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"Being it no matter what anyone else think about it:" Combating Gender Bias with Nontraditional Literature in an Urban Elementary Classroom

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"She had a caterpillar with her and loved all kinds of slimy things normal girls would not touch." Combating Gender Bias with Nontraditional Literature in an Urban Elementary Classroom

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Abstract: Gender stereotypes pervade children's literature. This action research project sought to alter stereotypical perceptions of gender roles held by a classroom of students in an urban elementary school through the introduction of nontraditional literature. Results suggested that some stereotypical perceptions could be altered through utilization and discussion of such literature.

A short time ago, as a fourth grade teacher and a researcher interested in the influence of stereotypes, I was a conscientious observer of stereotype-based relationships between my students, as well as those between teachers and students. I often questioned colleagues for excusing boys of disrespectful behavior because, as they asserted, "boys will be boys." I heard several comments regarding my colleagues' male students reflecting stereotypical beliefs, "yup, he sure is a boy, boys are so aggressive." Similarly, in my early years as a teacher, I was lightheartedly charged with displaying over-protectiveness towards the girls in my classes. To rationalize what others called coddling, I would tell myself I was "canceling out" the favoritism that boys seemingly receive in other areas of their educational environment and thus relieving the girls from some of the pressures I deemed unfair. For example, it had been my experience that during school, boys generally drew more attention to themselves in the classroom. Therefore, I was always sure to call on girls, likely contributing to a gender-based dichotomy in my early classrooms where the girls outperformed the boys. Indeed, research has shown that student

investment in their gender identity helps to maintain and create academic gender gaps (Moffatt, 2003).

One day during read aloud, I mentioned that a colleague of mine, a professor from the local university, would be stopping by during the afternoon to visit. "Is it the same lady that came last month?" one of my students questioned. It was, but before I could respond, one of my girls cut in, "No, girls can't be professors!" I waited after that comment, and no students offered rebuttal. I was as bothered by their silence as I was by the comment. From that point a goal of mine became to work to eliminate such stereotype-based perceptions from my classroom.

To be sure, many elementary teachers have similar stories. The action research project described here sought specifically to alter stereotypical perceptions of gender roles in my classroom through literature. In the classroom, one will often notice significant social and academic gender differences between children. Although these perceived distinctions often get dismissed as normal, many are detrimental to one or either gender. The disparities manifest themselves

academically, socially, and perceptually. Every time a girl gets ignored because she is quiet, or a boy is tacitly allowed to shove another boy, the cycle of stereotyping is perpetuated. Teachers can play an important role in breaking such cycles. For example, students in classrooms where teachers discourage aggression are less likely to show increased aggression over time (Henry, et al., 2000). As an educator, I felt a responsibility to work to change the stereotypical gender-perceptions of my students. To characterize children's perceptions of gender roles, it is important to understand completely their subjective experience in this context. In attempt to address this phenomenon, the current study sought to investigate gender perceptions, but also, in the spirit of action research, it attempts to take steps to change traditional stereotypical perceptions through literature/text study and classroom dialogues.

Oppression, prejudice and discrimination based on gender and race are historically rooted in American society. As a result, how individuals or groups are perceived by society remains important. The manner in which individuals come to perceive their social world is heavily dependent upon the physical, psychological, and social environments available to them. Therefore, it can be stated that forming adaptive perceptions of societal constructs (such as gender roles) can be viewed as significant developmental challenges. Furthermore, such challenges may be incrementally more difficult for individuals from environments involving multiple constraints that may prevent exposure to diverse notions of social ideologies. One environment that may significantly limit access to alternative views of adjustment may be marginalized low-income urban neighborhoods. Children within such environments are often confronted with institutionalized inequality at school and within the greater community, potentially prompting relational crises in the adaptive negotiation of racial and gender identity development (Stevens, 2002). Therefore, investigating the perceptions of gender roles held by children in such environments may provide meaningful insight into factors and processes that promote and maintain particular experiences among members of this group. Moreover, listening to the representative voices of these children may reveal specific and unique

developmental mechanisms guiding psychosocial perceptual adjustment and, in turn, may help explain future developmental outcomes.

Emergent gender role beliefs are generally dictated by factors such as societal barriers, guidelines of cultures, and particular customs of families (Stevens, 2002). Unfortunately, many influences upon these developing perceptions of gender roles may exhibit gender preferences that are typical of traditional societal views. For example, from preadolescence, children within our society are bombarded with images of females manifesting inferior gender-roles. Research suggests that knowledge of gender stereotypes increases with age in the elementary school years and that core gender stereotypes solidify well before school-age (Zemore, Fiske, & Kim, 2000). By kindergarten, children assign females a smaller range of lesser-paying jobs than their male counterparts (Stroeher, 1994). In addition, as females grow older they assign escalating statuses to masculine jobs and male workers, while deeming themselves inadequate to function within such positions (Durkin & Nugent, 1998; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001). What is more, stereotypes of gender inferiority pervade books (Wason-Ellam, 1997), television (Durkin & Nugent 1998), and other aspects of popular culture. Instead of expressing their individuality, children's characters ritually subscribe to gender stereotypes: *Teen-Talk Barbie's* electric voice box giggled "Math is hard! I love shopping! Will we ever have enough clothes?"(Ben-Zeev, et al., 2005), and presently there are even plans for *Dora the Explorer* (once a beacon of counter-stereotype for young girls) to grow up into a teenager with a short skirt and high heels (New York Daily News, 2009). Fictional characters from children's literature can influence children's schemas for subsequent perceptions of the world and their role in it (Zipes, 1986). To be sure, children's literature is often characterized by tough boys, and damsels in distress. Children eventually come to reflect these stereotypes in their attitudes and cognitions (MacGillivray & Martinez, 1998).

Similar to those of gender, African Americans and Latinos are flooded with stereotypical messages of inferiority deriving from many facets of society. This stereotyping can also lead to negative

consequences for children. For example, McKown and Weinstein (2003) suggest that African American and Latino children are highly susceptible to prevailing stereotypes related to intellectual abilities and that such stereotypes can have a direct impact on performance in school. Such susceptibility is shown to not be derived from internal doubts, but instead from the perceived threat of being negatively stereotyped and categorized (Steele, 1997). The debilitating effects of societal stereotypes can in this manner extend beyond academic achievement to beliefs about self-abilities and future prospects. African American and Latino children face the intrinsic, and sometimes overt, existence of gender and racial stereotypes in America. While many are motivated to achieve success, they are often disengaged from many social institutions that would otherwise instill a sense of opportunity for a wide range of societal successes. The goal of an educator should be to cultivate an environment where students can develop perceptions of peer potential that are not based on race or gender. As a teacher in an urban elementary school, I conducted various action research projects in this vein. The action research project described here sought to alter stereotypical perceptions of gender roles in my classroom.

Method

The present action research project took place at an urban elementary school in Miami, Florida. The elementary school was located in a low-income community characterized by a 99% African American or Latino population and a median household income of $18,809. The community has its origins within a 1934 housing deal which hoped to eliminate the settlement of African Americans near downtown Miami and also with the construction of a highway through the downtown African American community, which caused the relocation of thousands of families (Mohl, 1985). With the exception of the more recent settlement of low-income Latino families, largely in racially isolated trailer parks throughout the neighborhood, the demographics of the community have remained largely the same for three generations. The community is characterized by high crime rates, few commercial businesses, and many boarded up buildings. The schools are low-performing by

federal standards, and nearly half of high school students do not graduate. These characteristics are typical of many schools in urban centers in the United States (Kozol, 1992).

The student composition of the school where I taught was 74% African American, 25% Hispanic, and 1% White. Over 90% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch (MDCPS, 2006). The school had never made *Adequate Yearly Progress* according to federal standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Participants

The participants included the students in my fourth grade class—a classroom of 33 students (23 male, 10 female). Ages of participants ranged from 10 to 11. The classroom consisted of 25 African-American students and 8 Latino students. All 33 students completed surveys, and 16 also participated in focus group interviews.

Procedures

This research used qualitative methods to investigate gender-perceptions of 10- and 11-year old African American and Latino children in an urban elementary school setting. Qualitative methodology is particularly useful in studying others' perception development because of its ability to uncover meanings, explanations, and subjective experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Such research is deeply rooted in phenomenology - a method of inquiry based on the premise that reality exists as it is perceived by people (Merriam, 2002).

Pre-Intervention. Initial information was gathered through daily observations of students and teachers within my school. I collected my observations in daily journals, and I highlighted events and information relevant to gender role stereotyping. After a month of recording observations, I administered surveys to all 33 participants. The survey asked students to indicate whether boys, girls, or neither, were better at listed activities. The survey items largely reflected traditional gender stereotypes (e.g. math ability, house work, athletic abilities) and were derived from Measurement of Gender-Role Attitudes, Beliefs, and Principles

(Prasad & Baron, 1996) (see Appendix A). The percentage of students that chose each response was calculated for each item. The percentage of boys or girls that chose each response was also calculated for each item.

The initial surveys of all students were followed up by focus group interviews of a selected group. I had known many of the children in my class for two years or more. The rapport we developed over that time created a comfortable, conversational atmosphere. Purposeful cluster sampling was used to select four groups of four students. African Americans, Latinos, boys and girls were represented in each group. All interviewees were from low-income families. Additionally, the students in each group were friendly with and had conversational familiarity with each other. This criterion was employed in order to preserve the natural quality of conversations to ensue. Specifically, focus group interviews were utilized to illustrate in greater detail the participants' gender perceptions. According to Solorzano et al. (2000), focus groups have four specific strengths. They allow a researcher to: "(a) explore and discover concepts and themes about a phenomena about which more knowledge is needed, (b) add context and depth to the understanding of the phenomena, (c) provide an interpretation of the phenomena from the point of view of the participants in the group, and (d) observe the collective interaction of the participants" (p. 64).

The pre-intervention focus group interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. They centered on student perceptions of gender roles. Interviews were guided by the set of survey topics (Appendix A), they had recently completed. While survey responses were used as a guide, considerable latitude was given and follow-up questions were based on student response. Conversations were allowed to progress naturally as long as discussion was relevant to the students' perceptions of gender or gender roles. Students were allowed to speak of their personal perceptions. No value judgments were made on any statement. Such would be contrary to my goal of uncovering participants subjective points of view. Extensive fieldnotes were recorded to capture data.

Following each focus group interview, fieldnotes were rewritten and coded. Similar statements of perception and experience were categorized. Once all fieldnotes were coded, the coded statements were reanalyzed to determine which were most specifically related to participants' perceptions of gender. The resulting categories and statements are delineated in the findings.

Intervention. Following the initial surveys and interviews, participants read and reported on a number of children's books depicting nontraditional pursuits of boys and girls derived from Joseph (2004). This took place over the course of 9 weeks. The books were primarily read by students during their "independent reading" center, where they spent 45 minutes, twice a week. Some of the selected books were also read to the students during daily read aloud. The books were reported on in a book report format I used often in my classroom. Importantly, the format included summary and reflection components, and a question asking what was special about the main character in the book. Unfinished book reports were completed for homework. The book reports were analyzed, and statements mentioning the gender of the main character, or referencing stereotypical gender roles were highlighted for use in post-interviews and classroom dialogues.

Post-intervention. Post-intervention, all 33 students completed the gender-role surveys for a second time. The percentage of students that chose each response was calculated for each item. The percentage of boys or girls that chose each response was also calculated for each item. These percentages were then compared to the pre-intervention results. The selected 16 students also participated in focus group interviews for a second time. Post-intervention interviews were guided by student responses on the post-survey and comments the students wrote in their book reports.

Additionally, throughout the intervention process, all 33 students participated in class discussions about the literature. This was the case with all books read in my classroom. In both scenarios, the focus groups and the class discussions, the books were discussed both individually and as a collection, and extensive fieldnotes were taken detailing relevant

statements. Similar statements of perception and experience were categorized, and the categories developed from data analysis are delineated in the results section.

Pre-Intervention Surveys

Careful analyses of pre-intervention survey and focus group interview data revealed three major categories of gender biases present in my classroom: (a) those related to social roles, (b) those related to present academic competence, and (c) those related to future success.

Social roles

Consistent with traditional social role stereotypes, the large majority of participants rated girls as better at chores, housework, and taking care of children, and rated boys as tougher, faster and better at sports. These social gender biases were consistent across gender.

Academic Competence: "Boys attract to Nintendo": In *general* academic categories, my students consistently rated girls as being more competent than boys. Although some said that boys and girls performed equally, no students said that boys do better homework, or that they receive more A's. Furthermore, only one student out of 33 said boys turn in better class work. These responses were similar across gender, with one exception: Girls were more likely to rate themselves as *smarter*, whereas boys were unwilling to make that jump, generally rating girls and boys of equal intelligence.

Responses differed, however, when speaking about *specific* academic areas. Although boys rated girls' general academic capabilities as superior, the large majority of them rated boys as superior in specific areas such as math and reading. Girls most often said that boys and girls displayed equal competence in specific academic areas, with one exception: the majority rated boys as more competent in science. Although my students recognized superior academic performance by the girls in my class, consistent with societal stereotyping they rank males better in specific mathematics and science areas.

When confronted with the question of how they rated boys as better in specific areas, yet worse in general, answers were conflicting. Whereas many boys assured me that there is no doubt that they are better at math, others questioned their confident peers, "no, boys don't do better no way, look at the 100% [bulletin] board, it's mostly girls!" It was interesting to listen to the boys search for explanations.

"Girls just don't want to tell the truth and admit we better," a boy explained.

"But all the girls I know get A's," another countered.

"Boys [are] not really better at math…even though I still say boys are better," a boy displayed his confusion.

"That's because boys don't do homework," one hypothesized.

"Boys just be playing outside more," said another.

"They don't be focusing on they work and talking across the table," yet another searched for a viable reason.

"Girls do their homework because they don't have video games."

"Yeah," another boy jumped in, "boys attract to Nintendo."

It seemed the general consensus was that boys would do better academically, or at least as well as girls, if they just had fewer other things to focus on. In other words, the responsibility for lackluster performance was relinquished from the boys and placed on distracting outside influences.

Future success - "Boys grow into it": My students' gender-perceptions of future success were decisively different from those of present academic competence. Seventy-six percent of students expected males and females to perform equally in high school. Correspondingly, 70% expected males and females would perform equally in college. Controlling for those students who expected equal performance, students expected girls to do better in high school, but they expected boys to outperform girls in college.

Following schooling, however, there was a big swing in expectations. The majority of students believed boys would be better at working outside

the house. Students also chose boys over girls to get a better job, a higher paying job, and to have more money. Analyzed by gender, the girls' responses were relatively equally distributed when indicating who would have a better future in the working world, often opting to chose *same*. Boys however overwhelmingly chose themselves as more competent in every area following high school leading up to a career outside the home.

Overall, it appeared that gender perceptions of a more successful working career favored boys, whereas perceptions of present academic competence favored girls. When presented with this apparent disparity, participants told me that it does not surprise them, that things will undoubtedly change as they get older. A girl told me things would "even out," whereas boys were more adamant that they would come out on top.
"The older [girls] get, they get worse, they see their moms and be like that," I was told. "Girls work at home or stay and do nothing."

A number of participants seemed convinced that future success was less necessary for girls than boys. Despite differences in present performance, boys were often undaunted about their opportunities for future success; one boy told me that "boys grow into it."

Oppositely to boys, responsibility for lesser competence in girls was placed directly on the girls themselves. The consensus seemed that when boys didn't succeed, there was an outside influence (Nintendo, playing outside) affecting performance. However when girls didn't succeed, it was characterized a personal choice to "do nothing;" an intrinsic character flaw.

Focus Group and Class Discussions

During focus group interview and class discussions of the nontraditional literature the students had read over the nine-week period, students were especially cognizant of the qualities of characters reflecting nontraditional gender roles. "Jacob is special because he shares feelings with dad," one girl mentioned about a boy character. This is not an action common of boys in children's literature. "He liked to sit and smell the flowers…he did not fight" a boy told me of lead male character.

Student recognition of nontraditional pursuits was true also in female characters. In a book report, a girl wrote, "the girl did courageous things." Courage is an attribute often reserved for male characters in children's literature. "She had a caterpillar with her and loved all kinds of slimy things normal girls would not touch," a boy wrote of another primary girl character.

The students also recognized what the stories had in common. During a class discussion, a girl explained, "Oooh, the girls all had their own way of doing something," and a boy, "the girls wanted to do something that boys do."

"Boys do what the girls do, like [being] good at taking care of something," another boy added.

In later class discussions, girls began to take offense when certain pursuits were called "boy things." A girl explained, "sports ain't a boy thing, a lot of girls [are] good at it!" Statements describing similarities in books then began to become less gender-oriented. "All of them did what they wanted to do and be what they wanted to be," a boy tried to articulate of the characters. And one girl came to the following conclusion about what the books were telling us as a whole: "Being *it* no matter what anyone else think about it."

Post-Intervention Surveys

Although many of the second survey responses were similar to the first, some encouraging trends did emerge. Most notably, there was a clear response difference in the areas most heavily tied to gender stereotypes. These included both social role items and specific academic areas. These items were also most often the focus of the nontraditional literature.

Social roles

Whereas pre-intervention 73% of participants rated girls as better at childcare, post-intervention the majority of participants rated boys and girls as equally competent at this task. The majority of participants also rated boys and girls as equally competent at chores and housework. Similarly,

whereas pre-intervention 79% of participants rated boys as better at sports, post-intervention almost half of the participants rated boys and girls as equally competent at this task. Increased perceptions of equal competence in such social role performance held true across gender.

Present academic competence

Similar to pre-intervention, in *general* academic categories, my students consistently rated girls as presently being more competent than boys. They reported that girls do better homework, receive more A's, and do better class work. These responses were similar across gender. When speaking about *specific* academic areas, such as math, boys often rated themselves superior pre-intervention. Post-intervention, however, the large majority of boys rated genders equally competent in these areas.

Future success

Notably, the collection of gender-fair literature did not change participant perception of gender difference between present and future success. Students still consistently rated girls as presently more academically competent. Also, although girls now rated themselves in a more equal light, boys still consistently rated themselves as more competent in the professional world following college.

Discussion and Implications

In the elementary school environment, girls perform equal to or better than boys on nearly every measure of achievement, but by the time they graduate high school or college, they have fallen behind (Sadker & Sadker, 1995). Societal stereotyping may be one cause of this phenomenon (see Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). Children's perceptions mirror our societal reality and not an equitable ideal. The byproducts of the social power structure are gender-biased perceptions. This may cause children to limit their future paths, based on the perception that future success is more tied to gender than hard work and that male flaws are environmentally caused while female flaws are intrinsic traits.

Families play an important role in gender role socialization. Research has shown that for African American families specifically, a tendency to support traditional gender stereotypes is strong in low- income environments such as that represented in this study (Hill, 2002). Research also suggests that many Latino families socialize their children to represent traditional stereotypes (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). In addition, in America's urban centers, a combination of social and economic factors has resulted in large number of female-headed households. These areas are predominantly populated by African Americans and Latinos. Stevens (2002) asserts that the mother-daughter relationship is the primary influence on the maturational processes of African American girls; that they ascertain their gender role behavior through this bond, and that the sense of growing to be an African American woman is derived directly from the maternal relationship. Whereas girls in our urban schools may perceive that becoming a head of a household is a mark of success (Author, 2003), mainstream society often devalues this role. Instead of devaluing these definitions of success and alienating students, by respecting student values educators could help positively expand them. Specifically for African American and Latina girls in urban schools, teachers could intentionally present successful images of females through classroom literature. Understanding that external factors often influence student definitions of success, educators who are interested in the success of their students would be remiss in not exposing students to such positive images. In essence, not doing so can be characterized as feeding into an unequal society and as a decision to maintain the status quo. Teacher response to gender stereotyping with indifference can be interpreted by children as tacit approval. Specifically for African American elementary students, research has shown that children report adult approval when filling stereotypical gender roles (Tharp-Taylor & Gall, 2005).

Clearly, gender biases are reinforced at school. Classrooms are microcosms of society, mirroring both its goods and evils. It thus follows that normal socialization patterns of young children that often lead to distorted perceptions of gender roles are reflected in the classrooms. What's more, in the

classroom, bias is embedded in literature. In this manner, gender bias is implicitly part of the curriculum presented to students every day. Using literature that omits contributions of women, generalizes the experiences of either gender, and that stereotypes gender roles is common and further compounds this gender bias.

Although one cannot generalize or make assumptions on the basis of research with one classroom students, the present research has some important implications. The research shows that the use of nontraditional gender role literature allows students to develop more flexible attitudes towards gender roles. Importantly, it helps students view each other as individuals, instead of as general members of a gender with a predetermined role. Teachers should be aware of the gender bias embedded in many educational materials and texts and need to take steps to combat this bias. One method could include the use of gender fair literature. Such literature should include the following: individuals portrayed with distinctive personalities irrespective of their gender, achievement not evaluated on the basis of gender, occupations represented as gender-free, and individuals who display emotion based on the situation, not on their gender.

Future research should examine the impact of utilizing a more multicultural selection of literature. Also, it would be important to investigate the role of the teacher's gender and or race in the success of such action research projects. My identification as a White male, although I had a positively established rapport with students and their families, may have influenced student responses. Lastly, future examination is required as to what interventions may have an effect on student evaluation of their future prospects, as the current research showed limited effect.

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