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Middle School Girls and the Gender Stereotypes We Teach Them: Can Girls be Saved by Proper Pedagogy and *The Hunger Games*?

Jacqueline J. Alderman
St. Cloud State University

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**Middle School Girls and the Gender Stereotypes We Teach Them: Can
Girls be Saved by Proper Pedagogy and *The Hunger Games*?**

by

Jacqueline J. Alderman

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

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Thesis Committee:
Judith Dorn, Chairperson
Judith Kilborn
Stephen Hornstein

Abstract

Gender is one of the first characteristics we learn about people. It used to be that doctors would excitedly shout, “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” upon delivery, and now, most people find out the gender of their babies at only 20 weeks gestation. This gender, then, dictates the colors of nurseries and clothes, names, hopes and dreams, and because of gender roles in society, the success and quality of life the baby will attain. Gendering everything, however, can lead to significant problems for students as they come to realize that gender oppression is still a challenge faced regularly by women in the United States. What we think we are supposed to be is what we will become. Literature containing gender violence, stereotypical gender roles, and outright sexism is still widely taught in public middle schools, and if female students are complying with the messages they’re receiving, the effects can be detrimental. These negative effects can include lower self-esteem, lower test scores, and even where blame is placed in the cases of sexual and gender violence. Because the findings are alarming, and because the literature does not seem to be changing, I have made several recommendations herein for educators, so that we may work to break the cycle that continues to harm our adolescent girls. The most important recommendation is for teachers to address the messages with students. Also included is an analysis of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008), and whether or not it is a recommended text for combating gender stereotypes.

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this thesis to my daughters, who will not be held back by their gender.

Autumn, Allie, and Ivy inspire me every day and were the strength that brought my Master's journey to its culmination. Love you all. Mom.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Gender is one of the first characteristics we learn about people. It used to be that doctors would excitedly shout, “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” upon delivery, and now, most people find out the gender of their babies at only 20 weeks gestation. This gender, then, dictates the colors of nurseries and clothes, names, hopes and dreams, and because of gender roles in society, the success and quality of life the baby will attain. Society prescribes acceptable gender roles, and children learn about them at a very young age. It is not uncommon to hear preschool children talking about “boy toys” or “girl clothes.” Bem (1983) found that “what parents, teachers, and peers consider to be appropriate behavior varies as a function of sex; that toys, clothing, occupations, hobbies, the domestic division of labor—even pronouns—all vary as a function of sex” (p. 609). Gendering everything, however, can lead to significant problems for students as they come to realize that gender oppression is still a challenge faced regularly by women in the United States. What we think we are supposed to be is what we will become.

This is likely not surprising to most readers; we tend to be aware of media images and the way they shape us. What we may not realize, however, is that these messages are reinforced in the very place they should be questioned and contradicted: school. “What it means to be a man, and what it means to be a woman, are communicated to children by all the adults in a child’s life, including teachers” (Kommer, 2006, p. 247). I have been teaching language arts and reading for five years, primarily at the middle school level, where my students are working to find themselves and where they fit into their world. Adolescence is a time of constant identity questioning. The National Middle School Association (1995) found

that this is likely because “during early adolescence (often defined as the ages between 10 and 15), young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes that at any other period of their lives. This period is usually accompanied by an increased urgency to form a sense of identity” (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003, p. 426). Most teachers, myself included, work to help students push through this awkward time, providing them with guidance and encouragement on a regular basis. Additionally, Broughton and Fairbanks (2003) found that “language arts, perhaps more than any other academic discipline, has the potential to facilitate identity development” (p. 433). Conceivably this is because of the heavy literature component.

One day, I was reading aloud to my sixth graders, from the book *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1961), and I came across this passage: “Two young ladies about my age stopped, stared at me, and then giggled. My blood boiled, but I could understand. After all, I had three sisters. They couldn’t help it because they were womenfolks. I went on” (p. 28). I was appalled, and looked up at my students, expecting to see a similar reaction. Yet what I saw inspired me to conduct my research: Each of my students sat, silently, waiting for me to continue. Some even nodded in agreement, as if they, too, know how girls are and have no higher expectations for them than the character in our book. This attitude, known as benevolent sexism (Black & McCloskey, 2013; Diekman & Murnen, 2004), “reflects [the] tendency to endorse the traditional feminine ideal or to view women in idealized, overly romantic terms or as delicate creatures who require protection” (Diekman & Murnen, 2004, p. 375). This idea, which describes men as strong and women as weak, is the basis of stereotypical traditional gender roles in our society. And “neither girls nor boys can

effectively engage with social justice when they rely on stereotypes about gender and feminism” (Coats & Trites, 2012, p. 141).

Literature containing gender violence, stereotypical gender roles (benevolent sexism), and outright sexism is still widely taught in public schools (MN Department of Ed, 2010), likely because it is considered “classic” in nature and thereby appropriate. It seems that people reinforce gender stereotypes in order to conform to society’s expectations; therefore, it makes sense that these gender stereotypes would be present in the literature. But doing so can have grave implications for adolescent girls and the women they will become. When teachers ignore passages like the one from my class, they are agreeing with the statement. Short (2001) reminds us that “not positioning oneself *‘is a political stance’*” (as cited in Rubinstein, 2007, p. 364; italics in original).

Something happens to girls during their careers in the K-12 public school system. Sadker and Sadker (1994) remind us that “although girls in the early grades are ahead of or equal to boys on almost every standardized measure of achievement, by the time they reach high school, girls score lower on standardized tests” (as cited in Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003, p. 426). What is happening to girls between these early grades and graduation? Kommer (2006) states: “Most girls like being at school, but there is strong evidence that, as a social institution, schools can damage girls at the same time as they educate them” (pp. 249-250). This may be because “the books they read are most frequently written by men; they know the hierarchy of the school district is dominated by men; science classes frequently focus on male achievements; and math is presented as a male domain” (p. 250). In addition, “middle school students are navigating their inner and outer selves as they construct identities,

which include facets such as race, class, sexuality, and gender expression. As part of this construction of self, they use the texts they come across in their lives. They engage with texts as they read them to find themselves in the world” (Ma’ayan, 2012, p. 2). Girls begin as confident, smart, capable individuals, and just at the time when they’re most fragile and trying to figure out their own identities, we (society, teachers, etc.) send them the message that they are not worthy of doing what they hope to do. We teach them what is expected, regardless of the effects and then act surprised when they don’t perform as well.

Finders (1997) found that “girls’ roles are neither biologically determined nor individually constructed. Various expectations of society socialize young girls into particular gendered roles” (p. 12). Because society continues to operate under the assumption that girls and boys are pre-programmed to behave in certain ways, and because literature continues to reinforce traditional roles, teachers must prepare girls to be ready to face sexism (Bem, 1983). This approach will take effort, but the consequences of teaching any other way can be detrimental.

For this project, I really wanted to know what happens to middle school girls when they encounter negative messages about their gender in the literature we, as teachers, are assigning to them. I sought to figure out how girls could be affected, both initially and in the future, by reading about characters who exhibit typical and atypical behaviors according to society’s prescribed gender roles. My method began by looking at studies of how people, in general, may be affected by fictional texts, and moved into analysis of adolescent girls, specifically. In addition, I looked at the literature commonly taught at the middle school, in particular, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). When it became clear that not only were girls

influenced by what they were reading, but also that the content of these novels is extremely gendered, I looked to see the possible effects on the girls of receiving these negative messages. The negative effects can include lower self-esteem, lower test scores, and even where blame is placed in the cases of sexual and gender violence. Because the findings are alarming, and because the literature does not seem to be changing, I have made several recommendations herein for educators, so that we may work to break the cycle that continues to harm our adolescent girls.

Chapter II: Effects of Gender Stereotypes in the Classroom

How Girls are Affected by What They Read

One of the first items to consider is how girls might be affected by what they read. That is, can simply reading fiction which contains characters who behave in stereotypical ways contribute to some type of change in behavior? Gender schema theory suggests that yes, what girls are reading really is having an effect on them. According to the theory, “sex-typing derives in large measure from gender-schematic processing, from a generalized readiness on the part of the child to encode and to organize information—including information about the self—according to the culture’s definitions of maleness and femaleness” (Bem, 1983, p. 603). Ma’ayan (2012) came to a similar conclusion: “Gender and sexual identity are constructed, in part, by the texts a girl encounters” (p. 57). And Jacobs (2004) also agrees: “How the genders are portrayed in young adult literature contributes to the image young adults develop of their gender roles and the role of gender in the social order” (p. 19). Children learn to become male and female, at least according to society’s definitions, by organizing information presented in various formats and behaving according to this information.

Put more simply, Diekman and Murnen (2004) have found that “books teach children about gender roles” and that they “change children’s ideas about the world” (p. 373). Additionally, Tsao (2008) stated: “Strictly speaking, everything that children read contributes to the formation of self-images that help to construct children’s self-identity” (p. 108). Adolescents are likely equally affected by what they read because “books play an important role in the development and growth of ideas” (Heine et al., 1999, p. 427). Additionally, Pace

and Townsend (1999) found that “literature, like all texts created and discussed in our culture, helps shape our perceptions of people and places in the world” (p. 43). We learn based on our environment, books included.

Card (2005) reminds us that “fiction is made up, but it is not all lies. Or rather, out of the sum of his lies, the author’s view of truth inevitably emerges, and if the writer has wrought skillfully, some portion of his view of the world will remain with the reader, changing and shaping him” (p. 226). Even though people know and understand that fiction is not true, they still “insist on the illusion of truth and on truth itself” (Card, 2005, p. 226). People believe what they read, at least at some level, and it *can* change them, “even when passages are clearly based in fiction” (Diekman & Murnen, 2004, p. 373). When students are reading fiction, they are creating truth. Their identities are changing as they try to conform, and “books have long served as one of the primary vehicles for the communication of gender roles” (Carpenter, 2000, p. 91). This may be because “literary texts can be seen as cultural productions that actively participate in the reproduction and interrogation of the social order they are produced in” (Moffatt & Norton, 2005, p. 6). One study (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993) found that people remember books for a significant amount of time, even more so than other forms of media:

Conversations with adolescent students showed that individuals whose parents had read to them during preschool years could still name the title of their favorite children’s book, had accurate memory of the story content, and expressed enjoyment in remembering it. [...] Their recall of television programs did not seem to produce such a lasting impression. [...] Given this long-term influence of books, there can be no doubt that the characters portrayed in children’s literature mold a child’s concept of socially accepted roles and values, and indicate how males and females are supposed to act. (p. 219)

This story recall, even after such a significant amount of time, indicates the real influence of such stories on a child's future. Remembering stories so accurately may be harmful, since Tsao (2008) reminds us that "literature is one of the homes of gender stereotypes" (p. 108).

Research (Blumberg, 2008; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Jacobs, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Scott, 1986; Smith, Greenlaw, & Scott, 1987) has found that encountering literature which contains these traditional gender roles can lead to limited expectations for girls, and that "gender bias in textbooks is suspected of diminishing girls' achievements" (Blumberg, 2008, p. 346). Simply being exposed to characters who behave in stereotypical gendered ways "increased the traditionalism of children's gender-related beliefs" (Diekman & Murnen, 2004, p. 373). This finding is significant because it indicates that what children are reading is helping to mold how they will behave in society. They are likely so influenced because "the written word is one of the most powerful ways to transmit ideas and information" (Kinman & Henderson, 1985, p. 885). On the other hand, Scott (1986) found that if students are exposed to literature which contains female characters who behave in more *nontraditional* ways, they "were more likely to think that girls could perform the nontraditional activity of the narrative" (p. 106) than students who read similar materials with male characters performing the same tasks within the stories. The number of stories read did not change this effect (Scott, 1986). Clearly, what students are reading is affecting them in incredible ways.

This effect may be because, as Child, Potter, and Levine (1946) stated:

It is assumed that in reading a story, a child goes through symbolically, or rehearses the episode that is being described. The same principles, then are expected to govern the effect of the reading on the child as would govern the effect of actually going through such an incident in real life. (p. 3, as cited in Smith et al., 1987, p. 401)

Each event, whether real or imagined, contributes to how we view ideas, and helps us shape our views of how we should act based on our gender. In a study of Kansas and Texas teachers' read aloud choices, Smith et al. (1987) found:

Even without direct statement of what is important, interesting, valued, or acceptable, messages are sent to children indirectly by the content in the books that teachers choose to read aloud. [The books chosen by teachers send] a very strong message [...] to boys and girls about what is important, interesting, valued, and acceptable in terms of sex roles. (pp. 400-401)

It appears that whether students are listening to a story or whether they're reading it on their own, they are influenced nonetheless.

Smith et al. (1987) found that when students encounter curriculum with sexist ideas, they receive a specific message:

The message [...] tells children that boys should be active and aggressive, not passive and reflective. This may be contributing to the phenomenon that boys stereotype sex roles more than girls do, and boys have more difficulty modifying their perceptions even in the light of evidence to the contrary. [...] Perhaps the worst effect of sex stereotyped curriculum materials has been to make children - especially boys - feel that sex discrimination is a natural process that everybody follows. (p. 405)

So not only are boys and girls learning about sex roles from what they are reading, boys in particular may be learning that part of being a boy is discriminating against girls. In addition, these messages, according to Smith et al. (1987), teach students of both genders that only boys do "interesting, exciting things" and that girls do not; therefore, "it is easy to understand why it is accepted knowledge that girls will read what boys like but boys will not read 'girls' stories'" (pp. 404-405).

Marshall (2004) states that "representations of gender in children's literature, then, can be read [...] as discursive constructions that shape the social categories of 'boy' and 'girl'" (p.

259). Adolescents face similar fates when confronted with literature that contains these traditional gender roles. Jacobs (2004) states:

The manner in which genders are represented in adolescent literature has the capability to impact young adults' attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society. [...] Young adults may be particularly susceptible to gender portrayals in literature as they work through a stage in life in which they are searching to define themselves. Gender stereotypes in literature can prevent young adults from reaching their full potential as human beings by depriving them of suitable role models and reinforcing age-old gender constraints in society. (p. 20)

Because we can see the potential for adolescent girls to be influenced by what they are reading, it becomes increasingly important to delve into possible consequences. Smith et al. (1987) found that "It is realistic to characterize women in [traditional] roles, but when the characterizations dominate the images of women presented [in text,] the cumulative effect on children's socialization is extremely problematic" (p. 402). Women in traditional roles continue to reinforce stereotypes, and these should not be the only characters to which adolescent girls are exposed. If girls are believing that they should behave according to traditional roles, the implications are serious.

The Implications of Conforming

Learning to conform to traditional gender roles can be very damaging to adolescent girls and women. Studies (Black & McCloskey, 2013; Grubb & Turner, 2012) have found that adoption of traditional gender roles by both men and women led to higher instances of victim blaming in cases of rape. Men and women who subscribe to traditional roles "are more likely to accept rape myths (e.g., 'women secretly want to be raped'), to downplay the seriousness of rape, and to blame rape victims" (Black & McCloskey, 2013, p. 951). In addition, they are "harsher on the victim and more lenient towards the perpetrator than people

with feminist attitudes” (Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 447). Studies (Black & McCloskey, 2013; Grubb & Turner, 2012) also found that the gender roles prescribed to men and women in our society (men as more aggressive and women as more passive, men as powerful and women as submissive) tend to excuse rape as an extension of the way men and women are predisposed to behaving:

Those with traditional gender role attitudes may be more likely than those with liberal gender role attitudes to subscribe to traditional gender scripts, whereby women are not supposed to initiate sex and may resist it even if they intend to engage in sex [therefore] participants with traditional gender role attitudes may be less convinced that a rape has occurred. (Black & McCloskey, 2013, p. 952)

According to Grubb and Turner (2012), “Sex role socialization theory suggests that rape between dating partners should be viewed less as rape and more as part of normal sexual interactions” (p. 446). They found that this is because “forced intercourse supports the role of the male as the dominant party who initiates sexual overtures” (p. 446). Because of the behaviors prescribed by traditional, stereotypical gender roles, “sexually aggressive behavior is supported” leading to “false beliefs about rape and a hostile environment towards rape victims” (Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 447). It is not uncommon to hear people say that “boys will be boys” and using the saying to excuse violent behavior.

Based on these findings, it is not surprising that Black and McCloskey (2013) found “beliefs about men’s and women’s roles may be stronger predictors of rape perceptions than is gender” (p. 951). So whether people are male or female has less to do with their attitudes about rape than whether they are more traditional or liberal. Research (Grubb & Turner, 2012) has indicated that:

The more participants endorsed traditional attitudes about women’s places in society the more likely they were to blame the rape on the female. This finding was

consistent, regardless of participant gender, thereby indicating that conservative traditional values about women and their role within society is a key determining factor for attributing blame in cases of rape. (p. 447)

In addition, males and females who identified with traditional gender roles were more likely to recommend lighter punishments to men who were accused of rape (Black & McCloskey, 2013; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Melton, Sillito, & Lefevre, 2012). Black and McCloskey (2013) also found that individuals who identified with traditional gender roles “downplayed the negative impact on the victim when she [only] resisted verbally” (p. 963) as opposed to resisting both verbally and physically. This is likely because simply resisting verbally coincides with the way women should behave sexually, according to traditional gender role attitudes.

Melton et al. (2012) remind us that “men and women have been socialized to view, and experience, violence differently. Men may be taught to be violent, while women may be taught to be passive and submissive. Violence, in many ways, is an accepted part of masculinity” (p. 1095). This explains why, regardless of gender, “men and women with traditional attitudes are more accepting of sexual violence than are those of the same gender with liberal attitudes” (Black & McCloskey, 2013, p. 951). In all, Black and McCloskey’s study (2013) found:

Participants with traditional gender role attitudes were: (a) more likely to agree that the woman was responsible, (b) less likely to agree that the man was responsible, (c) less likely to agree that the woman should report the incident, (d) less likely to agree that the man should be arrested, and (e) less likely to agree that he should be found guilty. In addition, those with traditional gender role attitudes recommended a more lenient prison sentence than did those with liberal gender role attitudes. (p. 957)

So traditional gender role attitudes can have serious implications, including the endorsement of gender violence, and can cause individuals to downplay the negative effects experienced by

rape victims. On the other hand, “there is evidence to suggest that promoting gender equality can decrease sexual violence” (Jensen, 2014, p. 18). And if evidence suggests that students really are influenced by what they’re reading, and even change their minds about how people should act and what they’re capable of, all based on their gender, then we’re presented with a serious problem. Clearly, something must be done.

Because inadvertently teaching these gender roles in the classroom begins as early as the first day of school, and because subscribing to traditional gender roles can have such detrimental effects on girls, educators must seek a solution. Yet, society continues to treat gender as an acceptable form of segregation:

Even though our society has become sensitive to negative sex stereotypes and has begun to expunge them from the media and from children’s literature, it remains blind to its gratuitous emphasis on the gender dichotomy itself. In elementary schools, for example, boys and girls line up separately or alternately; they learn to sing songs in which the fingers are “ladies” and the thumbs are “men”; they see boy and girl paper-doll silhouettes alternately placed on the days of the month in order to learn about the calendar. Children, it will be noted, are not lined up separately or alternately as blacks and whites; fingers are not “whites” and thumbs “blacks”; black and white dolls do not alternately mark the days of the calendar. (Bem, 1983, p. 609)

Gender continues to be an acceptable way to separate children, thereby creating and excusing gender inequity. Just last week, I witnessed a coworker of mine threatened to seat her class “boy, girl, boy, girl” if they continued to misbehave. Teachers would never seat children according to eye color, race, or hair type as a punishment, so it should be deemed unacceptable to do so according to gender. Yet because of actions like these, children learn, and teachers continue to reinforce, that self-worth should be measured according to gender-schema, particularly the level at which children fit in with society’s gendered expectations (Bem, 1983). Bem also found that “children would be far less likely to become gender

schematic and hence sex typed if the society were to limit the associative network linked to sex and to temper its insistence on the functional importance of the gender dichotomy” (p. 609). However, it does not.

Gender-schema may also be the culprit of self-esteem changes since, as Peterson and Lach (1990) argued “a child’s repeated exposure to sexist images is ‘likely to have detrimental effects on the development of children’s self-esteem, particularly on that of girls and on the perceptions children have of their own, and of others’ abilities and possibilities” (as cited in Marshall, 2004, p. 260). The self-esteem of girls plummets during adolescence (Kommer, 2006; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Kommer (2006) found that

just prior to their entry into preadolescence, 60 percent of girls had positive feelings about themselves and their ability. Only 29 percent of high school girls felt the same confidence. (This compares with 67 percent of young boys feeling confident, and 46 percent of high school-aged boys having the same confidence). (p. 247)

Bem (1983) blames this on gender-schema, because gender-schema becomes “a prescriptive standard or guide, and self-esteem becomes its hostage” (p. 605). Robins and Trzesniewski (2005), much like Kommer (2006), found that even though boys and girls have a very similar level of self-esteem during childhood years, “a gender gap emerges by adolescence, such that adolescent boys have higher self-esteem than adolescent girls. This gender gap persists throughout adulthood” (p. 160). See Figure 1.

Although there has not been any definitive explanation for this difference, researchers “have offered numerous explanations for the gender difference, ranging from maturational changes associated with puberty to social-contextual factors associated with the differential treatment of boys and girls in the classroom or gender differences in body image ideals” (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005, p. 160). So, exposure to traditional gender roles within the

classroom could be contributing to lower self-esteem in adolescent girls. In fact, Tsao (2008) found that “gender identity is a pervasive social classification that [...] is an important aspect of self-esteem” (p. 108). While we can see that it is not the only factor, we can conclude that it is, indeed, a factor.

McKay, Dempster, and Byrne (2014) found that “in a longitudinal study of females, higher self-esteem was related to more positive outcomes generally (e.g., academic achievement, social relationships), whilst lower self-esteem was related to more adverse outcomes” (p. 1134), so having a higher self-esteem is beneficial. Girls also report higher levels of stress when compared with boys and boys reported higher self-esteem, “lower levels of the stress of peer pressure, and lower stress of future uncertainty” (McKay et al., 2014, p. 1143). Tsao (2008) found that “gender role stereotypes affect how children perceive themselves [and that] a negative portrayal of a child’s own gender may affect that child’s self-identity and self-esteem” (p. 110).

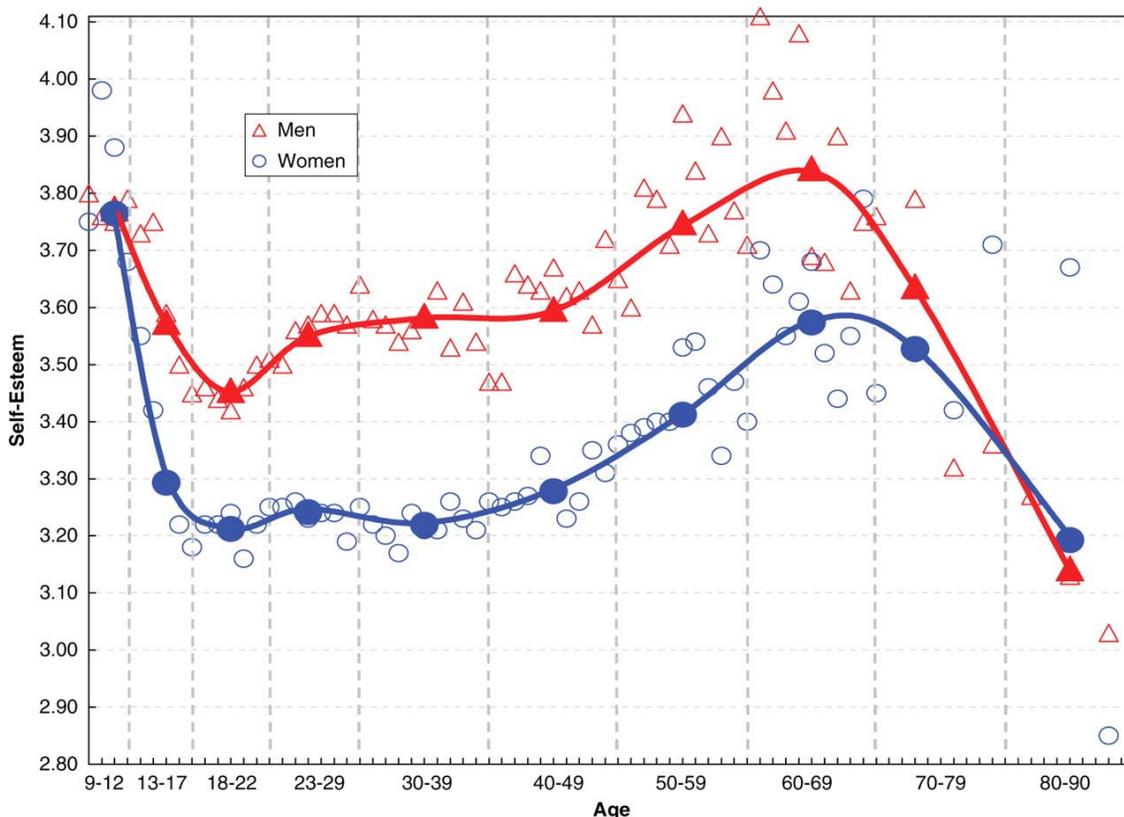


Figure 1. Average level of self-esteem for males and females across the lifespan (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005, p. 161)

This difference in self-esteem is likely witnessed by educators on a daily basis in classrooms and hallways. In one study (Mee, 1995), middle school students were asked questions pertaining to their gender. When asked to reveal the best thing about their gender,

Fifth through eighth grade girls demonstrated hesitancy and difficulty when responding to this statement during the class dialogue. Few if any girls' hands rose to respond and their body language, as they sat slumped in the seat, heads down, eyes looking to the floor, was almost unanimous [...] It was apparent that the girls really had to struggle to respond to the best thing about being a girl. (p. 2)

When boys were asked the same question in the same study, the most common answer was “not being a girl” (Mee, 1995, p. 3). Each time this response was given, it was “met with laughter, including that of teachers, whose reactions tended to parallel those of their students”

(p. 3). This laughter likely sent the message to students that the response of “not being a girl” was a true and correct response to such a question. Girls did not struggle when providing answers to the opposite question - what is the worst thing about your gender, while boys “most commonly responded ‘Nothing’ or ‘I can’t think of anything’” (p. 3). In 1992, The American Association of University Women surveyed 3,000 children and “concluded that the transitional period of early adolescence may be the most damaging time in the life of young girls” (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003, p. 426). Middle school girls are clearly vulnerable to the messages they receive about their gender, which makes the urgency of the problem that much more serious.

Current Problems

In 1997, The National Council of Teachers of English released “Guidelines for a Gender-Balanced Curriculum in English, Grades 7-12” in hopes of beginning to make changes. In it, they recommend providing literature by and about women at a higher rate so as to be more equal to that by and about men. But even this document is sexist in its recommendations:

To balance the curriculum, we need to incorporate literature by and about women into our courses. We need to learn to recognize and appreciate different genres (diaries, letters), different styles (spontaneous, circular), and different tones (intimate, emotional). As we add women’s writing to the curriculum, we will enhance our concept of what it is to be human. (p. 2)

This implies that women’s writing consists only of diaries and letters, and that it is more spontaneous, circular, intimate and emotional than that of men’s writing. It is a strange argument, as Greenbaum (1999) points out, regarding the way women write: “While there tends to be no discussion in high schools about women’s ways of being engineers, or

astrophysicists, or brain surgeons, the world of literature, with its inescapable issues of voice and viewpoint, remains divisible between the poles of gender” (p. 55). These claims, that women have a certain way of doing things, fit well with a traditional gender role attitude.

Another popular belief is that “by providing proper role models, girls can be shaped as strong, assertive, courageous, independent individuals, and in this way, they will be able to achieve equality. But this implies that sexism persists because women individually have not been strong enough in the past” (Hubler, 2000, p. 89) and neglects to blame society for women’s place in it. This clearly is not the message we hope to convey to youth. While providing strong role models is important, it is not enough because students must recognize that it is a societal issue, and they need to be supported throughout this process. It is critical that educators work to create a message of belonging and community because

when students don’t feel connected to their school, they’re more likely to miss classes and even full days of school. Not only does this affect their learning, but it also denies them the identity development benefits that result from the activities and in-person interactions that occur in schools. (McGarry, 2013, p. 27)

Students need to be in school, and school needs to be a safe place, conducive to learning.

Even the language used by educators, or that which occurs within text, can be damaging to adolescent girls. Doing things “like a girl” has a negative connotation, and even girls don’t want to do things “like a girl.” Applebaum (2003) reminds us that when “such speech acts are ritual or ceremonial [...] they ‘work’ only because they have been and continue to be repeated over time” (p. 156). The old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” is perhaps not as true as we would like to think.

Lawrence (1990), as quoted in Applebaum (2003), described how words really can hurt:

There is a great difference between the offensiveness of words that you would rather not hear because they are labeled dirty, impolite, or personally demeaning and the *injury* inflicted by words that remind the world that you are fair game for physical attack, that evoke in you all of the millions of cultural lessons regarding your inferiority that you have so painstakingly repressed, and that imprint upon you a badge of servitude and subservience for all the world to see. (p. 155; italics in original)

Words contain power. When that power moves through all things, like “people, places, histories and even language, then speech can be an important mode of address in which power can be reproduced through restaging and resignification” (Applebaum, 2003, p. 157).

Because of this, “such forms of address as ‘girl’, ‘delinquent’, ‘sinner’, cause grave harm not only because they constitute people and bodies, but also because they enable or foreclose agency” (p. 157). Persistent use of words like these continues to put women underneath men in the hierarchy of power, and teach girls that not only does this hierarchy exist, it is appropriate.

Applebaum’s (2003) study found that students felt comfortable to use such language because they understood that “this belief is supported by and supports the dominant ideology. [This language] is an instrument of subordination” (p. 157). When society as a whole excuses such language, or even supports it, oppression is the effect. Lewis (1993) found that “women are often the butt of male joking and are expected to absorb such violation in the name of joking” (Evans, Alvermann, & Anders, 1997, p. 112). Girls are learning every day that their gender is a burden, and that they do not deserve the things boys get. They are taught this lesson, partially, by the literature to which they’re exposed—including texts within the classroom. While educators are working to help female students pass exams, they are working against these very same students in regards to future performance.

Chapter III: An Analysis of Literature Commonly Used in the Middle School Classroom

The Canon and Young Adult Literature

One may be wondering at this point if the literature to which adolescents are exposed is truly as terrible as this research has made it out to be. For a more mainstreamed analysis, the literature for discussion will be categorized into two sections: Young Adult Literature (often referred to as YA literature, or YAL, which will serve as the primary category of text for analysis) and that of a more canonical nature. It is likely not surprising that literature which is often included as part of the literary canon contains significantly stereotypical gender roles given the historical context in which these stories are told. Coats and Trites (2012), in their interview of four language arts teachers, found a general consensus that it is important to study “historical context as a function of gender roles” (p. 148). Traditional gender roles were commonplace less than 50 years ago, so if the historical time period is considered, these texts may be less damaging. It should also be noted that most of the “classics” are written by, and about, men.

Young adult literature, on the other hand, has quite a tremendous following by many educators and experts alike. Jacobs (2004) found that young adult literature has “a readability and high interest level that appeals to every adolescent” (p. 19) while Coats and Trites (2012) found that using YAL:

Serves multiple purposes, including demonstrating how empowering girls involves deconstructing language, emphasizing community, and exploring identity. Because of the affective range of most YAL, the genre also lends itself to complicating what it means to be empowered, what it means to have an identity, and what it means to experience social justice—or injustice. (p. 154)

Ruggieri (2001) found that by assisting students in thinking about society's roles based on gender and by providing them with young adult literature, "we just might be able to stop some of the suffering and help reshape the destinies of one of this country's most valuable resources-its girls" (p. 52).

Young adult literature, especially when compared with older material, can help students relate to what they're reading. Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane (2013) have found that young adult literature can be "used to help youth critique the ways in which society is classed, gendered, and raced" (p. 1023) because students have such a high interest in these books and they tend to read them over and over again. Coats and Trites (2012) advocate using YA texts in the classroom because "Hemingway, for instance, is not known for his enlightened views on gender issues. [Young adult] texts complicate the social construction of gender in ways that raise questions rather than assume answers about identity and empowerment" (pp. 142-143). Getting students engaged in what they are reading is a critical first step to getting them to do anything else with a text. For this reason alone, young adult literature appears to be an essential addition to any educator's middle school curriculum, and the fact that these researchers have found added benefits to the content of YAL is a bonus for teachers and students alike.

On the other hand, young adult literature may not be the end-all solution educators have been seeking. One "criticism of young adult literature for girls is that it is often dominated with the notion that attaining a boyfriend is the ultimate success in a female's life" (Jacobs, 2004, p. 21). In fact, according to Moffatt and Norton (2005), "many feminist educators have seen popular texts as implicated in the reproduction of patriarchy through its

extended use of ideologies such as the ‘ideology of romance’ or the idea that heterosexual romantic love is essential to femininity” (Moffatt & Norton, 2005, p. 1). Many of these YA novels have a conflict that involves some sort of love triangle and a happy ending where the girl finally wins her man. And Rice (2012) reminds us that young adult literature “has long introduced readers to female characters willing to give up something of themselves for the betterment of others” (p. 30) which reinforces the caregiver gender role for females.

Rubinstein-Avila (2007) echoes this idea, finding that even though many of the female main characters in young adult literature are “no longer [...] depicted as ‘damsels in distress’ or witless doormats, as was more common in the past, a great many are still portrayed as selfless beings who conform to expected gender-appropriate roles, even at the expense of their own desires” (p. 370).

Even the literature hailed as nonsexist, such as some young adult titles, often contains content which, upon further analysis, conforms to traditional gender roles. According to Diekman and Murnen (2004), these texts “portrayed at best a narrow vision of gender equality, in which women adopt male-stereotypic attributes and roles. Most striking was the equivalence of portrayals of female-stereotypic personality, domestic roles, and leisure roles” (p. 381). It seems that while many texts have been successful in portraying female characters in more masculine ways, like being active and heroic, they have failed to either assign more feminine roles to males or to remove those feminine roles from females, or both (Tsao, 2008). It is okay for girls to play sports, but it is not okay for boys to cry. So rather than the literature portraying women as taking on different roles, they simply take on additional roles, while men are left the way they have always been.

There is even something missing in the list “Six Characteristics to Consider when Examining Children’s Books for Positive Gender Role Models” by Heine et al. (1999). They suggest examining “personal traits of the character, issues important to the character, how the character solves problems, the characters relationships with others, how the character departs from traditional stereotypes, [and] whether the character provides a voice for those who are often unheard in children’s literature” (p. 429). However, they have neglected to include how other characters react to these items. For example, are characters punished for performing actions outside typical gender role norms? And are they rewarded for conforming? It seems that whether or not a character is depicted in a gender role is not as important as society’s reaction within the text. For example, if a father character goes home and does the dishes, but then his buddies proceed to make fun of him, this is certainly a different message than if he goes home to do the dishes and no one acts like there is something unusual about this activity. Diekman and Murnen (2004) found that “sexist as well as nonsexist stories may thus perpetuate gender inequity through the reinforcement of the traditional feminine ideal” (p. 375). The acceptability of gender roles within literature then becomes as important as the gender roles themselves.

Many researchers (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Marshall, 2004; Rubinstein-Avila, 2007; Woloshyn, Taber, & Lane, 2013; Taso, 2008) agree that the gender roles played by many modern female characters simply are not much different from those of the past. Female characters are still “too often represented in traditional ways that focus on their domestic roles, appearance, and subservience while male characters are presented as masculine active heroes” (Woloshyn et al., 2013, p. 150). This strategy of replacing weak, feminine girl

characters with stronger ones seems like a sensible approach. If girls can see strong female role models, they can potentially begin to adapt that role. Marshall (2004) understands this and also recognizes a potential problem:

It is not surprising that liberal feminist interventions often take the form of replacing or supplementing representations of weak girls with assertive ones. Paradoxically, this strategy exposes *and* reifies the stereotypes educators seek to overcome. The paradigm of gender-role socialization privileges certain traits, such as active or strong, and the girl must lack these characteristics in order to acquire them. (p. 260, italics in original)

Female characters become strong in the face of adversity rather than naturally behaving that way like their male counterparts. This strength is something girls strive for rather than something that comes naturally to them. Also, as Marshall (2004) points out, “[...] the strong girl [...] relies primarily on white, Western, middle class, heterosexual notions of femininity” (p. 260), so it may lead to students of other cultures and backgrounds feeling alienated and confused.

In addition, readers are often led to believe that the sexist issues faced by female characters within novels are individual problems and can be overcome by the characters in the story, as long as they are strong enough to do so. These girls are victims of bullies, etc., who individually oppress the females. Hubler (2000) found:

There is no suggestion that the stereotypes individual males in the books inflict upon girls are linked to the legal, religious, economic, and other institutions that surround them. The absence of such a structural explanation of discrimination and oppression denies young readers information crucial to their ability to understand how they might confront sexism. (p. 86)

This is a serious problem, and it becomes the teacher’s or parent’s responsibility to show children that the gender oppression faced by female characters in fiction is not a problem limited to said fiction. Girls need practice recognizing and combating sexism in safe places

(like the classroom and at home) if they are to be able to draw on that knowledge when they face it in the real world.

In Blumberg's (2008) analysis of middle school curriculum, the discoveries were disappointing, but they echo the findings of other researchers:

Females and males were shown in highly gender-stereotyped ways in the household as well as in the occupational division of labour, and in the actions, attitudes and traits portrayed. To wit: women were accommodating, nurturing drudges at home and in the few instances they were depicted at work it was in traditional activities; girls were passive conformists, while boys and men did almost all the impressive, noble, exciting and fun things and almost none of the caring, or 'feminine' acts or jobs. (p. 347)

These findings mimic what we find in society. One teacher in the Coats and Trites (2012) study said that she refuses to use young adult literature because she believes that “‘many young adult novels have a female protagonist who is a victim of abuse.’ Although [some novels] openly address victimization and its attendant emotions, [this teacher] is still concerned that many YA novels are predicated on gender imbalance: ‘These protagonists overcome, but I worry that my students will see this victimization as a norm’” (p. 148). So perhaps young adult literature isn't everything it's cracked up to be.

The Hunger Games

One young adult novel that's gained a strong following by both students and teachers is *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008). Entire school districts have adopted the text due to its “lessons of ‘respect, compromise, cooperation, teamwork, and making ethical choices’” (Taber et al., 2013, p. 1022). The story takes place in a dystopian society in the future in which two “tributes” from each of twelve “districts” are forced to compete to the death in a competition known as The Hunger Games. The competition is then nationally televised for entertainment and as a reminder to the outlying districts not to rebel against the

Capitol. After her little sister is drawn from a lottery to compete, Katniss (the protagonist) volunteers to take her place in order to save her from certain death. The tributes are whisked away to the Capitol to be prepared—mentally, physically, and aesthetically. After many tributes have lost their lives, the rules are changed to allow two people to win as long as they are from the same district, likely in order to bring back audience intrigue. Katniss joins with the male tribute from her district, Peeta Mellark, and together, they make it to the end. When the rules are changed again to only allow one winner, Katniss and Peeta decide to ingest poison berries simultaneously in order to “win” the games according to their own rules. Ultimately, the “Gamemakers” allow them both to win.

The Hunger Games is “marketed to girls” (Coats & Trites, 2012, p. 141), and throughout the book, Katniss demonstrates skills and possesses traits that are more masculine than feminine. In fact, one female participant in a study “visualized Katniss as a boy when reading independently as a result of her participation in hegemonic masculine behaviors, including the suppression of fear and the harming of others” (Taber et al., 2013, p. 1032). Her father is dead, and Katniss takes on the traditionally masculine role within her family, which consists of her mother, younger sister, and her. Katniss is skilled with a bow and arrow, and remains strong in the face of adversity. When her sister, Prim, is chosen as the tribute to fight in the games, Katniss volunteers to go in order to protect her. Katniss is “her family’s hunter and gatherer” and is “highly analytical” (Coats & Trites, 2012, p. 152).

The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008) has a lot of potential in regard to what it can offer to students and educators alike. Coats and Trites (2012) stated that in the novel, “males and females display a broad range of traditional gender roles” and that “neither gender is the sole

proprietor of any particular trait” (p. 152). This allows for students to see different characters participating in activities that may be normally reserved for particular genders under the guidelines of traditional gender roles. For example, Peeta (a male) is “far more nurturing and emotionally perceptive than Katniss” although he is “physically stronger” (p. 152). Additionally, the novel contains an “emphasis on empathy, which is presented in non-gendered ways” (p. 153).

Even though *The Hunger Games* is hailed for its strong female role model, there is sexism within the text that continues to reinforce traditional gender roles for girls. First of all, “Katniss is an example that [...] while female characters may take on masculine tasks and roles, they often only do so in exceptional circumstances usually involving the absence of a father figure, reinforcing the idea that this behaviour is not normative” (Woloshyn et al., 2013, p. 154). This is true in the story, as readers can assume that the only reason Katniss has stepped into this role is because someone needed to assume the responsibilities previously held by her father as there was no one else to fill this void. In other words, she would not have exhibited these characteristics if the circumstances of her father’s death had not warranted such a shift in her gender role. So even though we see that girls *can* behave this way, we still are led to understand that this is atypical. In addition, when she needs to go away to the games, she “garners promises from Gale [her male hunting partner] as well as Peeta’s father to care for them, selecting two male characters to replace her role as family provider, further propping up familial ‘patriarchal power’” (Woloshyn et al., 2013, p. 154). There was not a female with the qualities desired by Katniss to fill her role, further reinforcing that her qualities are unusual.

In the story, tributes can gain the attention and support of “sponsors” who then purchase “gifts” for the tributes to use during the games. These can include food, medicine, weapons, etc. But in order to appeal to the masses and gain sponsors, Katniss must become something she is not. In one such instance, Katniss is forced to participate in a makeover:

I’ve been in the Remake Center for more than three hours and I still haven’t met my stylist. Apparently he has no interest in seeing me until Venia and the other members of my prep team have addressed some obvious problems. This has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty foam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body of hair. My legs, arms, torso, underarms, and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped of the stuff, leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. (p. 61)

And after all this, one of the members of the prep team tells Katniss: ““You almost look like a human now!”” (Collins, 2008, p. 62). In order to get what she wants and needs to survive, “Katniss has to look beautiful and feminine” (Woloshyn et al., 2013, p. 155). Her worth is measured by her appearance. Of course, the male tributes must also be prepped for their appearance on national television and these quotations represent Capitol values, but regardless, the message is sent that Katniss’s appearance is of great importance. Before she had her body hair removed, she appeared animalistic to her prep team, as evidenced by them referring to her as “almost human.” Woloshyn et al. (2013) found that “Katniss’s appearance as a heteronormative object of desire is very important in the trilogy, with *how she looks* and *is desired* often viewed as more important than *who she is*” (p. 155; italics in original).

Later, during the Games, while Katniss is busy fighting for her life, she learns that if she pretends to love Peeta, the sponsors will provide more necessary supplies. So the lesson here is that by behaving in traditionally feminine ways, such as displaying affection to a boy—even in the face of death—one will be rewarded. These excerpts from *The Hunger*

Games exhibit this behavior and corresponding rewards: “Besides, it just makes sense to protect each other. And in my case—being one of the star-crossed lovers from District 12—it’s an absolute requirement if I want any more help from sympathetic sponsors” (p. 247).

And another:

Haymitch couldn’t be sending a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. [...] If I want to keep Peeta alive, I’ve got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance. (p. 261)

Katniss is forced to pretend to be in love with Peeta in order to gain approval from the audience. She must behave in a way she doesn’t want to so that she can fulfill the expectations of her role as a female. Katniss even has to be physically affectionate with him, which could be viewed as a sort of assault.

Eventually, Katniss begins to have feelings for Peeta while they are in the arena. When this happens, she begins to exhibit sexual feelings for Peeta. Katniss relays these feelings: “This is the first kiss where I actually feel stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another” (p. 298). This is worth noting because we first see Katniss as not attracted to Peeta, and then we see that because of the interventions of the audience (providing gifts when she is romantic), she has changed her mind. This may send the message that Katniss does not know what is best for her and her own body. The audience’s judgements have changed her. Later, Peeta becomes protector and Katniss becomes vulnerable, coinciding with traditional gender roles: “No one has held me like this in such a long time. Since my father died and I stopped trusting my mother, no one else’s arms have made me feel this safe” (p. 299). By the time they win the games, Katniss hardly seems like herself: “I just smile a lot and try to speak as little as possible” (p.

367). She is performing for the audience here, exhibiting a feminine stereotype for the world to see. The way she changes for a man may suggest to readers that when heterosexual love is the goal, femininity is the road to get there. This reinforces the claim of Woloshyn et al. (2013) that “many female characters, who initially may appear to be strong role models, often remain constrained by patriarchal norms of emphasized femininity in that they eventually are returned to traditional roles” (p. 151). Particularly alarming, however, is the fact that after feeling forced to be physically affectionate with Peeta, Katniss begins to fall in love with him. So the message here could be interpreted as “forced love may become real love, with time,” and obviously, this is not a healthy message to send to adolescent girls.

After the Games, Katniss has lost a considerable amount of weight, thereby shrinking her breasts. When she’s being primped by her stylist for her next television appearance in front of the nation, he hands her the dress she will wear:

I immediately notice the padding over my breasts, adding curves that hunger has stolen from my body. My hands go to my chest and I frown. [Her stylist verbally responds to this gesture, letting her know:] ‘The Gamemakers wanted to alter you surgically. [Your mentor] had a huge fight with them over it. This was the compromise’. (p. 354)

Katniss apparently feels a sense of inadequacy over her shrunken breasts, which seems a mismatched reaction when paired with her *I don’t care* attitude, but it does seem to coincide with her gradual change of becoming more feminine and concerned with how others view her appearance.

However, even with these significant issues, *The Hunger Games* can be an excellent textual companion for educators in their middle school classrooms. One teacher in the Coats and Trites (2012) study uses YA novels, such as *The Hunger Games*, to provide students with

examples of strong female protagonists operating under complex understandings of how gender identity can empower or disempower girls” (p. 145). And Moffatt and Norton (2005) found that exposing students to literature with “sexually aggressive masculinity and cautious femininity [...] forces the reader to consider whether girls and boys really have similar or different sexual desires and whether these desires are similar or different at all times and in all places” (p. 8). Once students are working to reach conclusions about gendered ideals, they are in a place where real shifts in learning can take place. It is important to continue to provide texts of high interest to girls even if that text “appears to be a simple mechanism for the reproduction of dominant ideas of gender relations [because texts like these] may contain radical possibilities for investigating these very same relations” (Moffatt & Norton, 2005, p. 10). This becomes almost an inoculation for students: give them a little of what they will face in the real world so they will be prepared to fight it off.

Chapter IV: Recommended Pedagogical Practices

Addressing the Issues

So while we can see that gender stereotypes are readily available within the texts to which students are exposed in the classroom, and we can see that subscribing to these traditional gender roles can have detrimental effects on students, little has been published on exactly how educators should handle this situation. Some research (Mitchell, 1996; Pace, 2006; Rubinstein-Avila, 2007; Short, 2001) suggests, however, that possibly the best way to address it is to, quite simply, *address it*. Ignoring the issue is one way of supporting the stereotypes: “If these issues are never raised, if students are never encouraged to question the assumptions behind gender and race portrayals, the gender seems to be that students will accept the portrayal of characters as the way people really are” (Mitchell, 1996, p. 77). In addition, Pace (2006) has found that “providing opportunities for students to consider diverse ideas supports critical literary literacy” (p. 585). Educators have got to get students talking about gender issues, and not simply at a superficial level. Unfortunately, this seems to be the approach many educators take (Grant, Wiczorek, & Gillette, 2000). The texts available to most educators and the corresponding assignments included in curriculum materials “may have race, class, and gender as add-ons” (Grant et al., 2000, p. 12), but those texts do not go deep enough for students to experience critical analysis and discussion. Depth is critical because as students explore alternative viewpoints, they “learn to recognize how perspective can make or expose the social and political assumptions that influence reading and responding to texts” (Pace, 2006, p. 585). By doing so, students can begin to feel comfortable challenging gender stereotypes in the real world.

Raising gender issues in the classroom, however, can pose challenges: “Even when resistance is not voiced, discussion of critical issues can be difficult to initiate or sustain because of the power structures and social histories that students negotiate in and out of language arts and literature classes” (Pace, 2006, p. 586). In addition, Taber et al. (2013) found that “youth often experience difficulties abandoning stereotypical norms related to sociocultural issues in favor of critical conceptualizations” (p. 1023), and so they recommend proceeding with caution. Because of these and other reasons, educators may be fearful of discussing gender in the classroom (Grant et al., 2000; Mitchell, 1996). This could be due to feelings that “more honest and complex discussion will be disruptive to classroom harmony because such discussions can result in conflict and disagreement” (Grant et al., 2000, p. 12). The fact remains that doing nothing can result in detrimental effects, so educators are strongly encouraged to persist through the difficulty to do what is best for students. Taber et al., (2013) remind us that “educators and those who work with youth should not be discouraged in initiating these types of discussions but be aware of the difficulties in challenging societal norms, leading to the need for prolonged engagement with youth in critical discussions” (p. 1023). Sometimes the risks do not outweigh the potential rewards, and this seems to be the case with gender issues in the classroom.

Educators may also find difficulty with student resistance to these ideas. Showing students that the texts they’re reading, both in and out of school, may be influencing them in negative ways “has often been met with resistance by pre-teen and adolescent readers. Few young readers appear to embrace this kind of critique of popular culture or of romantic love” (Moffatt & Norton, 2005, p. 2). This is because identifying for students the gender roles

within their literature forces them to choose between what they like and what is right, which leads “many students to reject critical analysis and frequently alienat[es] the very students that we most hope to engage” (Moffatt & Norton, 2005, p. 2). Evidently, then, educators need to proceed with caution as they try to identify the troubling content for their students. Yet, Taber et al. (2013) wish to “remind educators and others who work with youth that these efforts must be ongoing and that awareness is a critical first step to transforming beliefs” (Taber et al., 2013, p. 1035). Even through the difficult periods, educators must persist.

Educators need to prepare girls for the things they will encounter in the real world. According to Mee (1995), “the worst thing educators can do is to pretend there aren’t problems and to continue to do things ‘the way things have always been done.’ Society’s changing views and attitudes regarding appropriate gender behaviors send mixed messages to young adolescent students” (p. 6). During a time of soul-searching and identity development, confusion for students is the last thing educators are aiming for. Even though we know that continued exposure to “masculine sexual aggression and feminine passivity may reinforce dominant ideas of gender and sexuality, they may also serve to raise questions about whether this contrast between masculine and feminine desire is universal, natural or inevitable” (Moffatt & Norton, 2005, p. 8). Getting students to really question what they read is an important lifelong skill. Mee (1995) found that “once teachers and students become aware of biased language, identification of bias become easier” (p. 7). In a time when people have unlimited access to a wealth of information, being able to identify bias and categorize that information is critical.

It is not to say that identifying gender issues within literature for students will be enough to make a substantial difference in the gender issues within society, but as Evans et al. (1997) put it, “We are hopeful [...] that once the issue is on the table, investigators and teachers will pursue these matters of justice and equal social and learning opportunities for all students” (p. 120). Creating awareness is the first step to making change.

Classroom Discussion

One strategy commonly used to analyze gender in literature is whole-class discussion (Flynn, 1991; Pace, 2002, 2006). This seems like a logical method of digging through material with teacher guidance, and ensuring all student voices and opinions can be heard. But Pace (2006) suggests that this may not be the best approach to dealing with gender issues in the classroom. In one study, Pace (2006) found that several students changed their initial reactions after participating in literature discussions:

[Her] responses suggest that Kavita thought differently about the short story and the issues it raised about gender roles and marriage after participating in postreading activities in a literature class. These subtle shifts indicate that while Kavita was initially critical of the inequity she saw in the husband-wife relationship, she ultimately defended that inequity. Her shifting perception and the abandonment of her original critique raises questions about the power of literature discussion to reinforce the status quo and to stifle the development of critical readings. (p. 584)

While educators may want to use discussion to change the minds of students who are struggling with recognizing negative effects of stereotypes, they do not want the opposite effect, as observed in Pace’s research. Because society continues to endorse traditional gender roles, literature discussions tend to reflect those views.

An additional problem with utilizing discussion in the classroom to challenge gender stereotypes, particularly at the middle school level, is that “students may be reluctant to share

personal perspectives” (Pace, 2006, p. 586). Creating a “collaborative community” is a “myth” because it “overlooks the social realities of students’ lives” (Pace, 2006, p. 586). Pace found that “even when teachers invite students to interrogate the status quo by assigning texts that offer diverse perspectives, students may not respond to that invitation” (p. 592) and that girls, in particular, “do not publicize personal perceptions that counter gender-role stereotypes” (Pace, 2006, p. 586). In a study of middle schools girls, Finders (1997) also found this to be true. When one of the female students in her study, Tiffany, got an A on her English assignment, Finders reported the following:

She told me privately in my exit interview that her autobiography was the best piece she had ever written, but publicly she mocked [her teacher’s] approval and announced to her classmates that she had spent no time at all on it and that her mother had, in fact, typed it for her. Constricted by the role she maintained, Tiffany would not publicly acknowledge any pride in this piece of writing. (p. 75)

Girls in our society are socialized to be humble and to act stupid. Tiffany was unable to acknowledge her interest in the assignment and her pride in the grade she earned because she was afraid of rejection by her classmates. This is something many educators see on a regular basis.

One method of counteracting these effects observed by Pace (2006), where girls changed their initial opinions in order to match society’s interpretation of gender roles, is to engage students in “small-group discussions, where more personal responses might be shared” as this can help “students build on personal responses while accounting for and respecting authorial intentions” (p. 592). Pace also suggests “small groups of like-minded students” and “single-gender groups” (p. 592). Finally, she recommends grouping students based on discussion style. For instance, “assertive, argumentative students can be grouped

together. While they may still argue, they will do so with others who are comfortable with that way of communicating” (p. 592). Creating comfort is a good way to draw honesty from students. But, Evans et al. (1997) discovered a startling implication of using small groups for discussing literature:

Literature discussion groups are advocated as an instructional practice teachers might use to provide students the opportunity to voice their responses to literature. This practice is believed to be superior to large group discussions, where some students do not have the opportunity to speak, and to an alternative practice of the teacher telling the students about conventional responses to literature. Curiously, however, this analysis as well as other reports, suggest that the talk during peer-led literature discussions often reinforces sexist stereotypes that the discussions are designed to interrupt. (p. 117)

This may be because students are socialized in such a way as to dictate how they should behave in these situations. Middle school students are primarily concerned with others’ views of themselves, thereby creating a problem in peer-led, small group discussions. Students are not honest in these encounters, instead behaving in ways that further separate the two genders.

And research (Taber et al., 2013) suggests that students, in general, may resist different ideas, may understand some while refusing to acknowledge others, and may vary their responses at any given time. But this same research also suggested that these issues stress “the need for prolonged engagement with youth in critical discussions” (p. 1023). Pace (2006) echoes these suggestions, encouraging teachers to continue to bring gender issues to the forefront in classrooms, and ensuring the issues aren’t ignored:

When communal meaning making neutralizes texts, students may assume that critical issues cannot be raised in school, or, what is worse, that those issues cannot be raised at all. The corrosive effects of recognizing cultural inequities and then suppressing that recognition may be one mechanism that alienates students from school literacies and that supports the persistence of hegemonic structures. (p. 592)

Educators must counter these effects in order to convey the message to students that these issues can, and should, be raised. The challenge, then, becomes steering discussions in the direction of critical analysis, as opposed to agreement with the status quo. This is important because the conclusions we come to when participating in discussions “matter because they tell us who we are and who we can become. They tell us how our community responds to human behavior and hint at how we might be judged by our peers. Literature and the ways that we talk about it have the power to define what we perceive as acceptable in our culture” (Pace & Townsend, 1999, p. 43). Our discussions, if we’re going to have them, need to conclude in a way that promotes equality.

Feminist Pedagogy

Some research (Flynn, 1991) suggests that approaching gender issues should be done from a feminist perspective. She claims that “feminist theory in general suggests that because society has been male-dominated, women and men have developed different ways of perceiving reality and different interpretive strategies” (p. 80). Therefore, it would be logical to approach these issues from a feminist perspective within school walls. Feminist pedagogy can allow students to be equal in the classroom, but what is feminist pedagogy, really? Bostow et al. (2015) define feminist pedagogy as “not a toolbox, a collection of strategies, a list of practices, or a specific classroom arrangement. It is an overarching philosophy—a theory of teaching and learning that integrates feminist values with related theories and research on teaching and learning” (p. 1). Within a feminist classroom, “students and teachers ideally learn with and from one another, co-constructing knowledge—both communal and contingent—together” (Bostow et al., 2015, p. 1). While some fear that a feminist approach

may alienate boys, Tomsho (2008) found that boys have not been negatively affected by more feminist pedagogical approaches. Instead, the teaching style has brought girls up to a level closer to that of boys, working to close the achievement gap (Tomsho, 2008).

Because specific definitions of feminist pedagogy vary, it is important to consider the three key elements as according to Henderson (2013). They include 1. “Resisting hierarchy,” which is where “the teacher figure and students work against the creation of a hierarchy of authority between teacher and student” and “the students also deliver ‘content’ and influence the design of the class;” 2. “Using experience as a resource” where the personal experiences of students and teachers is used as materials for learning along with traditional curriculum; and 3. “Transformative learning” which is where students and teachers don’t simply “acquire new knowledge” but their thinking actually “shift[s] in new directions” (p. 1).

Unfortunately, middle school students may be concerned with the word *feminist*. Coats and Trites (2012), in their study of four language arts teachers, found that “many students continue to harbor binaristic stereotypes that cast feminists as (only) women who are (always) angry, rather than as people of both genders seeking equality and identity recognition” and that “most students believe that a feminist outlook has a negative connotation attached to it” (p. 145). Additionally, this study found that even beginning to help students recognize gender stereotypes within the literature poses a challenge. One teacher claimed that her students begin the year ““not really notic[ing] gender issues in the text”” and that her students claim ““everything is equal now between men and women” (Coats & Trites, 2012, p. 145). The experiences in my own classroom echo this claim. Students believe that things are equal because the laws and media claim that they are, which further

supports the need to teach the skills for recognizing the stereotypes and working to change them.

Coats and Trites (2012) found that empathy is the “chief obstacle to feminist pedagogy of YAL” because middle school students must be “willing and able to see something from someone else’s perspective” (p. 149). This may be difficult for students of this age because the brains of many adolescents are not yet developed enough to see things from the perspective of another. Adolescents tend to have a distorted view of reality, one that centers around themselves. Coats and Trites further recognize that “understanding the basic humanity of every individual is a prerequisite to feeling empathy - and to understand the importance of social justice” (p. 153). These reasons may be why adolescents find it difficult to be empathetic.

Gender Balanced Curriculum

Another approach to combating gender stereotype issues in the classroom is to attempt to balance the curriculum with an equal representation of women and men among the literature (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE] Committee on Women in the Profession, 1997). NCTE’s Committee on Women in the Profession’s document, released in 1997, lists several strategies for creating a “gender-balanced curriculum,” as they “[urge] all English departments to integrate literature by and about women into the curriculum” (p. 2). They suggest including selections by or about women each quarter, using books in pairs (a book by a man paired with a book by a woman, especially if they have similar themes), and analyzing “video selections used in English courses” (p. 3) to determine how women are portrayed. It is also suggested that educators “put gender balance on the agenda for [...]

departmental meeting[s]” and “involve the principal” (NCTE Committee on Women in the Profession, 1997, p. 3). Forming school committees and inviting female authors to speak are additional recommended strategies. Above all, in a one-word attempt to stress the importance of the issue, the NCTE recommend that educators, simply, “persist” (p. 3).

One issue presented by using literature from the canon is that it consists primarily of literature written by, and about, men. Flynn (1991) has found that “the first step in a practice informed by both feminism and reader-response criticism is to ensure that students read works by a balanced number of women and men” (p. 81). This is because students of both genders need to be able to see themselves in what they’re reading. Including texts by and about women is important “because our identity is formed by the recognitions of others, the absence of such recognition as well as misrecognition can cause real harm” (Applebaum, 2003, p. 153). Research (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2003; Sadker & Sadker, 1994) has found that girls consider themselves less important than boys when the books they are reading do not contain female characters. Unfortunately, Flynn (1991) found:

There is no guarantee, of course, that teachers will actually select women’s literature even if an anthology provides it. [She] recently scanned the book orders of teachers of literature in [her] own department and discovered to [her] dismay that the 41 texts selected for the nine courses included only one book by a woman. Surprisingly, five of the nine courses were taught by women. (pp. 81-82)

While Flynn’s discovery is discouraging, today’s educators need to use it to fuel their own desire to balance the curriculum for their students.

Of course, educators are bound by two important constraints when choosing instructional materials for their classrooms. First, they will work with what is available. Funds in education are typically allocated in another direction if class sets of books already

exist. Secondly, parents and the community still have a strong hold on what educators can do in the classroom, even at the middle and high school levels. The Common Core provides these guidelines for text inclusion: “At a curricular or instructional level, within and across grade levels, texts need to be selected around topics or themes that generate knowledge and allow students to study those topics or themes in depth” (MN Dept. of Education, 2010, p. 79). Yet, many titles that enable students and teachers to encounter strong female characters have been challenged by parents, and some have been banned in districts (Social Sciences, Health, and Education Library, 2014). In my own district, *So Far From the Bamboo Grove* (Watkins, 2008) has been banned, and the Director of Teaching and Learning has unofficially banned *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). Typically, these bannings follow parent complaints. In the case of *The Hunger Games*, I had planned to teach it in my seventh grade class and sent the title home on my class syllabus. A mom called me with concerns about the level of violence within the story. I had assured her that I would choose a different book with a similar theme for her son, but she didn’t want him to be singled out. So, she went to my principal to try to get him to ban the book. He refused, so she went to the Director of Teaching and Learning, who informed me that I would no longer be able to teach the book. It should be noted that I teach at a public school, so this was a disappointment, to say the least. But my hands were tied.

Diekman and Murnen (2004) suggest that banning these books may be a step in the wrong direction. Having students read a variety of texts is a good idea because “limiting children’s reading diet solely to gender-egalitarian models may not be the best way to work against sexism. In real life, children will surely encounter gender prejudice; educating

children that such constructs exist, and how to work against them, can be more effective than ignoring the reality” (p. 382). Pace (2006) echoes the importance of students encountering oppressive texts and being able to work through them: “In each literary text that students encounter and in each cycle of response and interpretation that they experience there is an opportunity for becoming that can be enriched by the voices and perspectives of others” (pp. 592-593). Denying female students access to texts which mimic social realities would be sending them into the world unprepared to deal with society’s expectations of them. Hubler (2000) found that “girls are better served by novels that offer them not only positive role models but also a structural ‘map’ of social reality, one which reveals the historical development, and interrelationship, of the institutions of gender, race, and class” (p. 85). And Younger (2012) says that “we must expand our vision of what is ‘acceptable’ in the middle school and high school classroom and bring as many challenging books as we can to the students [so that we can] push our students to critically think about the issues of justice, equality, and human rights that surround gender,” (p. 59). We must offer students texts outside of the comfort zones of some parents, teachers, and kids in order to get them working at a level which will provoke critical analysis and societal change.

Flynn (1991) has additional suggestions regarding the implementation of woman writers into the curriculum. She suggested that “what students read matters as much as—if not more than—how they read; thus all courses, not just women’s courses, must include women writers in substantial numbers” (p. 81). When receiving feedback from students after incorporating texts by and about women, she found that “several of the woman students clearly found the readings and the focus on gender to be empowering” (p. 86). Flynn

recommends pairing a “potentially alienating text” with a feminist text “so as to nullify its dangerous effects on female readers and to make evident its androcentrism [because] the juxtaposition forces discussion of issues concerning gender” (p. 82). This suggestion is only made under the assumption that these “alienating” texts may be used at all. Flynn further recommends a different style of reading for feminists, or those reading with a feminist lens:

Feminist readers [should] read texts by male and female authors differently. Such a reader should read male texts critically, paying specific attention to the ways in which the text excludes women’s perspectives and is thereby alienating, reading against the text so as to defend herself against loss of self. In contrast, she should read women’s texts supportively, connectedly, defending the woman writer against possible assaults by male readers. (p. 82)

Paying specific attention to ways that women’s perspectives are ignored will certainly help students recognize them, but students will likely be hesitant to read women’s texts in a different way. Suggesting that they should be read supportively, and that the women need help with defense, may be implying that women writers are weak, and thereby furthering the gender stereotypes we hope to combat.

Active Reading

Active reading is another way to ensure girls aren’t simply absorbing negative messages from the fiction they read in the classroom (Hubler, 2000; Motes, 1998). Motes found that “if readers are conscious of the gendered messages found in texts, they can choose to adopt those understandings or rebel against them” (Motes, 1998, p. 49). This is not unlike adults viewing television programs that we recognize as biased in some way. We are not automatically programmed to view things differently just because we’ve encountered negative messages. Hubler (2000) reminds us that keen readers “are not passively shaped by their pleasure reading, but, as reader-response critics argue, actively construct the meanings of the

texts they read” (p. 90). But students must be actively reading, because “if readers are passively, subconsciously digesting messages, the prescribed roles may become their social DNA long before they become aware of the transmission” (Motes, 1998, p. 50). Jacobs (2004) agrees that we must teach students to “read critically, so our youth will become skilled at forming their own opinions and not unquestioningly incorporate all messages they receive” (p. 19).

Active reading helps students learn to critically analyze texts, which is something with which middle school students struggle. If adults working with children can help them develop this skill, it can only offer benefits. In an analysis of educators and how they approached *Hamlet*, Pace and Townsend (1999) found that when students and teachers worked together to question Hamlet’s actions, “Hamlet became more human, [and] his character became more complicated, more interesting, and more connected to students’ lives” (p. 47). In fact, according to Younger (2012), girls “may also begin to define themselves by rejecting or resisting the depictions they read as they seek to come to terms with their own identities in a culture that continues to marginalize girls, especially girls who do not conform to ideal standards of acceptable femininity or beauty” (p. 57). This claim echoes those of Motes (1998) and Hubler (2000) that students are not necessarily absorbing texts at face value without examining the messages, assuming they are “actively reading.”

What students are reading does not necessarily define them, much the same way adults who choose certain novels (romance, murder mystery) would not necessarily consider themselves defined by those texts. Hubler (2000) found that girls who read books with “traditional femininity” were “not doomed to imitation,” but rather, were able “to reflect upon

the process of gender-role socialization, and thus to take an active role in the construction of [their] own gendered identity” (p. 91). However, many need educator guidance in order to do this. Additionally, literature for the classroom should still include characters with which educators want students to identify, and “along with strong role models, a feminist literature for girls should provide a knowledge of the historical development of women’s subordination, and represent its role in structuring social institutions, including the family, sexuality, and the economy” (Hubler, 2000, p. 92). This way, students can piece together the components of what makes women’s roles what they are today, and even form predictions about what they can become.

Teacher Modeling and Reflection

Students, especially elementary and middle school students, need teachers to literally show them effective ways of navigating texts (Motes, 1998). Our reactions to, and interpretations of texts is extremely important for establishing how students will react to the gender roles they encounter within the literature. McGarry (2013) found that “beyond the written curriculum, what educators do and say as they teach has a great deal to do with [...] safe and respectful student learning” (p. 31). Pace and Townsend (1999) agree: “How we talk about characters and literature is as important as the characters and literature that we talk about” (p. 43). Not only does teacher modeling help students identify *what* they should be looking for, it can help them understand *how* they should be reacting. If educators want to elicit change for girls, we must be showing them how they may get there. One example of helping girls as they navigate sexist materials, as provided by Bem (1983), follows here:

Accordingly, before we read our daughter her first volume of fairy tales, we discussed with her the cultural beliefs and attitudes about men and women that the tales would

reflect, and while reading the tales, we frequently made such comments as, ‘Isn’t it interesting that the person who wrote this story seems to think that girls always need to be rescued?’ (p. 614)

By not only discussing what the young girl would encounter in the text prior to exposure, but also questioning the gender roles as they were unveiled, Bem’s daughter was able to see the text for what it was instead of internalizing its messages that women need to be rescued by men.

Reflecting upon our own practices and beliefs is an important step in helping our students do the same. Rubinstein-Avila (2007) found that “engaging directly with youth requires that we reflect upon how our backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences, funds of knowledge and ideologies shape our social constructions and subjectivities so that we recognise [*sic*] how these factors affect the types of texts we select and recommend, the types of discussions we promote and the research questions we pose” (p. 372). It can be challenging to really think about our own identities, however, and the influences they may have on our teaching, but according to Coats and Trites (2012), “the most successful teachers are those willing to problematize their identities within their classrooms. This meant that subject matter and how students thought about it were no longer the only culprits in influencing critical thinking skills” (p. 143). We need to be able to recognize our own faults in order to address them, because, as Evans et al. (1997) remind us, “reflection is the means by which norms are challenged” (p. 120).

Reader Response and Media Literacy

Reader response is a method in which the text itself is not the end-all meaning maker. Rather, the response of the reader is what ultimately gives meaning to text. Flynn (1991)

states: “Readers-response [*sic*] pedagogy depends on the idea that the reader plays an important role in creating the meaning of a literary text and that students will best learn to read literature by responding to it and receiving feedback on those responses” (p. 80). The reader’s response to the text is not the only “response” considered in reader response methods. The responses of others (teachers, peers, etc.) to the reader’s initial response is also considered. This feedback, then, can assist the reader in ultimately making meaning from the text. Whatever the exact definition of reader response, “almost all approaches include collective negotiation of meaning” (Flynn, 1991, p. 80). This method reflects the methods of feminist pedagogy where the teacher isn’t simply feeding knowledge to students. Rather, everyone is working together to come to conclusions. Flynn found that a classroom in which reader response is general practice, “students can respond to texts, exchange responses, and become aware of the gendered nature of their responses” (p. 82). Once aware, they can reflect on implications of these issues.

Media literacy skills can also be extremely important for students as they not only navigate the texts they’re reading, but as they find meaning in the messages they receive from all forms of media. This is because the media “helps to construct the ways we think about standards, student achievement, school violence and how we consider how gender, or race, or social class are played out in classrooms” (Grant et al., 2000, p. 12). Mee (1995), Jacobs (2004), and Kommer (2006) highly recommend teaching media literacy skills to students. Studying media, according to the Common Core Standards (MN Department of Education, 2010), includes identifying bias, propaganda techniques, purpose, message, target audience, and other items in order to analyze the media. However, some worry that it may not be

enough, or worse, that students may feel angered by this approach. Moffatt and Norton (2005) found that “a traditional media literacy approach ends up constructing students as passive dupes of the media industry” (p. 2) because they learn how they have been taken advantage of. When presented with information this way, many students will not only defend themselves, but they may also become combative and deny that which educators are attempting to present to them.

Suggested Activities

Some research suggests specific strategies for classroom inclusion to help students work through gender issues. Since we have already established that ignoring the issue only implies agreement, educators may be searching for individual activities with which to engage students. Some strategies with which researchers and educators have had success include: “sentence starters” in which teachers “ask students to write ten sentences beginning with Being a female means... or Being a male means... according to their gender,” and “character descriptions” which involve reading passages from texts which describe characters, omitting names and pronouns which would reveal gender, and having students figure out which gender is being described, and providing justifications for their guesses (Mitchell, 1996, p. 77). Of course, discussion of outcomes would follow these activities. Taber et al. (2013) used several strategies when working with a small group of girls who were analyzing *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). They included “synthesizing and summarizing the assignment readings, completing a number of theme-based discussions and activities, and ended with the girls forming predictions for the following session” (p. 1027). In addition, “session activities

included roleplaying, thematic discussions, character sketches, popular culture-text comparisons, and relationship explorations” (p. 1027) and “character silhouettes” (p. 1030).

Pace (2006) also recommends using color-coded responses to texts: “Students color code their reading journals to identify feeling responses, thinking responses (those connected to literary elements and style), and critical responses (those that are connected to social and cultural assumptions in the text)” (p. 592). This could help students stay organized and utilize their original responses quickly to use in essays or discussions. The NCTE Committee on Women in the Profession (1997) recommends utilizing students’ own narrative writing to work with identifying gender stereotypes:

Invite students to write short-short stories and then analyze together the number of male and female central characters and the kinds of behaviors shown. Are there any clear observations that stand out? Do any of them suggest stereotyping that the whole class can consider? A similar idea would be to ask students for titles of their favorite books or films and to analyze them in the same way. (p. 2)

This strategy could be expanded to include song titles, favorite activities, television shows, movies, and others, so long as students are becoming more comfortable with the idea of identifying stereotypes. This can assist students with resisting traditional gender role conformity.

Blumberg (2008) suggests “exercises that first expose the bias and then get teachers and students to counteract it” (p. 357). Younger (2012) recommends a “spectrum activity” to help students identify bias:

After defining femininity, a first step toward a spectrum would be, either in small or large groups, to list words that might fit onto the spectrum. [These may include words such as:] girly, frilly, soft, passive, strong, active, powerful, weak, pretty, ugly, aggressive, loud, quiet, obedient, respectful, attractive, big, small, shapely, shrill, silent, smooth, rough, sharp, fast, slow, and perhaps nurturing. (p. 68)

After creating this list, the students and teacher work together to put them on a spectrum, ranging from extremely stereotypical to uncharacteristic of traditional gender roles. This can help students identify that the ways in which females are described may be more or less stereotypical than they originally thought.

Many educators use “trigger warnings” to warn students of potentially damaging content prior to reading it. This practice is especially common in middle and high school classrooms, where parents still have a finger in the pot, so to speak, dictating what type of education their children are receiving. But, The American Association of University Professors “argues that trigger warnings threaten academic freedom” (Schmidt, 2014, p. A15). Schmidt found that “the use of trigger warnings suggests ‘that classrooms should offer protection and comfort rather than an intellectually challenging education’” (p. A15). While this may be true at the university level, where most students are not adolescents seeking identity, it still is important to help middle school students navigate their way through potentially damaging texts.

Some researchers (Costello, 2008; Kommer, 2006; Taber et al., 2013) recommend using gender to divide students for some activities in order to help prevent oppression of girls by boys within these groups. Costello recommends single-gendered reading activities while Taber et al. suggest girl-focused groups for analysis as well. Kommer states: “Students should at some times have an opportunity to work in a gender-matched activity, while at other times they should learn to function in a more typical gender-mismatched one [because] to teach only one way for each gender would do a disservice to the boys and girls who do not fit

the stereotype” (p. 250). Kommer assumes here that if we divide groups by gender, we will teach differently to each group.

Ruggieri (2001) suggests helping students gain a better understanding of what it truly means to be beautiful. A recommended activity is to have students:

Collect advertisements directed toward teen girls and women and then analyze their contents for elements of persuasion. Students could then write persuasive letters or poems about the issue to a person of their own choosing, either to strongly suggest changes to the advertisers or to convince a friend that she should not endanger her health for the sake of her appearance. (p. 50)

By following through with the persuasive letter, students can have a personal stake in the content of media advertisements, creating a more real connection than asking students to simply identify the techniques used. This may be a good introduction for identifying gender issues within texts, because students will feel passionate already.

Chapter V: Conclusion

When I think back on the day when I read *Where the Red Fern Grows* to my students and together, we encountered the sexist passage, it pains me to remember that I did nothing. When I saw that they did not expect me to do anything, I had decided it was not worth the time and effort to engage in a discussion about gender oppression (though I did follow up with significant research). Did I cause real harm with this decision? I believe I did. By not taking a stance, I was implying compliance, and teaching all my students—both boys and girls—that girls belong in the second class in society, and that it is acceptable to make judgements about people based solely on their gender.

Gender-schema theory, sex-role socialization, and numerous studies contained herein, suggest that what girls are reading is having a profound impact on them, and that behaviors of both boys and girls have changed after reading both materials that contain traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and those that did not. Readers make meaning from fiction, and these imagined experiences may later be referred to in order to make real meaning in a new scenario. The characters to which students are exposed and the actions of those characters provide lessons to kids that may never be unlearned without proper intervention.

Educators have to draw attention to these traditional gender roles for students so they can learn to recognize them and deal with their implications in the real world. Our girls must be able to combat sexism when they encounter it. We know that men and women who subscribe to traditional gender roles are more likely to blame women in cases of rape and gender violence. We know that the self-esteem of adolescent girls plummets to levels well below that of boys, and remains there for the lifespan. Girls cannot come up with answers to

questions about the benefits of their gender, and they continue to feel pressure to conform to roles in order to impress their peers, even if doing so comes at an academic cost. When we provide students with texts that exacerbate the problem without working to counter the potential effects, we are implicitly teaching our girls that not only does society not care about them, but neither do we.

While the reviews of different types of literature (by and about women, young adult literature, canonical selections, and others) did not elicit a specific recommendation, it did allow us to see that the content is not necessarily as important as what we *do* with that content. We cannot simply supply it to youth and expect them to come to healthy conclusions about their genders. Educators must guide them through it, via modeling, reflection, identification of the issues, various modes of discussion, and other pedagogical strategies as previously discussed. It is likely that a review of most young adult literature would conclude with similar findings as I have discovered here with *The Hunger Games*: that much of it is wonderful and much of it is not. Although, again, we have seen here that the content itself is not as important as how we use it, and if we're helping students navigate the pages of their text instead of making assumptions about what they'll be able to accomplish on their own, we will be doing them a significant favor.

In regard to *The Hunger Games* specifically, I suggest a lot of “hand-holding” for middle school students. They must be able to see the transformation in Katniss and be able to recognize the reasons for her change: she must pretend to be in love with Peeta in order to save them both. It is just as important for them to see the reactions of the audience to how Katniss behaves as indicative of society's reactions to how girls should behave. While saving

her own life is her primary concern, the romance entangled within the plot is not ignorable, and students will need help identifying it as a concern since they are so accustomed to a romance plot. Taber et al. (2013) had much success with analysis of *The Hunger Games* by using the several strategies listed here in Suggested Activities and by using small groups of females only.

Even though some research here has suggested that discussion may do more harm than good for female students, it seems that in order to help students through any potentially damaging text, the teacher and students *together* must talk about it. Additionally, teacher modeling is important whenever educators are concerned that students might not be questioning the messages they're receiving, as is likely the case with *The Hunger Games*. I read aloud the passages highlighted above so that I may model my thoughts for students. I might also ask my students to compose compare/contrast essays, highlighting the similarities and differences between The Capitol and society, or between Katniss and another female protagonist in a different novel. This deep analysis will force students to ask questions that they may not otherwise ask, which will ideally move them in the direction of being able to ask the questions themselves, both in and out of the classroom.

There is no specific reply to the question of “what should educators do to combat the negative messages girls are receiving in the literature we assign to them?” but the answer is *something*. The strategies contained herein are a great place to start, and with adequate teacher reflection and good intentions, along with feminist pedagogical strategies, educators can continue to help create awareness among staff and students alike. Doing so will move things in the right direction, girls nationwide will benefit, and we can sleep better knowing

that maybe one day, doing something like a girl will no longer be an insult. We must work to place gender on a level where it is simply a descriptor as opposed to a defining characteristic for all things attainable. Because, what are educators if not an advocate for all their students, and guides along the paths which elicit change? It is time to recognize the implications of sexist texts and help our students be everything they can be, regardless of gender, period.

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