

To Thine Own Self Be True: Examining Gender Roles and Stereotypes through a Pre-Adolescent Lens

Dan Barber

Introduction:

The idea for this curriculum unit came to me from the least likely of sources. Immersed in my first year of teaching fifth grade (for six years I was a 2nd grade teacher followed by a one year stint as a Talent Development Catalyst teacher) I was thoroughly overwhelmed trying to keep pace with the fifth grade content and standards I was being expected to effectively implement while, at the same time, continually seeking out exciting and engaging ways to deliver that content to my students. As the year was slowly drawing to a close I discovered that teaching fifth grade also carried with it the responsibility of teaching our pre-adolescents the ins and outs of puberty and the myriad of seemingly frightening changes their bodies were about to undergo (or were already in the process of undergoing). Needless to say, I was certainly not thrilled by the prospect of having to teach this topic to my students toward the end of an already arduous school year. In fact, if you were to poll even a small sampling of fifth grade teachers across the school district, it would be a safe bet to expect most of those teachers to identify reproductive health and safety education, or “RHASE” as it is commonly referred to, as the least exciting aspect of their job (or year for that matter). Reproductive health, as subject matter, just does not present quite the excitement and thrill to a fifth grade teacher as science or an interesting novel or the unraveling of a complicated math problem.

Despite my reservations about teaching the reproductive health curriculum, particularly toward the conclusion of what had already been a long and draining school year, I mustered up every ounce of energy I could to deliver this content in a meaningful and interesting way. What followed surprised me more than I could have anticipated and set me on the path toward the idea for this curriculum unit. While I had been dreading even the mere idea of teaching the reproductive health curriculum and my students had given visible signs of having similar thoughts and feelings about what they anticipated would follow, things played out much more differently than either my students or I could have expected. What I quickly discovered was that in all the forethought I had given to the teaching of this curriculum and how it would play out with my class, as a whole, what I hadn’t considered was the perspective of my individual students. While my class, as a whole, was genuinely uninterested in talking about puberty, sex, or reproductive health, they each, individually, were very interested in these topics. In retrospect, this certainly makes a lot of sense. The reproductive health curriculum and topics we discussed were more relevant to the kids than just about anything else we had covered over the course of the school year. While topics such as the weather, decimals, and forces and motion were

relevant to many facets of the kids' lives none were as important as the topic of puberty. Puberty was a topic my students were living through and nothing could be more pressing to them than getting some help explaining the range of hormones, feelings, and biological changes which they were experiencing to varying degrees.

One aspect of the experience helping my students get a firmer grasp on the changes they were encountering which particularly resonated was the discussions my students and I had around gender. At the onset of these discussions my goal was to get through the conversations in as expedient a manner as possible so I could then glaze over some of the more sensitive topics addressed by this curriculum unit. However, once my students began talking with each about gender, and particularly gender roles, it became quickly apparent to me what a powerful topic this was and how much of an injustice I was doing by simply glazing over it. Thus the brainchild for this curriculum unit whereby I would seize upon my students' natural curiosities and instincts about the changes they were undergoing to engage them in meaningful dialogue and activities related to gender and gender roles.

Background:

I am a nine-year teaching veteran and currently teach fifth grade at an inner city magnet school, Irwin Academic Center, for academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) children in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System (CMS). My class is currently composed of 27 students: 7 girls and 20 boys. All of my students are AIG/talent development (TD) certified, necessitating that the curriculum I prepare for them be both rigorous and meaningful in nature. As a result of this, I spend a great deal of time researching ideas, resources, and materials that are higher-level in nature, sometimes 1 or 2 grade levels above what is typically expected in a fifth grade classroom.

In addition to the challenges posed by the level of academic functioning of my students, I am also under a great deal of pressure from the parents of my students to deliver an academically rigorous curriculum to their children. Since Irwin is a magnet school, the parents of my students actively researched the school and went through a demanding application process (and lottery) to have their child assigned to Irwin. Consequently, the parents have high expectations that the time and energy they devoted to getting their child accepted to Irwin will be rewarded by a challenging and engaging curriculum which meets the needs of their child.

In my brief tenure at Irwin Academic Center (this is just my second year in this particularly learning environment) I have noted that the expectations placed on my students by their parents primarily because their child has been identified as academically gifted, are often at odds with the expectations my students have for themselves. My kids just want to be kids and enjoy a more carefree lifestyle devoid of the stresses and strains

that face most of their parents in their demanding work environments. In a sense, giftedness manifests itself as an added burden my students are forced to carry around with them. This burden, coupled with my students' challenge of being representative of their culture, gender, and family, carries with it a lot of weight for pre-adolescent children. It is little wonder why I often find myself playing the roles of psychologist and counselor, helping my students to manage the lofty expectations being placed on them which run in conflict with their desire to have fun and enjoy their youth.

The pressures my students face weighed heavily in my decision to focus my curriculum unit on self-identity through a gender lens. Fifth grade is a year of closure for my students, representing the culmination of their very first years of schooling. But it is also a vital stage of preparation as my students transition from being at the highest rung of the elementary level to being the lowest students on the middle school totem pole. If my students do not have a good handle on their self-identity by the time they leave my classroom at the end of the school year, it can be expected that they will have a more challenging time unraveling their self-identity once thrown into a more independent schooling environment where they share time and space with peers who may be two to three years further along the path of adolescence. Consequently, fifth grade is perhaps the most critical time for children to identify, assess, and explore their self-identity and the role societal stereotypes of gender can play in shaping that self-identity.

Objectives:

Pre-adolescence is a difficult stage in anyone's life. This is the stage in one's life when the body begins wreaking biological havoc on appearance and emotions. Couple this with the pressure one faces from their peers who may be less than accepting or understanding of the changes a person is undergoing and it becomes plain to see why so many kids switch into "survival" mode during this stage. It is critical, in my opinion, as our boys and girls are taking their first steps on the path to becoming men and women, that we give them the tools to make meaningful sense of the changes they are experiencing and the myriad messages they are receiving from multiple sources about what it means to be a man or a woman.

One objective I have for my students is that they will be able to self-identify around values, beliefs, and opinions, regarding gender that allow them to navigate and manage outside influences. An additional objective I have for my students is that they be able to identify gender stereotypes created or propagated by multiple media sources as well as individuals within my students' circle of influence. However, mere awareness of gender stereotypes, in my opinion, is not sufficient enough for me to feel as if I have done my due diligence in aiding my students in developing and fostering their own identity independent of any outside influences. Therefore my final objective for my students is that they be able to apply what they have learned about their own self-identity coupled with the ways in which media and other outside influences create and propagate gender

stereotypes to make sound and meaningful decisions related to what they desire their identity to be.

Rationale:

Gender stereotyping starts at a young age and has a lasting effect on children in a multitude of immeasurable ways. From television series such as Bob the Builder or Thomas the Train Engine (*Thomas and Friends*) to such popular children's books as *Amelia Bedelia* and *Harry Potter*¹, children get strong messages about what it means to be a boy or a girl, man or a woman from a very young age. These messages shape our children's perception of what it means to be a member of a certain gender, which then leads to their questioning of their own role within that gender.

Early Influences

Gender role stereotyping can neither be escaped nor avoided even at the youngest of ages. Kids' books, television shows, movies, and songs all carry with them sources of influence over a developing child's perception of what it means to be a member of a certain gender. How is a child supposed to react when Thomas the Train Engine's bullying aristocratic boss, Sir Topham Hat, gets on him for exposing his sensitive side or failing to fulfill the masculine stereotypes that are associated with being a rough and tough steam engine?² How is that same child supposed to feel when they flip through children's television programming and the latest releases of children's DVDs and are hard-pressed to find any show or movie of substantial quality or popularity featuring a female protagonist in the role of lead character? Switch over to the world of literature and that same child, and for that matter all children, will have the hardest of times even finding well-known or popular novels or children's books featuring a female character in a lead role, never mind the fact that such books often feed into potentially harmful societal stereotypes of gender roles. Such gaps and omissions of gender role models who defy societal stereotypes can be difficult to overcome. This problem only grows more challenging as our students grow older and the need to act upon some of these societal stereotypes and conform to peer pressures becomes increasingly more important to our children.

Emergent Influences

While early media and societal influences on our children arguably shape and influence the later perceptions those same children have about each gender and their own self-identity, it can be argued that such media influences are more clandestine in nature and, at times, more self-aware to the potential havoc such messages can wreak on the developing psyche of our toddlers and elementary-aged children. As Poniewozik has pointed out, many sources of children's media are making efforts to address sexism and, at the bare minimum, demonstrate a cognizant effort to recognize and, in some cases, counteract gender stereotypes.³ Bob the Builder and his personification of masculinity is

now joined by Dora the Explorer and her efforts to bring a greater degree of balance to gender role perception at such an early age. While research still shows that the balance of children's programming and literature are still skewed heavily toward content that reinforces gender stereotypes, research backs the assertion that progress is being made in this area (though, again, one can only surmise to what degree that progress will continue to be made).

The same cannot be said about the role media and societal influences play in shaping the self-perceptions of our pre-adolescent children. When it comes to children's programming, geared toward toddlers through early elementary-aged children, our society is careful to draw lines and boundaries related to what constitutes acceptable programming and media influences at this age. These same lines and boundaries tend to be nearly universally adhered to by the parents of these children; you would be hard-pressed to find a parent of a kindergartner who would deem it acceptable for their child to watch *The Fast and the Furious*. Yet no such boundaries exist for what is acceptable pre-adolescent programming and literature and what sources of media should be off-limits until our pre-adolescents have matured more or developed literacy skills for examining such texts through a critical lens. As a consequence of this, pre-adolescents, and in many cases, pre-pre-adolescents, are left to make sense of media ranging from the latest viral video on YouTube to popular movies with adult overtures without the critical understanding that such media have been intentionally created or constructed to push a certain idea or agenda without regard to sensitivity to who the audience of such text may be.

Effects of Gender Role Stereotyping on Self-Identity

Bandura's social cognitive theory⁴ suggests that children, adolescents, and adults, alike, learn from the behaviors portrayed in media. Other theorists argue that identification with a media character (or characters) has a critical influence on the beliefs and behaviors of the consumers of that media. While the intensity of this influence and its effect on preadolescents is still unclear the fact that such an influence exists is hardly in dispute.⁵

Equally as alarming as the influence that media exerts on pre-adolescents is the form and variety of media readily available for this population to consume. In television alone, the number of commercial television channels available in most homes has leapt from three major networks to over hundreds of networks. Add to that the influence of Internet sources of media, particularly video content sites such as YouTube whose popularity has exploded over the last 5-10 years, and video games, another popular media venue for pre-adolescents, and it is easy to identify the innumerable sources of media, and potential gender stereotypes, which exist for pre-adolescents.

So what do pre-adolescents see and experience when they consume these various sources of media? The general patterns of media are particularly troubling for girls.

Over 30 years ago, Gerbner and Signorielli noted that male characters on primetime television outnumbered females of 2.5 to 1 in the years spanning 1969-1978.⁶ While this figure may strike one as startling, it actually mirrored societal roles around that time as the U.S. labor force, as late as 1950, had 2.5 men for every 1 woman represented.⁷ As the labor force has grown more representative of society, overall (as of 2008 there were 1.2 males for every female in the U.S. labor force), has primetime television representation kept pace? Not so, according to Howard Fullerton⁸ who cited the latest figures on male to female representation as 1.6 males for every female in primetime television programming.

The underrepresentation of girls/women also exists in media such as music videos (3:1 male to female ratio)⁹ top-grossing G-rated movies (2.57 males for every 1 female)¹⁰ and in video games (7 male characters for every 1 female character)¹¹, a particularly popular source of media imagery for pre-adolescents.

The underrepresentation of female role models for pre-adolescent girls is particularly troubling when viewed in isolation. However, it is also important to take into account the fact that a mere increase in the prevalence of female characters does not necessarily address the lack of positive role models for pre-adolescent girls. For example, in their study, Edward Downs and Stacy Smith found that 41% of female characters represented in best-selling video games either wore revealing clothing or had unrealistically proportioned bodies.¹² Add to this an analysis of cartoons showing female cartoon characters were much more likely to be shown as more attractive than male characters (by a 7:1 ratio).¹³ Attractiveness, in turn, has been linked with more positive social characteristics than negative. Consequently, simply increasing female representation in media imagery may, in some cases, exacerbate the problematic effects, particularly for pre-adolescent girls, if serious questions relating to the role(s) female play in such content is not simultaneously addressed.

According to relevant research, media imagery can be particularly damaging to pre-adolescent girls. Hayley Dohnt and Marika Tiggemann conducted a longitudinal study of seven-year old girls and found exposure to television shows in which appearance was emphasized led to decreases in satisfaction with appearance as soon as 1 year later.¹⁴ Similarly, Sarah Murnen et al. found that girls with a stronger awareness of sexualized images of female celebrities were more likely to have poorer body esteem.¹⁵ In a study of 10-12 year olds, Sarah Lindberg et al. found that by age 11 girls experienced more self-surveillance (defined as the tendency for women to monitor their bodies to see if they are meeting cultural standards) than boys.¹⁶

What effect does gender stereotyping have on boys, particularly with such an emphasis being placed on the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women and girls in a vast array of media sources? Research related to gender stereotypes impact on pre-adolescent boys is less prevalent than the research associated with the potential

harmful effects such as stereotyping can have on girls. However, as Margaret Quinlan and Jennifer Bute note, part of the deficiency in research related to this topic is rooted in the lack of boys and men's involvement in sex education and some of the critical conversations which often arise in those settings.¹⁷ In their examination of sex education classes at the college and university level (though still applicable to the discussion of pre-adolescent sex/gender education), Quinlan and Bute found the majority of classes were geared toward educating women about sex, sexuality and potential inherent risks assumed by sexually active women. Left out of this conversation, and in many cases discouraged from enrolling in class and, by default, even participating in the conversation about sex, were men. By requiring women to take part in the class (or receive a waiver from a health care professional) but not holding men to the same standard, colleges and universities were essentially holding men blameless for many of the ills associated with gender stereotypes and the effect those stereotypes have on their recipients.¹⁸

Lisa McClure also espouses on the effects of gender stereotypes derived from media imagery, particularly as it relates to boys. Even when parents and teachers work together to dispel gender stereotypes or present children (pre-adolescents included) with positive messages related to gender roles and equity, those same children simply cannot avoid the gender bias and stereotyping they are exposed to through the multitude of media they are exposed to on a regular basis. Consequently, boys are similarly hindered by gender stereotypes.¹⁹ As Beth Benjamin and Linda Irwin De-Vitis note, the same predominant stereotypes which often lead girls to create the expectation for themselves as a future "nurturer" or "caregiver" often leads boys to believe themselves to be "hunter-gatherers", responsible for providing for or protecting their family.²⁰

In an interesting study on the plight of boys, Megan Rosenfield tells the story of a five-year-old boy who insists on purchasing a pink (his favorite color) bike. After enduring merciless teasing (particularly at the hands of girls who regularly wore blue) the boy, by the age of eight, refrains from disclosing to others that his favorite color is pink.²¹ Such stories tend to be more commonplace for a population (boys) who are more fragile as babies than girls, more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities, sent to the office, or prescribed medication for hyperactivity or attention deficit disorder. This same population is five times more likely to commit suicide than their female counterparts and is increasingly more likely, as adults, to be incarcerated, abandon their families, or both the perpetrators and victims of crime.

Gender bias, stereotyping, their collective effect and the role media imagery plays in these important topics, then, is not simply an issue confined to one particular gender. It is a concern that has important implications and consequences and, as a result of this, should be explored with fidelity in a manner conducive to both genders.

Strategies:

Pre-writing/Free Writing

It is critical to the success of this curriculum unit that my students have the opportunity to gather, process, and write down their thoughts unhindered by the perspectives, opinions, and biases of their classmates and other media sources (which will be discussed as the unit progresses). One important tool I encourage using to assist in this process is pre-writing/free writing. Prior to discussions on gender roles and stereotypes, I will engage my students in the process of free writing their thoughts, perspectives, and opinions on several topics and questions related to gender roles and gender stereotyping. While it is certainly not my belief that my students' work will be free of any potential biases (obviously, by age 9 or 10 they've already been heavily influenced by their surroundings and upbringings), it is my hope that the free writing strategy will free my students of the burden of conforming their answers to those of their more outspoken or adamant classmates (since free writing does not carry with it the implicit notion that all students will be expected to share their free writing thoughts).

Jigsawing

Looking at media and how gender is represented in media from different perspectives and through a critical lens is going to be important to provide my students with the background information they will need to process and respond to during the course of our focused class discussions. Rather than forcing students to endure whole group dissections of piece after piece of media, I plan on making more efficient use of my students' time as well as engaging them more personally in the critical examination of gender roles in media through the use of the jigsawing strategy. In smaller, more focused groups, students will, in pairs or small groups, each be asked to critically look at a different form of media and report back to the whole class on some of the perceptions of gender roles created by this form of media. Once partnerships or whole groups have examined this media, their observations, pared down and summarized, will add a voice to the class's shared understanding of media-created perceptions of gender roles and the influence those perceptions can have on their audience.

Active Questioning/Paideia Seminar

I am anticipating my primary role in this curriculum unit as one of guide or facilitator. My students must come to their own level of comfort and understanding of the sensitive topics we will discuss and unravel. Consequently, the greatest tool I will have at my disposal is the use of questioning. My observations, over the years, have led me to believe that students, at this age, are far too accepting of manipulative messages as universal truths. Therefore, one aim I will have in this curriculum unit will be to inspire skepticism in my students such that they are not lured into false perceptions of gender

roles as spoon fed to them by media messages or authoritative sources. Paideia seminar, whereby I will guide my students through a closer examination of text or other material while being carefully deliberate not to insert my own biased opinions or beliefs, will be one tool I hope to utilize to accomplish this goal.

Gender Along a Continuum (Defining Gender)

As students delve into the topic of gender identity, it will be important to engage students in discourse related to the question(s): what does it mean to be a boy? What does it mean to be a girl?

Related to these questions, it will be important for students to examine, discuss, and understand that gender exists along a continuum whereby certain traits can be more closely defined or attributed to one gender than other traits. For example, along the gender continuum it is pretty safe to assume that most American pre-adolescents would identify “playing with dolls” as more representative than “baking”, thereby implying that it will be more socially acceptable for boys to bake than play with dolls. Some activities, such as swimming, tennis, or reading will more readily fit into the “middle” of the continuum, thereby implying that they are socially acceptable activities or characteristics of both boys and girls. When discussing gender along a continuum it should be stressed to students that even the very definition of boy or masculine and girl or feminine is very much open to interpretation and that there may not be conclusive agreement, even amongst a small sampling of boys and girls, where certain descriptors fall along a gender continuum. It is also critically important to note, to students, that gender continuums are very much social constructions and, as such, the society a student is a member plays an important role in the shaping of the gender continuum. For example, “hugging” or may be viewed as primarily feminine traits in American society. However, in many Asian cultures it is not uncommon to see boys hugging each other, implying that this characteristic is more gender ambiguous than it is in American society.

As with much of what will be done in this curriculum unit, the gender along a continuum strategy is designed not merely to inform students (about the openness of the interpretation of even the definition of boy/masculine and girl/feminine) but also to empower students in their ability to make sound and meaningful decisions related to their own gender identity. It is my hope that once students realize the ambiguity related to defining gender and the many shades of grey which exist when attempting to clearly denote certain characteristics as being exclusively masculine or exclusively feminine they will develop a greater level of comfort with their own traits and recognize how increasingly difficult it can be trying to fit oneself into a gender role which is not very clearly defined nor agreed upon.

Reflective Writing Journals

While free writing before a discussion will be instrumental in controlling for the influence of peer pressure, the use of reflective writing journals, following lengthy discussions on sensitive topics will be just as critical to the success of this unit. During the course of our jigsaw activities and Paideia Seminars, students will be exposed to a variety of different opinions and perspectives on gender roles (and stereotypes). Providing students with a post-discussion opportunity to gather their own thoughts and opinions is going to be critical to the success of this curriculum and is also going to be a critical tool for me to assess student learning and perceptions (particularly any changes in perceptions). A writing journal, therefore, will be one such tool for students to reflect and respond to the information and opinions they are gathering in an unbiased manner.

Activities

Gender Self-Identity Assessment/Pre-writing Activity

Critical to the success of this curriculum unit will be my students' thoughtful consideration of their own perceptions of gender roles and a close/critical examination of the ways in which they do or do not personify those very same perceptions. To start my unit, then, I will ask my students to take a close/critical look at what it means to be a member of a certain gender, what expectations tend to be associated with membership to that gender and how closely they, as individuals, meet or fail to meet those perceived expectations. In its most simplistic form, I will ask my kids, "what does it mean to be a girl or woman? What does it mean to be a boy or man? How are girls/women or boys/men supposed to act or behave? Do you feel like you act or behave the way your gender is expected to act or behave?"

Affording my students the opportunity to free write their responses to these questions will achieve two purposes. First, my students' responses will provide me baseline data upon which to gather a better understanding of my students' perspectives going into this unit. Second, free writing will free my students from having their opinions altered or influenced by the opinions of their peers as may be prone to happen if I started this unit with a class discussion.

Sources of Gender Stereotypes

Another important component of this curriculum unit will be having students taking a close look at the abundant sources of potential gender stereotypes which exist in their sphere of influence. For this activity, students will be split into small "jigsaw"- style groups. Each group will be assigned a source of gender-related messages and potential stereotypes and asked to discuss their sources. Within their groups, students will be asked to develop a list of smaller sub-group sources of gender-related messages, within

their overall source, and to also describe some of the messages they receive from those sources. Once such a list has been compiled, students will be asked to analyze and evaluate the predominant messages they receive from those sources and whether or not, on a whole, those messages tend to reinforce or refute potential gender stereotypes. The sources of gender-related messages students will examine (with some possible suggested “subgroups”) include (but may not be limited to):

- Family (parents, siblings, immediate family, etc.)
- Peers (age-level peers, friends from school, etc.)
- Religious-related sources (church sermons, youth groups, religious texts, etc.)
- Activity group-based sources (sports teams, activity clubs or organizations, etc.)
- Print media sources (newspapers, magazines, comics, etc.)
- Electronic media sources (movies, television, video games, etc.)

Once students, in their small groups, have concluded their examination, analysis, and evaluation of these sources of gender-role related messaging, groups will share out their findings with the entire class. Critical to the success of this curriculum unit will be the ensuing discussion which takes place as these sources of gender-role messages are raised. It can certainly be anticipated that there will be a lot of variance in the respective experiences of a class and that the messages students receive from various sources will be indicative of this variance. Consequently, it is important that discussion be allowed to take place centered on each of these topics such that students can respectively hear each other’s examples and learn from each other’s experiences. Classroom discussion will also be critical to coming to consensus related to the reliability of messages from certain sources. For example, are the gender-role related messages we receive from our parents more or less reliable than the messages we receive from print or electronic media sources? Once addressed, this question will be followed by the critical application of: what makes one source of gender-role related messages more reliable than another source? While it is certainly not anticipated that clear consensus regarding the accuracy and reliability of gender-role related messages will be achieved on all sources, the most important part of this activity is that students come to realize that not all sources of gender-role related messaging are equally reliable. Secondly, it is equally important that students learn to become critical consumers of gender-role related messages, regardless of the source of those messages. Through the process of the discussion related to this activity, students should come to understand that they should not be passive consumers of messages, but rather, critical examiners of those messages (and the sources from which those messages originate).

Media Imagery Examination (Positive and Negative)

While ample time will be devoted to the examination of gender-role related messages (particularly stereotypes) originating from non-media related sources, a great deal of time will be devoted to a more careful examination of media-related gender messages. Rather than generating a list of media sources, ahead of time, to discuss with students, this activity will be entirely student-driven. (Using student-generated media sources is particularly recommended, considering the rapidly changing nature of much of the media our students consume. Having the students generate examples of media which is of relevance to them is particularly advisable in making this activity one in which students can relate).

For this activity, students will be asked to look critically at various sources of media and the gender-related messages, perceptions, and potential stereotypes those sources of media send to their consumers. Students will each be asked to identify a source of electronic media they feel is relevant or resonates with them (or with their age-level peers). Examples of electronic media can range from commercials to favorite scenes from full length feature films. Students choosing to focus on a longer piece of video footage, such as a favorite movie or television show, will be asked to select a smaller snippet, no longer than 1-3 minutes in length, to share.

Prior to having students analyze their sources of media imagery through a gender-role/gender-stereotype lens, it is important that the teacher model this skill. The teacher should select a couple of video clips to use with students which present both explicit examples of gender stereotyping as well as more subtle forms of gender stereotyping (i.e., girls wearing pink). It is recommended that the teacher be deliberate in choosing different forms of media to share with students such that students can begin to recognize how such imagery is deliberately applied depending on the medium and message purpose. For example, a short television commercial is much more likely to include gender bias than a feature length documentary since the commercial will rely more on gender bias to generate an emotion which leads to the purchase of a product. After students have been given ample practice in identifying examples of gender stereotypes perpetuated by electronic media sources, it will not be time for students to put theory into practice as they examine their own self-selected electronic media clips.

Prior to analyzing their video clip, students will be asked to recount what they recall about the video clip as well as any fondness or attachment they associate with the video clip. This is an important step in the process as students should begin to recognize their subjective feelings or affinities for the video clip they have chosen prior to participating in an objective analysis of the clip. Once students have recorded their feeling, thoughts, or associations with the video clip, they will then be asked to participate in a thorough analysis of the video clip. For this analysis, students should view their video clip through a gender lens, looking at any messages, both explicit and subtle, which create, perpetuate, or reinforce gender stereotypes. Following their analysis of their self-selected electronic media text, students will be asked to swap video clips with a peer (preferably of the

opposite sex) and engage in an analysis of each other's video clips. Once students have analyzed a peer's text, they will compare notes with that peer and discuss any differences in their analyses. After students have had an opportunity to view, analyze, peer review, and share their analyses with their peer, the teacher should select a few examples of the students' video clips to share and analyze as a whole class. This will be important in assessing how well students have internalized the process of video clip analysis (through a gender stereotype lens) and to "spot check" the student analysis process. This should also lead to several critical conversations related to the topic of gender stereotype perpetuation through electronic media which will be important to enhancing the entire class's recognition and understanding of this concept.

Print Media Imagery Analysis

In a similar fashion to the electronic media imagery analysis described above, students will also be asked to follow similar steps in analyzing examples of print media sources. It is important to note that print media sources can be interpreted as books, short stories, magazines, posters, pictures, or just about anything printed on paper or a "page" of any source. Following the same steps of analysis, students will be expected to self-select print media imagery (again limiting their print media source to something manageable, such as a favorite part of a book or advertisement from a magazine). Drawing upon their experience from the electronic media analysis, students will then be asked to follow some of the same steps of self-analyzing their selected work before participating in a peer review and, if selected, a whole-class review. Throughout the process of review, students will be asked to be mindful and self-reflective regarding how their analysis of text compares to their peer and whole-class analysis (thus raising their awareness of the personal bias which may exist and may hinder their ability to objectively analyze their self-selected media texts).

Myths versus Reality

After students have participated in the media analysis process, it is important to bring everyone back together and engage in a more broad analysis of media created myths and societal realities. Whenever possible, the teacher should be prepared to contribute counterexamples to media myths or interject relevant facts, figures, or information which will allow students to construct a more unbiased reconstruction of societal realities. For example, if students raise the topic of the media-generated gender-role stereotype that men are expected to be brutish, tough, and seemingly emotionless, the teacher should consider providing students with counterexamples to this imagery, such as the peaceful and loving messages of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi. It is critical to the success of the debunking of media myths that the teacher assume the role of facilitator and guide students to understanding the differences between media myths and societal realities through counterexamples and the fulfillment of the role of "devil's

advocate”. Student-led discussion, along the lines of a Paideia seminar, should be the catalyst in guiding students to this understanding.

Empowerment

The final, and perhaps most critical, part of this curriculum unit is the empowerment portion. The goal of this unit is not just to guide students in an understanding and recognition of media-based gender stereotypes. Mere recognition of gender stereotypes is not the most desirable outcome of this curriculum. Instead, the driving thrust behind this curriculum unit is empowering students to take action and actually do something positive to debunk or counteract gender stereotypes. What that “something” is could take various forms and should be entirely student-driven. It is certainly advisable for the teacher to offer students suggestions related to how they may wish to empower themselves, and others, to both recognize and speak out against media-based gender stereotypes. Suggestions might range from creating their own videos which spoof or make light of gender stereotypes (thus applying an appealing comedic perspective to an important issue) to writing letters of protest to companies or organizations which blatantly produce media that reinforce gender stereotypes. Again, what shape or form student empowerment assumes will be entirely dependent upon the particular group of students. However, it should be the expectation of the teacher that every student develop and create a product demonstrating how their knowledge, awareness, and analysis of media-based gender stereotypes have empowered them to take positive action to curb the effects of such stereotypes.

Annotated Bibliography

Guillermo Avila-Saavedra, “Madame President and the First Gentleman: Gender and Power in ‘Commander in Chief.’” *Conference Papers – paper presented at International Communication Association Annual Meeting* (2009), 1-23.

One very poignant and representative example of what may be considered a “shift” in gender-role representation, particularly of women, in media. Discusses how even when women are presented in authoritative roles or roles which counteract common gender myths, they are still often presented with many stereotypical feminine traits which tend to undermine the counteraction of a gender-role stereotype.

Albert Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication.” in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, Jennings Bryant et al., eds. (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002) 121-154.

In a pretty well-known theory of social construction, Bandura hypothesizes that large portions of an individual’s knowledge is directly related to their observations of others in social contexts.

Beth Benjamin and Linda Irwin DeVitis, "Censoring Girls' Choices: Continued Gender Bias in English Language Arts Classrooms," *English Journal* 87 (1998): 64-71.

In an interesting study of sixth through eighth grade girls in a summer literature discuss group, Benjamin and Irwin-DeViti uncovered that a majority of girls in this age group are aware of the societal stereotype that the preeminent role for American girls is one of nurturer and caregiver. Despite parents and educators who profess that they encourage girls to aspire to careers and lives outside of the realm of caregiver/nurturer, a majority of girls still register this as their paramount goal and acquiesce to this plight.

Hayley Dohnt and Marika Tiggemann. "The Contribution of Peer and Media Influences to the Development of Body Satisfaction and Self-esteem in Young Girls: A Prospective Study." *Developmental Psychology* 42 (2006): 929-936.

In an important study on self-esteem and self-image at a young age, Dohnt and Tiggemann examined the self-image of 97 girls (aged 5-8) at one point in time and a year later. Dohnt and Tiggeman also tracked the exposure of said girls to "appearance-focused" television shows. Their findings – girls who watched considerably more appearance-focused television shows were more likely to believe a thin body image to be ideal and, consequently, have a lower self-image (particularly if they were not living up to the thin ideal).

Edward Downs and Stacy Smith. "Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis." *Sex Roles* 62 (2010): 721-733.

In an analysis of 60 popular video games, and over 450 video game characters, Downs and Smith found a gross overrepresentation of male characters to female characters (420 to 70). When present, Downs and Smith found female characters to either be dressed provocatively/inappropriately and/or depicting an unrealistic body type/image.

George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli. *Women and Minorities in Television Drama 1969–1978* (Philadelphia: The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1979).

Gerbner and Signorielli take a close look at the shift in women and minority representation in primetime television over a ten year pattern. Though they found the rate to be steadily increasing, it is still not reflective of societal norms.

Hugh Klein and Kenneth Shiffman. "Messages About Physical Attractiveness in Animated Cartoons." *Body Image* 3 (2006): 353-363.

In an analysis of animated cartoons, particularly those directed at young children, Klein and Shiffman revealed an overwhelming tendency for such cartoons to associate positive

messages with attractiveness (and attractive characters) and negative messages with unattractiveness (and unattractive characters). Klein and Shiffman's research is important to the understanding of the creation of social stereotypes at a very early age.

Sarah Lindberg, Janet Hyde and Mary McKinley. "A Measure of Objectified Body Consciousness for Preadolescent and Adolescent Youth." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30 (2006): 65-76.

Lindberg et al. defined objectified body consciousness (obc) as the ability to view oneself as an object to be judged/evaluated by others. Self-surveillance, per their definition, is the tendency for an individual to monitor one's body in relationship to a cultural standard or norm. In their study, Lindberg et al. found that by age 11 girls experienced a greater degree of self-surveillance than boys.

Lisa McClure. "Wimpy Boys and Macho Girls: Gender Equity at the Crossroads." *The English Journal* 88 (1999): p. 78-82

In this article, McClure shares a couple of anecdotal stories (such as the 8-year old boy whose favorite color was pink) which clearly illustrate the dangers of gender stereotyping. Additionally, McClure offers suggestions of activities one can do with students that not only expose gender stereotypes but also has students taking steps to address such stereotypes in positive and meaningful ways.

Sarah Murnen, Linda Smolak, J. Andrew Mills, and Lindsey Good. "Thin, Sexy Women and Strong, Muscular Men: Grade-school Children's Response to Objectified Images of Women and Men." *Sex Roles* 49 (2003): 427-437.

Murnen et al. found girls to have a stronger reaction to objectified images of women (i.e. the "thin ideal" for women) than the reaction given by boys to objectified images of men (i.e. the "muscular ideal" for men). Stronger reactions to objectification, in turn, were shown to have a strong relationship to poorer self-image, particularly by girls.

James Poniewozik. "Is Kids' TV Sexist?" May 28, 2009.
<http://entertainment.time.com/2009/05/28/is-kids-tv-sexist> (Accessed August 10, 2012).

Interesting article related to recent analyses of children's television. Poniewozik takes issue with some criticisms of children's television and encourages a "closer read" of such television to derive a clearer opinion (as opposed to simply citing instances of female characters, for example, without considering the context in which those characters appear).

Margaret Quinlan and Jennifer Bute. “‘Where are all the Men?’ A Post-Structural Feminist Analysis of a University’s Sexual Health Seminar.” *Sex Education: Sexuality, society, and learning* (2012): 1-14.

In this study, Quinlan and Bute examine the effectiveness of sexual education seminars at the college/university level. They identify several areas of concern related to sexual education seminars in higher education, including the victimization of women (by only requiring women to take part in such seminars), the “dumbing down” of curriculum such that it is not befitting a college-aged audience, and the absence of open dialogue and discourse on sensitive sexual education topics. Quinlan and Bute’s research is particularly helpful in the crafting of relevant and engaging curriculum for preadolescents as it identifies the pitfalls and shortcomings of said curriculum for young adults.

Megan Rosenfield, “Reexamining the Plight of Young Males,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 1998.

With much emphasis being placed on the effects of gender stereotyping on girls/women/females, Rosenfield turns her attention to boys and the effect such stereotyping has on males. In particular, Rosenfield details the damaging effects gender stereotyping has on boys both statistically (higher rates of incarceration, higher incidences of learning disabilities, etc.) and anecdotally. Rosenfield’s work lends credence to the effects of gender stereotyping on both genders as well as the need for greater research into the effects of such stereotyping on boys/males.

Stacy Smith, Katherine Pieper, Amy Granados, and Marc Choueiti. “Assessing Gender-Related Portrayals in Top-grossing G-rated Films. *Sex Roles* 62 (2010): 774-786.

In an analysis of over 100 more popular G-rated films released between 1990 and 2005, Smith et al. assessed the prevalence of male characters to female characters and the roles assumed by such characters. Their findings showed an overwhelming incidence of males to females (2.57 to 1) and found female characters were portrayed in more traditional or stereotypical roles.

Jacob Turner. “Sex and the Spectacle of Music Videos: An Examination of the Portrayal of Race and Sexuality in Music Videos. *Sex Roles* 64 (2010): 173-191.

Turner examined music video content from such popular music television stations as MTV, MTV2, BET and CMT with a particular focus on gender and race portrayal in music videos. His research found that gender and race play an important role in the level of sexual content portrayed in videos (particularly in African American music videos which were significantly more likely to portray sexual content and/or women in provocative clothing).

Classroom Materials

Student journals – As this unit is a sensitive one, it is important for students to be able to record their thoughts, particularly those related to the topics of gender, gender roles, and gender stereotypes in an anonymous manner. Consequently I suggest each student have their own journal or daybook in which they can record their thoughts freely (without fear that such thoughts will be publicly disclosed). I also suggest allowing time at the end of each day's activity/lesson for students to take a few moments to reflect and write.

Novel sets – Part of this unit will incorporate the open dissection of popular children's literature through a gender lens. Thus it will be important that students have some form of common knowledge or understanding of specific novels. Since each classroom dynamic is certainly different, I am not going to suggest any particular novels nor would I suggest paying particular attention to gender-related variables when selecting what novels to use with students. Part of what should make this activity work particularly well is the ability to have students reflectively look back at novels that have been shared collectively and/or books they have read individually and examine those books for signs of gender roles, gender inequity, and gender stereotyping. Once students have critically and reflectively looked back at what has been read prior to this curriculum unit, it will be important to have them use this literary criticism to help drive their (and perhaps your class's) future book choices.

YouTube and/or other video technology – The success of this unit is predicated on the ability of students to be able to view and analyze images of popular culture. Since what is considered popular culture is subject to change at the drop of a dime, it is important that students have accessibility to the latest popular culture videos. YouTube is currently the best source of such popular culture imagery and should be utilized in such a way as to allow students to access, view, and analyze popular culture imagery (with, of course, teacher discretion applying to what qualifies as appropriate imagery to be analyzed).

Teacher Resources

Howard N. Fullerton Jr. Labor force participation: 75 years of change, 1950-1998 and 1998-2025. *Monthly Labor Review* (1999): 122.

Notes

¹ Mikulan, Krunoslav. "Harry Potter through the Focus of Feminist Literary Theory: Examples of (Un)Founded Criticism" *The Journal of International Social Research* 2 (2009): 2.

² Jessica Roake. "Thomas the Imperialist Tank Engine: The Not-so-hidden Subtexts of the Popular Children's Show." http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2011/07/thomas_the_imperialist_tank_engine.html (Accessed August 10, 2012).

³ James Poniewozik. "Is Kids' TV Sexist?" May 28, 2009. <http://entertainment.time.com/2009/05/28/is-kids-tv-sexist> (Accessed August 10, 2012).

⁴ Albert Bandura. "Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication." in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, Jennings Bryant et al., eds. (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002) 121.

⁵ Ibid, 127.

⁶ George Gerbner and Nancy Signorielli. *Women and Minorities in Television Drama 1969–1978* (Philadelphia: The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1979).

⁷ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2000. http://www.bls.gov/oes/2000/oes_nat.htm (Accessed August 10, 2012).

⁸ Howard N. Fullerton Jr. Labor force participation: 75 years of change, 1950-1998 and 1998-2025. *Monthly Labor Review* (1999): 122.

⁹ Jacob Turner. "Sex and the Spectacle of Music Videos: An Examination of the Portrayal of Race and Sexuality in Music Videos. *Sex Roles* 64 (2010): 177.

¹⁰ Stacy Smith, Katherine Pieper, Amy Granados, and Marc Choueiti. "Assessing Gender-Related Portrayals in Top-grossing G-rated Films. *Sex Roles* 62 (2010): 777.

¹¹ Edward Downs and Stacy Smith. "Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis. *Sex Roles* 62 (2010): 721-733.

¹² Ibid, 725

¹³ Hugh Klein and Kenneth Shiffman. "Messages About Physical Attractiveness in Animated Cartoons." *Body Image* 3 (2006): 355.

¹⁴ Hayley Dohnt and Marika Tiggemann. "The Contribution of Peer and Media Influences to the Development of Body Satisfaction and Self-esteem in Young Girls: A Prospective Study." *Developmental Psychology* 42 (2006): 933.

¹⁵ Sarah Murnen, Linda Smolak, J. Andrew Mills, and Lindsey Good. "Thin, Sexy Women and Strong, Muscular Men: Grade-school Children's Response to Objectified Images of Women and Men." *Sex Roles* 49 (2003): 430-431..

¹⁶ Sarah Lindberg, Janet Hyde and Mary McKinley. "A Measure of Objectified Body Consciousness for Preadolescent and Adolescent Youth." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30 (2006): 73.

¹⁷ Margaret Quinlan and Jennifer Bute. "'Where are all the Men?' A Post-Structural Feminist Analysis of a University's Sexual Health Seminar." *Sex Education: Sexuality, society, and learning* (2012): 1-14.

¹⁸ Ibid, 1-14.

¹⁹ Lisa McClure. "Wimpy Boys and Macho Girls: Gender Equity at the Crossroads." *The English Journal* 88 (1999): p. 78-82

²⁰ Beth Benjamin and Linda Irwin DeVitis, "Censoring Girls' Choices: Continued Gender Bias in English Language Arts Classrooms," *English Journal* 87 (1998): 64-65.

²¹ Megan Rosenfield, "Reexamining the Plight of Young Males," *Washington Post*, March 26, 1998.