DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 100 491 PS 007 568

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TITLE Sex Role and Pupil Role in Early Childhood Education.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.; Office of Child Development (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE [74]
NOTE 25p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.85 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Development; Child Role; *Early Childhood Education; Expectation; Learning Processes; Literature Reviews; Preschool Children; Primary Grades; Role Perception; School Environment; School Role; Sex Differences; *Sex Role; *Student Role; *Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Education; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the interaction between sex role and "pupil role" in the early childhood education setting. It postulates that teachers and schools have a demonstrated investment in socializing children to a passive, docile, and dependent role, beginning at the preschool level. This role, called "pupil role," corresponds closely to the traditional female sex role and is incongruent with the standard male sex role. Thus, boys experience conflict and stress in school while girls accommodate to the passive learning style associated with pupil role. The long-range implications of these differential interactions are discussed along with suggestions from research and theory about the benefits of active over passive learning strategies. Finally, recommendations are offered for teacher training and school reform. (Author/ED)

SEX ROLE AND PUPIL ROLE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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...erial in this publication was prepared pursuant to a contract with ... National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education ... Welfare, partially supported by a contract with the Office of Child ... Contractors undertaking such projects under government ... are encouraged to express freely their judgement in ... and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript ... submitted to the Area Committee for Early Childhood Education at ... University of Illinois for critical review and determination of ... competence. Points of view or opinions, however, do not ... necessarily represent official government position or policy, or the official views or opinions of the Area Committee.

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SEX ROLE AND PUPIL ROLE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Society's increasing concern with sexism has persuaded educators to examine the school's potential for fostering sexist values in children. The issues which have attracted the greatest scrutiny have been the sexist content of children's books (e.g., Saario, Jacklin, and Tittle, 1973), sex typing of school-related activities and objects (e.g., Kagan, 1964b; Paley, 1973), and stereotyped sex-role expectations of teachers (e.g., Feinbach, 1969)

Our position is that the school is neither more nor less sexist than most other American institutions. The school does, however, serve a unique function in sex-role socialization through its implicit indoctrination of children to "pupil role" and through explicit support of the larger society's stereotyped sex-role expectations. It is the special nature of pupil role and its resulting interaction with sex role which has important and differential implications for boys and girls and which should be of major concern to educators.[1]

Accordingly, this paper has three objectives: to discuss the origins of pupil role and its relationship to sex role in early childhood settings (from nursery school through second grade); to indicate the problems this interaction presents for both boys and girls; and to offer recommendations for teacher training and school reform.

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[1] This interaction has been analyzed elsewhere (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1974; Lee, 1973; Lee & Gropper, 1974). However, these previous treatments differ from the present one in three important respects. First, none has focused specifically on the interaction between pupil role and sex role in early childhood settings. Second, with the exception of Lee (1973), none has attempted to analyze the etiology and specific nature of pupil role as an institutional phenomenon. Third, none has described and documented a viable and valid alternative to pupil role.

Pupil Role

During the early years, young children assume a variety of roles as a way of adjusting to the complexities of human society and its institutions. In the family, the child usually plays multiple roles; for example, son or daughter, little brother, older sister, etc. Upon entering school, however, children are typically faced with a new set of roles, which, whether at the nursery or second grade level, are peculiar to the school as a institution. Children are expected to be pupils for the first time in their lives. The ideal pupil is often viewed as a conforming, dependent, docile, and unobtrusive child. The assumption is that this behavior profile is the most conducive for learning. This view of pupil role seems to be derived from the nature of teaching as a profession and of schooling as an institution.

In comparison with other professionals, such as physicians and lawyers, teachers receive only brief academic preparation for their jobs. Moreover, the period of student teaching is probably too short and comes too late in training, when one considers the responsibilities students are expected to assume once they take their first real teaching assignments. Katz (1972b) has referred to the first year of teaching as the "survival stage" of teacher development, and Fuller (1969) has found that beginning teachers have anxieties about their own adequacy as teachers which often lead to rigidity and an overinsistence upon maintaining classroom control. With increasing maturity, some teachers shift focus from their own performance as teachers to the children's performance as learners; but, many teachers continue to place a high premium on effective classroom management and

prefer those students who are easy to control. This preoccupation with control is found in teachers in nursery school as well as those in early elementary classrooms.

Early educational settings, whether day care centers or public schools, are probably the most crowded institutions in American urban culture (see Jackson, 1968, p. 8). Whole neighborhoods of children are crowded into buildings for three to eight hours a day. These great numbers of only partially socialized youngsters create enormous problems of crowd control. In view of these realities of schooling, pupil role had to be invented as an alternative to chaos in the hallways, the cafeterias, and the bathrooms, as well as in the classrooms.

Most states have statutes requiring universal, compulsory schooling starting with kindergarten. This means that public schools do not select their clientele, nor do the students voluntarily choose to go to school. One can easily see why the school would place such emphasis on controlling the behavior of its involuntary clientele and why it invokes pupil role as the proper role for students.

From kindergarten on, most schools have an age-graded system. This means that teachers have to move their students through a carefully scheduled sequence of curricula so that they are prepared for the next grade. As a result, there is great pressure on students to move through the school year in an orderly and predictable fashion. Those who have approximated ideal pupil-role status are the ones most likely to be on schedule, exactly where the teacher wants them to be. With the recent introduction of academic instruction in many preschool settings, there is often the same concern with "curriculum" appearing in nursery school classrooms. In preschools

serving lower socio-economic populations "preacademic" programs frequently require the child's accommodation to pupil role. For certain periods of the day, he is expected to sit in place, receive direct instruction, and answer questions just as if he were in first or second grade (e.g., Bereiter and Engelman, 1966). In schools serving more economically privileged populations, admission to prestigious private elementary schools is often based upon an evaluation of the child's performance in nursery school. Such evaluations usually rely heavily upon the child's "potential" for assuming acceptable pupil-role status.

Some readers might argue that the early childhood settings described above are not representative of the typical setting for young children, least of all of nursery schools. Little research has been conducted on this question, but the few studies which have been done indicate that teachers begin socializing children to the pupil role as early as nursery school. Jackson and Wolfson (1968), for example, found that the average nursery school child receives almost three constraints per hour from his teacher. In a school consisting of 97 children, six teachers, and ten assistant teachers, they counted approximately 3,500 constraints every morning: 25 percent of these were imposed by the teachers. The observations took place in a university laboratory school generally regarded as an outstanding example of good nursery school practice. In another study, LaBelle and Rust (1973) found even more instances of control in their sample of 20 nursery school teachers. These teachers averaged 35 control episodes during a 45-minute observational period. Forty-nine percent of these controlling responses were for the specific purpose of socializing children to the realities of efficient classroom management, while another 32 percent

constituted assertions of "personal control" by the teacher. LaBelle and Rust commented that a number of these personal assertions were closely related to institutional objectives, thus indicating further pressure on the children to adopt pupil role, to be passive and manageable. Only 19 percent of the controls were designed to introduce children to the cultural values of the larger society. It would seem, then, that pupil role is a reality of schooling which begins in nursery school and usually becomes an accepted part of the child's experience by first and second grade.

Sex Role

Just as pupil role is a creation of schools and teachers, sex role is a creation of the larger culture. Sex role consists of a set of cultural prescriptions which are delivered to the child by the significant figures in his or her life. Parents, peers, and television characters use a variety of techniques (including modeling, reinforcement, expectations, and direct teaching) to draw the child's attention to the essential parameters of his or her "appropriate" sex role. As the child incorporates early lessons in sex-role identity, he increasingly views sex role as a central component of self-concept and begins to more actively select and assimilate characteristics which are congruent with his emerging sex-role identity. There is no need to review the complexities of sex-role acquisition here, as they have been adequately presented elsewhere (e.g., Maccoby, 1966). A few selected points, however, should be considered:

1. Both adults and peers socialize children to their culturally assigned sex-role identity. Socialization by adults begins during the first year of life (e.g., Goldberg and Lewis, 1969), while peer effect influence is apparent among three-year-olds (Fagot and Patterson, 1969).

2. Most boys and girls are aware of their gender by their third birthday (Gesell, et al., 1940, p. 228); and, whether aware of it or not, behave, according to society's sex-role expectations, in predictably different ways by three years of age (Fagot and Patterson, 1969).

3. Although there are some exceptions, both boys and girls tend to adopt society's prescribed sex roles (see Lee and Gropper, 1974). The male sex role generally incorporates characteristics such as dominance, aggressiveness, physical assertiveness, and large muscle mobility, as well as distinct preferences for certain objects, games, and activities. The female sex role, on the other hand, emphasizes dependence, passivity, neatness, politeness, affiliative skills, and small motor dexterity, as well as toys and activities which allow for expression of these characteristics (see Kagan, 1964a; Sutton-Smith and Savasta, 1972; Ross and Ross, 1972).

Sex Role and Pupil Role

An examination of the characteristics of sex role and pupil role indicates that there is a strong correspondence between pupil role and the female sex role. Second, the exact opposite holds for the relationship between pupil role and the male sex role. One would expect, then, that boys would have a more difficult time adjusting to school than girls. Available evidence seems to bear this out, even at the early childhood levels. One nationwide study, for example, found that girls have much higher promotion rates from first to second grade than boys. Of the 402 schools surveyed, 73.2 percent reported higher rates for girls, 23.6 percent reported no difference, and only 3.2 percent had higher rates for boys (AASA, 1958). Another study, conducted in Marvland, found that girls are referred to extra-classroom specialists much less frequently than boys are, especially

at first grade where the referral ratio is three boys to every girl (Bentzen, 1966). A recent survey of the Boston school system discovered that boys constituted 62 percent of children in classes for the mentally retarded, and that they probably accounted for approximately 70 percent of the "false positives" assigned to these classes. The same survey found that, in the five to seven year age range, 33 percent more boys than girls are "excluded" from school (Task Force, 1970, pp. 38-40 and 82).

Moreover, first grade boys receive more criticism from teachers than first grade girls do, while the two sexes receive about the same amount of praise (Brophy and Good, 1970). At the preschool level, however, Biber, Miller, and Dyer (1972) found that girls received more positive reinforcement than boys did. Another preschool study observed that boys were significantly more disruptive than girls and that boys received three times as many "loud reprimands" from their teachers as girls did (Serbin, O'Leary, Kent, and Tonick, 1973). McNeil (1964) and Davis and Slobodian (1967) found that first grade children were apparently aware of these differences in treatment, since they perceived boys as receiving more negative comments from teachers than girls received. Finally, Gregersen and Travers (1968) asked first and second graders to draw pictures of their teachers. As might be expected, two out of three boys produced drawings expressing negative feelings toward their teachers, while the opposite ratio held for girls.

One might attribute these differences in school adjustment to the relative social and physiological immaturity of boys as contrasted with girls. For example, Bentzen (1966) estimates that at the time of entry into first grade girls are approximately one year ahead of boys in general maturity. Yet boys and girls are officially expected to meet approximately the same standards of performance. This marked difference in maturity

doubtlessly accounts for a sizeable portion of the total variance between boys and girls in initial school adjustment; but we are still left with the striking incongruity between sex role and pupil role for boys and the equally marked congruity between the roles for young girls. Moreover, sex-role differences between boys and girls are not a function of maturity, but of cultural indoctrination. Boys, at whatever level of maturity, seem to have difficulty in coordinating the conflicting demands of sex role and pupil role. This conflict leads to demonstrable stress, starting at the earliest school levels.

It may seem, then, that schooling is a benign experience for young girls. On the contrary, however, the close match between sex and pupil roles for the typical young girl carries its own problems which may be more pernicious than the problems experienced by boys. There are three studies which shed light on the young girl's status in school, one concerned with teacher expectations, and two with teacher behaviors.

Levitin and Chananie (1972) found that 40 first and second grade teachers perceived boys as being "typically" more aggressive than girls, and girls as being more dependent. Moreover, the same teachers significantly approved of achievement and dependent behaviors over aggressive behaviors, regardless of sex of child, indicating their pupil-role expectations. The teachers liked dependent girls more than aggressive girls, but did not like dependent boys more than aggressive boys.

Two other studies indicate that these expectations are reflected in the teacher's behavior with children, even at the preschool level. Fagot and Patterson (1969) empirically identified a repertoire of "sex-role behaviors" among 36 nursery school children. They then observed four nursery school

teachers and found that they reinforced only female-typed behaviors in girls (97 percent), and almost always female-typed behaviors in boys (86 percent). The effect of this repetitious consistent reinforcement schedule was that boys adopted cross sex-typed behaviors almost twice as frequently as girls did, although for both sexes the proportion of cross sex-typed behavior was small (13.5 and 7.6 percent, respectively). Serbin, et al. (1973), essentially corroborated and extended these results by finding that nursery school teachers were highly reinforcing of various dependent behaviors in both boys and girls. One interesting difference was that teachers attended more to physically proximal girls than to girls in distant parts of the classroom, whereas boys received the same amount of attention regardless of their distance from the teacher. This latter finding would seem to indicate that teachers foster greater dependency in girls than in boys. Moreover, boys were found to be about three times as "disruptive" as girls and received about nine times as many teacher reprimands as girls for their disruptiveness. If one were to view disruptive behaviors as assertions of autonomy, then boys were obviously receiving more teacher attention (i.e., reinforcement) for autonomy than girls were. Most teachers, however, probably do not realize that their reprimands are serving to reinforce precisely those behaviors they would prefer to eliminate.

These studies indicate that nursery school teachers both expect and reinforce appropriate pupil-role behaviors in children, irrespective of sex, although their reinforcement procedures appear to be more successful with girls than with boys. Teachers apparently have different sex-role expectations for boys and girls, and are, in fact, faced with real differences in the sex-typed behavior of boys and girls. The typical teacher's expecta-

tions for pupil role interact with her[1] expectations about sex role so that she is defensively sensitized to marked discrepancies between the two and tranquilized by inter-role correspondence. Thus, the poor fit between pupil role and sex role for boys leads to ongoing stress and conflict in the educational setting. Girls, on the other hand, are victimized by the close fit between pupil role and their sex role. They are, in a sense, locked into cumulatively reinforcing cycles of passivity, docility, and dependence and many eventually come to accept passivity as the proper stance for learning. While schooling may be a more benign experience for girls over the short run, boys usually resist full indoctrination to passive modes of learning. The long term implications of the typical girl's relatively easy accommodation to pupil role are probably counterindicative of her ever becoming a fully active learner.

Learning as an Active Process

The above analysis is based upon the assumption that habits of active learning are preferable to the habits of passive learning associated with pupil role. Most educators would be willing to make this assumption despite the probability that they seldom allow it to influence their practice. There are two reasons for this: teachers commonly believe that children must be made manageable before they are teachable and they tend to equate the conditions of active learning with permissiveness or disorder. We do not question the

[1]All 50 teachers used as subjects in these three studies were female. Whether or not the preponderance of females among early childhood teachers is a significant factor in the sex-role ecology of the school is a matter of conjecture (Lee, 1973). However, since 98 percent of teachers at grades three and below are female, these samples would seem to be representative of the sex distribution in the population of early childhood teachers (NEA Research Division, 1971, 1972).

value of a reasonable degree of classroom control, nor do we view ourselves as advocates of "permissive" approaches to education or childrearing. However, it might be useful to recall the writings of Dewey and Montessori. These educators, although misunderstood by many of their contemporaries, could hardly be judged as radical by current standards. Over 70 years ago, in his famous essay "The Child and the Curriculum," Dewey reminded us that "subject-matter never can be got into the child from without. Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within (1956, p. 9)." Thirty years ago, Montessori wrote about the interaction of learning and activity in young children:

> When mental development is under discussion, there are many who say, "How does movement come into it? We are talking about the mind." And when we think of intellectual activity, we always imagine people sitting still, motionless. But mental development must be connected with movement and be dependent on it. It is vital that educational theory and practice should become informed by this idea (1967, pp. 141-142).

More recently, Piaget and his associates have again reminded educators of the essential importance of active cognition to effective learning. According to Piaget the human intellect operates actively upon reality in order to construct and incorporate a symbolic model of the world. In young children such mental operations are mapped upon perceptual-motor manipulations of objects, which, in turn, are external manifestations of the very same mental actions they serve to develop (Piaget and Inhelder, 1971). Dewey, Montessori, and Piaget would therefore seem to agree that the young child's learning should be a mobile, proactive engagement of reality and that enforced passivity would interfere with effective and meaningful learning.

There have been a number of studies on the relationship between activity and young children's learning of simple paired-associate tasks. The basic

finding of this line of inquiry is that children learn better when they actively manipulate objects than when they are allowed no manipulation or are restricted to observing manipulation by another person (e.g., a peer or a teacher). Moreover, when kindergarten-age children are given clearly stated instructions on how to learn paired-associate tasks, they apparently have no advantage over subjects who are not given instructions. That is, experimental treatments which encourage subjects to approximate pupil role are less effective than those which allow for more active modes of learning (Wolff and Levin, 1972; Wolff, Levin, and Longobardi, 1974).

It would seem that the kind of active learning proposed corresponds fairly well with the degree of mobility and object manipulation found in most preschool settings, that it is probably somewhat less evident in kindergarten, and that it rapidly disappears in first and second grade classrooms. Thus as the typical child moves through the early childhood enterprise he begins as an active learner, is gradually socialized to pupil role, and completes early schooling as a passive, less efficient learner than he was at the outset. The available research is quite clear in indicating that this trend is an observable reality, but that the trend runs counter to the best information we have on how children learn. There is something perverse about the way these two bodies of evidence have failed to interface, particularly when one recognizes that the kind of activity advocated by educational philosophers and epistemologists and operationalized by researchers can hardly be equated with classroom chaos. Nevertheless, it is common practice to socialize children in school to passive modes of learning. Teachers are apparently unwilling to risk the benefits of active learning because of its presumed association with loss of classroom control.

Recommendations for Educational Policy

Teachers' professional behavior is a function of their training, their working conditions, and their individual sensibilities. The last would seem to be beyond policy recommendations, but we do have recommendations regarding teacher training and working conditions as they relate to the issues discussed in this paper.

Teacher Training

There is a basic body of knowledge which ought to be included at both the pre-service and in-service levels as a systematic and integral part of teacher training. First, teacher trainees should be given general anthropological information about the school as an institution. To be fully effective, any professional, whether he be a tax accountant or a teacher, must know the folkways of the system within which he works. It is not enough that a tax accountant, for example, be able to compute deductions and fill in tax forms; to be truly professional, he must understand the tax code and know how to manipulate the subtle realities of taxation to work for, rather than against, his client. Similarly, a professional teacher must know more than methods, materials, and content; she must know the code or system of the school so she can use it to the benefit of her clients. General treatments of the school as an institution can be found in Jackson (1968), Silberman (1971), and Sarason (1971). There has been very little anthropological work on the early childhood setting per se, but one might want to begin with Shure (1963), Margolin (1974), and King (1973).

In particular, teacher trainees should receive systematic instruction about the functioning of pupil role and sex role, how these roles interact,

and how these interactions lead to detrimental consequences for girls and boys. Trainees should also be exposed to pedagogical theory and research which compare active and passive modes of learning, and should be able to recognize the implications of these studies for seeing children as learners rather than pupils.

Finally, teacher trainees should familiarize themselves with the principles of behavioral analysis and techniques of behavior change, to avoid the common pitfall of fostering precisely those behaviors they wish to discourage. On this last point, we are aware that there are potential dangers in the misapplication of behavioral techniques, and we are not recommending that teachers indiscriminately use systematic reinforcement with any and all children (see Katz, 1972a). But there are potential risks in allowing people to become teachers of young children when they are unaware of both the reasons for much of what they do in the classroom and the possible consequences. Teachers should know about the folkways of the school, about the realities of sex role and pupil role, and about the contingencies of human behavior; and colleges of education should assume responsibility for imparting this basic knowledge.

Beyond the content of teacher training, there is the matter of training format. It would seem imperative that the formal presentation of knowledge just recommended be accompanied by group discussions or seminars. Such seminars could be a vehicle for trainees' analysis of their own roles as actual or potential teachers and of their place in the overall workings of the school as an institution.

One item for analysis would be the teacher's dual role of custodian and educator. In her custodial role she views the child as a pupil, a consumer

of school-based experience. But when the teacher educates she engages the child as a learner. A second item for analysis would be the teacher's apparent dominance in the classroom, a myth which dissolves rather quickly under careful scrutiny. Teachers, for example, are usually tacticians who implement the strategies of curriculum experts. Moreover, the teacher's behavior is often influenced by the behavior of children and this is particularly true where there is one adult (the teacher) who is working with 20 to 25 children (see Yarrow, Waxler, and Scott, 1971). A final and related agenda item would be a teacher's analysis of her own modeling value for children. It is enlightening to observe children "playing teacher"--and also embarrassing. Apparently, a teacher's most obvious behaviors are managerial and disciplinary in nature. Thus, it would be advisable for a teacher to reconstruct herself as a model of active learning. This would put her in more active control of her own classroom experience, enhance her appeal to children, and attach value and prestige to active modes of learning. Unless a teacher is helped to develop a pedagogical strategy which is firmly grounded in an awareness of institutional folkways and the contingencies of human behavior, she will continue to expend primary energies in the management of minor crises, rather than in the creation of educational experiences.

School Reform

We are not prepared to suggest sweeping proposals for school reform. Such suggestions are usually futile. Also, much of what goes on in school is unintended, but is related to the nature of the institution. For this reason the most profound criticism of the school usually evokes the institution's

most obtuse response. Thus, our recommendations for school reform are modest and specific.

The school should attempt to provide teachers with at least the rudiments of a professional support system. This means that teachers should have access to ev[illegible]ervisory input. Such support would be especially important to new teachers who, feeling constrained to establish their own professional adequacy, are particularly prone to impose inflexible versions of pupil role on their students. The purpose of supervisory support would be to move new teachers through the "survival stage" as expeditiously as possible. Some innovative school systems have teacher resource centers and a cadre of roving supervisory personnel. It would be desirable to have all schools provide the same support to their teachers. Some attempt should also be made to reduce the isolation of teachers through the provision of time and space for group discussion of common institutional and professional problems (see Sarason, 1971, pp. 105-108). These discussions would probably be facilitated by representatives of resource centers or by educational directors, who could keep the sessions goal directed and task oriented, as well as provide constructive feedback. The point of these two recommendations is to help teachers achieve conscious and purposeful control over their classroom behavior and to promote continuity between training and professional practice. Such continuity can be achieved only if the school supports the teacher's efforts to translate her training into application. We can safely assume that most teachers would want to open, rather than close, experiential options to their children, if only they knew how. Therefore, we have placed our greatest emphasis on getting teachers to know what they are doing and why they do it. This is the essence of professionalism and may well be the best hope for eradicating those aspects of pupil role which are most detrimental to all young children.

SUMMARY

Schools for young children do not play a disproportionate role in socializing them to sexist expectations or stereotypic values. Most other childhood institutions are at least as responsible as schools are for such socialization. What makes schools unique is that they constitute the young child's first contact with formal, group-based learning. In order to manage large numbers of involuntary, partially socialized children, each with his own set of individual differences, schools have invented a cultural vehicle, which we have defined as pupil role. Examination of the few studies available indicate that pupil role is in effect at the earliest levels of schooling, including nursery school.

Pupil role places first priority on passivity as the proper stance for school-based learning. As such, it ignores theory and research which holds that learning is facilitated by activity and inhibited by passivity. Pupil role corresponds very poorly with the male sex role, thus making for ongoing stress and conflict between young boys and their schools. Ironically enough, young girls are victimized by pupil role for precisely the opposite reason. The close correspondence between pupil role and the female sex role seduces most girls into becoming well-behaved students and passive learners. The short-to-medium-range implications of these role interactions are probably more damaging for boys. Girls, however, probably suffer more over the long run due to the relatively dysfunctional modes of learning they adopt. It would seem that both sexes would benefit from considerable loosening of the constraints imposed by pupil role.

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