

Barbie Against Superman: Gender Stereotypes and Gender Equity in the Classroom

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Abstract

In this age of mass media, we are surrounded with images that promote certain gender roles. These hidden forces shape us and our world view, often without us being aware that they are doing so. Gender stereotypes occur when generic attributes, opinions or roles have been applied toward either gender and the results are apparent everywhere in our society. From the point of view of education, it is important to use and/or to refuse gender stereotypes in the classroom.

Since education is a significant social area where gender segregation and the reproduction of gender stereotypes are generated, there is, without doubt, much can be done in this area to prevent this phenomenon. As gender equity, is prevalent part of our society, teachers must help their students identify where it exists in the classroom and school environment.

Key Words: Gender stereotypes, gender equity, stereotyping, gender segregation, language teaching.

Özet

İçinde bulunduğumuz toplu iletişim araçları çağında, belli başlı cinsiyet rollerini vurgulayan imajlarla çevrelenmiş bulunmaktayız. Bu gizli güçler çoğunlukla biz farkında olmadan bizi ve dünya görüşümüzü şekillendirmektedirler. Cins sterotipleri, herbir cinse yönelik cinse ait davranışlar, fikirler veya roller uygulandığında ortaya çıkmakta ve toplumumuzda her yerde görülebilirler. Eğitim açısından bakıldığında, cins sterotiplerinin sınıf içinde kullanılması ve/veya kullanılmaması önemlidir.

Eğitim, cins sterotiplerinin üretildiği ve cinsiyet ayrımının ortaya çıktığı en önemli sosyal alanlardan biri olduğu için, bu fenomenin engellenmesi için bu alanda çok şey yapılabileceği şüphesizdir. Cinsiyet eşitliğini sağlamada toplumun etkin bir kesimini oluşturan öğretmenlerin, öğrencilerinin sınıf içinde ve okul çevresinde bu eşitliği belirleyebilmeleri için yardımcı olmaları gerekmektedir.

Bu çalışmada, ilk olarak bazı yaygın cins sterotipleri sıralanmış ve bunlar hakkında bazı gerçekler ortaya konulmuştur. Daha sonra, cins sterotiplerinin meydana gelmesindeki nedenler, sınıf içindeki durumları, öğretmenlerin ve ebeveynlerin bu konuda neler yapabileceği belirtilmiştir. Son olarak, cins sterotiplerinin kullanımıyla ilgili bazı öneriler ve örnek sınıf içi aktiviteleri sunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cinsiyet rolleri, cins sterotipleri, cins ayrımcılığı, sterotipleştirme, dil öğretimi.

Introduction

Nowadays, through the increasing power of mass media, it is a fact that images have a strong effect in the promotion of certain gender roles. These hidden forces shape us and our world view, often without us being aware that they are doing so. Gender stereotypes occur when generic roles have been applied toward either gender and the results are apparent everywhere in our society. The process of subtle gender shaping is all too present, even in children's TV programmes. For example; the famous cartoon "The Simpsons" conspicuously reinforces gender-based stereotypes. The girl, Lisa, is portrayed as intelligent and well-behaved, but the boy, Bart, is portrayed as naughty and playful. Again, the mother, Marge, is the homemaker and the father, Homer, is the breadwinner.

Since education is a significant social area, where gender segregation and the reproduction of gender stereotypes are generated, without doubt, much can be done in this area to prevent this phenomenon. As gender equity, is a prevalent part of our society, teachers must help their students identify where it exists in the classroom and school environment. Thus, a great necessity to do more research on this particular area exists in order to increase the awareness of both students and teachers.

In this study, first common gender stereotypes will be listed and some facts about them will be presented. Then, the causes of gender inequality will be looked at and as an important part of educational process some recommendations for parents will be listed. Finally, problems and possible solutions in using gender stereotypes in the classroom will be discussed and some recommendations and a sample lesson plan including three classroom activities will be presented for teachers in order to help achieve gender equity in the classroom.

Common Gender Stereotypes

As it can be seen from the examples, there are many gender stereotypes used to define each sex. These roles are so popular that they can be easily seen in every part of life, even in some poems like:

“ Sugar and spice and all things nice,
That's what little girls are made of.
Slugs and snails and puppydog tails,
That's what little boys are made of. ”

Common gender stereotypes associated with women are:

- submissive
- emotional
- quiet
- neat
- clean
- clumsy
- artsy
- housewife

- childrearing

Common gender stereotypes associated with men are:

- aggressive
- no emotions
- loud
- messy
- athletic
- math and science oriented
- money maker
- naughty

The Causes of Gender Inequality

Gender differences are the result of natural forces but not the results of upbringing. So the roles of women and men in the society depend on biological differences between the sexes. However, the explanation of gender differences should not only be looked for in hormones and chromosomes, but also should be looked for in social norms which require men and women to behave in different ways. These social norms are also called stereotypes.

At that point, such questions as “Why do we want to meet gender requirements and norms? Why is it necessary for us to justify gender expectations?” can be asked. First of all, we are subjected to normative pressure. We have to follow certain rules and justify society’s expectations. Secondly, we experience informational pressure. From infancy, our culture teaches what it means to be a boy or a girl. From the colour of our clothes to the toys we play with, the messages begin at a very early age.

That is to say, before deciding what is right and what is wrong we try to find out what is right in other people’s opinions. We consider that we behave in a right way when we behave the same way as others. The strong influence of gender norms on our behaviour can be explained by the combination of informational pressure and normative pressure. On the one hand gender stereotypes simplify our life and reduce the number of apprehension processes. In our childhood we discover this and learn to follow them without thinking and without making any effort to change them. But on the other hand gender stereotypes limit the development of a human personality and lead to social inequality.

What Parents Can Do

Since gender stereotypes limit children to gender-based roles that often do not account for a child’s individual likes and abilities, conscious parents should do something to prevent this phenomenon. “The first step is for parents to be more thoughtful about gender roles and to consider what messages they want to send to their children”(K.Finello,2004) Parents should decide what values they want their son or daughter to have. Once they have a clear idea what message they want to send, they can make smaller , everyday decisions based on whether they support that message. Here are some simple recommendations for parents:

- Monitor your child's media consumption. Be aware of what your kids are watching and listening to and the messages they are getting.
- Worry less about what other people think. Focus more on your child's individual abilities and needs and fret less about whether he'll get teased for his choices.
- Avoid making stereotypical statements. Saying things like, "Big boys don't cry" or "Little girls shouldn't get their pretty clothes dirty" may seem harmless but they may cause serious unhealthy gender stereotypes.
- Make a conscious decision about what you want your child to play with. For example are dolls ok for boys? Toy cars fine for girls? What about guns for both?
- Minimize emphasis on appearance and maximize emphasis on skills, abilities, and personality traits. Compliment not just on how something looks that your child has completed but on its content.
- Try to separate girls from the media's messages about their bodies. Because of pervasive media messages, most women feel they are too fat, too skinny, etc. Most of the scientists say that there is nothing wrong with caring about your appearance but it should not be the most important factor in a girl's life. Assure your daughter that she looks great just the way she is, but also emphasize how great she is on the inside as well.
- Encourage girls to get involved in sports or musical performance. Boys tend to join these activities more than girls as they get older, so girls may be missing out on some of the benefits. Research shows that involvement in sports, for example, can boost a child's confidence and lower her likelihood of body image problems.

Gender Stereotypes and Gender Equity in the Classroom

As has been mentioned before, young people are influenced by a barrage of messages to conform to a variety of expectations, to buy this widget, and to preserve a rigid set of values that stress the differences between genders. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), which was founded in England, found that young people still opt for traditionally male and female subjects at school, despite believing in equality between the sexes.

Since education is a significant social area where gender segregation and the reproduction of gender stereotypes are generated, without doubt, that much can be done in this area. As for the teachers and teacher trainers, the problem at using gender stereotypes occurs when teachers find themselves making assumptions about members of their own or the opposite sex. Some of the researchers claim that "one of the more important reasons explaining the gaps between sexes is the teachers' stereotyped attitudes towards the girls and boys in the classrooms. These can be described as sexist attitudes, although the teachers themselves are usually not aware of such reactions." (Ben Zvi-Mayer, Hertz-Lazarovitz and Safir, 1990) That means that if a teacher believes in the gender stereotypes of boys not crying, s/he could become angry at his/her student becoming emotional during class. If a woman believes in the stereotype that girls should not play sports, she would be upset at her friend

for entering a sports competition. These situations can lead to the victims becoming unsure of themselves and second guessing their reactions or intentions.

What Teachers Can Do

It is a fact that the effects of gender stereotypes and gender inequality can easily be observed in almost all of the classroom situations. Studies have shown that “there are gender differences in communication styles in the classroom.”(Hall, 1982) Generally, men tend to respond to questions more confidently, aggressively, and quickly, regardless of the quality of their responses; they tend to speak more freely and spontaneously in class, formulating their answers as they speak. On the other hand, women tend to wait longer to respond to a question in class, choosing their words carefully, reflecting on the question and constructing an answer before they speak. Additionally, women tend to be interrupted more frequently than men. Thus, they get the message that their contributions are not as valuable, and they may hesitate to join discussions in the future.

By using certain teaching techniques, or only by concentrating on “good” teaching, these gender-related differences can be ignored. Here are some recommendations for teachers, instructors and lecturers.

- Encourage class participation. Allow a wait time before choosing someone to answer a question. By waiting another two or three seconds, it is possible to encourage more students to participate in questions and answers.
- Be aware of whom you are calling upon and how you respond to their questions’ answers. Studies have shown that lecturers tend to call on men more frequently than they call on women, and that they react more positively to the responses of men. If possible, self monitor or have someone else monitor the number of men and women who speak in your classroom.
- Be careful about the language and materials. Use gender neutral language, refer to or give examples from female as well as male scientists, and try to learn the students’ names. Include material that reinforces your support of gender equity.
- Encourage the use of study groups. Study groups let students know they are not alone and allow students to process material more thoroughly by explaining it to others. “Cooperative small group work is a more effective strategy both for achievement and motivation” (Gardner et al. 1989) By cutting down on the competitiveness in a class and encouraging cooperation, study groups can be especially beneficial to female students.
- Create a better sense of community. Teachers and students may consider ways in which the students can get to know one another better in the classroom in order to foster a better sense of community. During class, have students discuss a question with their neighbor for a few minutes before you ask for responses.
- Rearrange the classroom setting. If possible, rearrange the structure of the classroom seating. Set up desks in a U-shape or seat students around tables. This can introduce a level of informality and personal connection to the classroom.

- Make yourself available. Remind students that their questions and visits are welcome. Give students an e-mail address where they can send questions.
- While giving examples choose them from opposite stereotypical groups. For example, acknowledge women's contributions to science. Instead of simply mentioning a scientist's last name, include the first names of women scientists so that students do not assume you are referring to a man.

A Lesson Plan and Some Activities

Level: Intermediate/ upper intermediate

Learning Outcomes: Students will:

- discuss characteristics of male and female stereotypes in the society
- identify ways in which their own lives have been affected by these stereotypes
- understand the stereotypical perfection is illusory and unreal
- recognize the futility and the harmful effects of striving to attain stereotypical perfection
- appreciate the benefits of celebrating who they really are

Materials: magazines for cutting
Flip chart paper and markers

Procedure:

- Introduce the concept of gender stereotyping. Explain to the students that gender stereotyping refers to stereotyped images of males and females. Images of males and females are sometimes difficult to see as stereotypes because they are strongly connected with deep-seated beliefs about the roles of males and females in our society. Many people find it disturbing when these roles are questioned.

Activity 1:

Distribute a copy of the table below to the students. The table shows some common examples of gender stereotyping. For each example students are to decide:

- what ways of thinking are associated with the stereotyping
- what other possible ways of thinking there might be which are not shown in this example of stereotyping

The first example has been completed to provide a model for students.

When they have finished students should swap their work with another student and compare answers.

Example of stereotyping	Way of thinking encouraged by this stereotype	Other possible ways of thinking not shown by the stereotype
1. Many advertisements show mothers serving meals to their families (but very few show fathers doing this).	These advertisements seem to suggest that mothers do all the housework and cooking, and really enjoy this.	Men should do more of the cooking. Some mothers hate doing housework.
2. Many newspaper photographs, films, advertisements and television programs show men engaged in physically active pastimes such as sport, rock-climbing or canoeing (but few show women doing these things).		
3. Many magazine photographs and advertisements show teenage girls grooming themselves such as putting on make-up, brushing their hair and generally worrying about their appearance (but few show teenage boys doing these things).		
4. Many television advertisements show young boys playing with action toys such as trucks and super-hero figures (but girls are not shown doing this).		

(developed by

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Activity 2:

Tell the students that not all images use stereotyping. Have the students create a poster which shows the difference between stereotyped images and non-stereotyped images.

- Have students form a group of two or three other students and choose one example of stereotyping from the table above.
- They should take a large sheet of paper and divide it into two columns. One column should be headed “stereotyped images” and the other “Non-stereotyped images”.
- From a collection of magazines the students are to cut out pictures and paste them in the appropriate column according to whether they think the pictures support the stereotype or not.
- After students have finished they should display their posters for other students to see.

Activity 3:

Ask your students “How would you define stereotype?” and “What are some typical examples?” Have their answers.

- Take flip chart and write “What makes a man” at the top of the flip chart.
- Ask your students “What does it mean *what makes a man*? What words or expectations come to their mind?
- Attempt to record students’ own choice of words and create a list.
- Draw a box around the list.

Tell the students that you are going to call this “What makes a man” stereotype. Inside the box is a list of attitudes and behaviors that boys are expected to adopt in the process of becoming men in the society. Men and boys are not born in this way; these roles are learned.

- Take flip chart and write “What makes a woman” at the top of the flip chart.
- Ask your students “What does it mean *what makes a woman*? What words or expectations come to their mind?
- Attempt to record students’ own choice of words and create a list.
- Draw a box around the list.

Tell the students that this the “what makes a woman” box. Women also learn to conform to very specific role expectations as they grow up being female in the society.

These two flip charts can be used in some other lessons also.

The teacher may give homework related to these topics such as finding some other magazine articles or news from media and bring them into class and share them with their friends.

Discussion

The above mentioned classroom activities will be helpful to encourage students to develop their own critical intelligence with regard to culturally inherited stereotypes and to the images presented everywhere in daily life. This sample lesson plan includes some activities in which students can take a look at their own assumptions about what it means to be man, and what it means to be a woman. These kinds of activities can provide the students with the opportunity to explore the process of stereotyping in visual and written texts. The brainstorming and discussions sessions are meant to encourage the students to ask gender-specific questions as a step in the self-reflective process. Additionally, by preparing and/or applying a lesson plan of this kind teachers can also increase and improve their own awareness about the stereotypical issues and their effects in their classrooms.

Conclusion

In the light of the fact that gender roles and gender stereotypes have important effects in the field of education, first, some common gender stereotypes have been defined and

mentioned in this study. Then, again being an important part of educational process, the role of parents has been discussed and some recommendations have been given for them. Finally, the problems in using gender stereotypes in the classroom have been reviewed and in order to achieve gender equity in the classroom some recommendations and a sample lesson plan with three classroom activities have been presented.

Additionally, it should be pointed out that there are many books, articles, brochures and etc. are available that focus on dispelling the negative influence of gender stereotypes on children and students. While it is imperative to teach the younger generations to avoid and dispel gender stereotypes, it is also believed that adults and the teachers need to look at their own behaviour and roles as well. Children learn by example and setting a good one is important. Isn't it a good idea for children to see more fathers having tea parties with their children and helping clean up around the house and more mothers watching football matches?

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