usually follow traditional gender roles.

a true story about two male penguins in a zoo that adopted a baby penguin. Reichelmann then taught the sixth-graders about book-banning governments such as Nazi Germany, and how, as she says, "the truth of knowledge" in those books threatened the powers that be. She gave her students the good news that every banned book in their classroom was available in the local library.

Kerrie McCormick, 22, another major in the program, chose literature

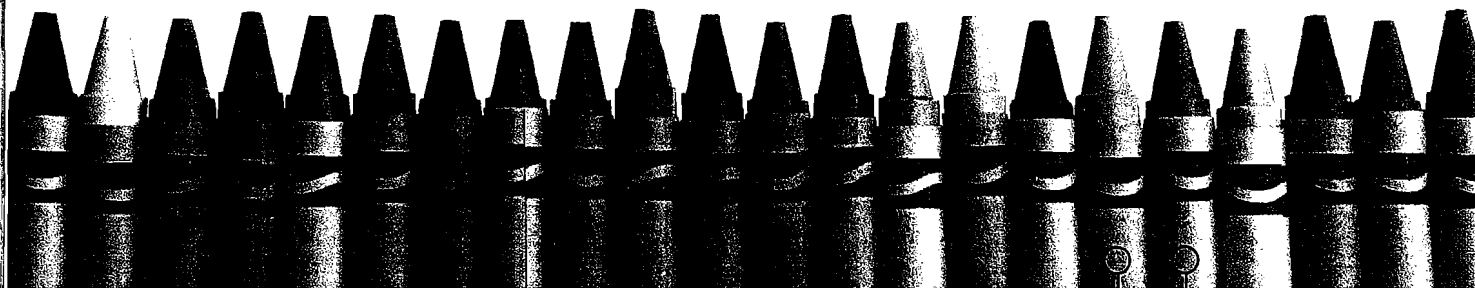
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Majors graduate with the qualifications to teach kindergarten through middle school, and the program has been popular. Since it began in 2004, it has more than doubled the WGS majors at the college.

A key component of the program is student teaching. For example, recent graduate Ashley Reichelmann, 22, developed a unit on the democratic process with her sixth-grade class that included a presentation of elementary school books consistently banned by some U.S. school districts—most of which portray gender or sexual diversity. One was *And Tango Makes Three*,

for the class she taught that featured women or minority characters in leading roles, such as her favorite book, *The Birchbark House*, about in-charge Ojibwa women. Books like this upend the status quo of most elementary-school literature, in which the main characters tend to be male.

McCormick also taught kids to look critically at their textbooks. She highlighted the "box histories" within their history books that isolate the stories of women and minorities from the main narrative. Teaching against the textbook, McCormick criticized this marginalization of women and



In feminist education, girls' and boys' favorite colors aren't prescribed.

Feminine ————— **Masculine**

minorities, insisting that there's "more than one history" rather than a single, all-consuming narrative.

Elementary through middle school is a time of, as education scholar Deborah Britzman writes, "exorbitant normalcy," or strict policing of gender behavior. Children who are taller, rounder or in any way deviate from the crowd may be taunted with "lesbo" or "faggot." An action or phrase even slightly out of the norm can elicit the snide remark, "That's so gay." Teachers must be attuned to the meanings of these everyday transactions in order to interrupt their "normalcy." Ariel Donohue, 22, tells a student-teaching story of a fifth-grade boy who enjoyed drawing pictures of women in fashionable outfits. He was so beleaguered by name-calling that he stopped coming to school. But Donohue managed to boost his self-esteem and woo him back to the classroom, where she enlisted the aid of his fellow students. "We formed a protective team that allowed this student to feel safe and respected in his school," she says.

Children are commonly divided by gender in elementary and middle school despite antisegregation laws, and that's another tradition that majors in the College of New Jersey program work against. A recent graduate named Jennifer Hatrak, 24, for instance, has learned that it's better to organize teams (for sports or academic games) by T-shirt color rather than by gender.

Education scholarship also indicates that boys are still called on more often by teachers, given more time to

talk in class, asked more demanding questions and given more praise. Those teaching behaviors can be even worse outside the U.S., as Bryana Fogarty, 22, learned when she did her student teaching in Kenya. "Girls were beyond scared to step out of the very small space they were given," she recalls, and the principal at the school where she taught told her directly that "women do not have the right to make decisions." But by standing her ground and presenting a strong face to the rowdy boys and silent girls, Fogarty affected their behavior so dramatically that by the end of her time there, the girl students were speaking up almost as confidently as the boys.

Interest in replicating the program has been high in New Jersey and across the country, but a significant hurdle has been negotiating No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the controversial 2002 Bush administration's legislation on education. NCLB mandates that teachers have a college major in a "teachable" subject, such as English, history, math and science, excluding interdisciplinary majors such as women's studies. However, by working with the School of Education, the College of New Jersey's WGS program was able to devise a K-8 major whose graduates meet NCLB's standards. By taking four English and four social-studies courses—many of which are cross-listed with WGS—and then passing state tests in English and social studies, students qualify for teaching credentials from kindergarten through middle school.

NCLB presents an even bigger challenge for secondary-school teacher education, since students must complete a full "teachable subject" major in addition to their education courses. That virtually excludes a WGS major if students wish to graduate in four years. William Paterson University in New Jersey disbanded their WGS and education major for just that reason. The College of New Jersey, however, has done preliminary work on a possible five-year secondary-school master's degree, and is also developing a WGS certificate program for practicing K-12 teachers in order to help them bring WGS knowledge and values into their classrooms.

If teacher education became integral to women's and gender studies majors nationally, a revolution could be on our horizon. The College of New Jersey has already shown that, even in NCLB's test-centric educational climate, bringing gender studies into the K-8 classrooms is highly achievable, and in the fall it will track its first class of graduates, some of whom have already secured teaching jobs. But word of its success is already out. Said one of the graduates, "I have become a confident outspoken woman for social change, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to teach others all that [has been] taught me." ■

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