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Reading the Subtext on Gender

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In the Vermont Equity Project, educators are helping children of all ages to recognize and interpret the cultural messages that may shape the way they see themselves as boys, girls, and people of color.

Melody Daigle encourages her 6th graders to view popular culture as a powerful teacher. As one of her students wrote during a unit on social studies and literature:

> *Think about the last time you watched television and saw commercials for kids' toys. Think about all those ads for "girl" products. Did you see much besides dolls and fashion-oriented stuff?*
>
> *If you are a girl, you hear these ads saying that you should just worry about raising a family and looking good. If you aren't as thin as a beanpole, you should go on a major diet.*

Daigle created her unit on popular culture when she received training, along with dozens of her colleagues, in the Vermont Equity Project, a state- and grant-supported program. Our aim is cultural literacy—the ability to read, interpret, and bring a critical perspective to the way our culture shapes our identity and expectations. Our guiding principle is that only by learning to read their world can children grow into citizens able to shape their own lives.

Cultural literacy extends and gives depth to multicultural education. Students not only celebrate diverse cultures but also recognize their society's pressures to fit the dominant cultural milieu—in terms of ethnicity, gender, family, and education. We see culture as Julian Weissglass (1994) defined it: "the attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices shared by a community of people which they often do not state or question and which they may not be consciously aware of."

Since 1994, when I launched the Vermont Equity Project in cooperation with middle school parent (now school board member) Kathy Olwell and Hunt Middle School Principal Linda Carroll, I have been leading 15 weekly seminars each autumn. James Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, was one of our speakers (1995). Forty-two Burlington, Vermont, teachers have participated.

The Media's Messages

Ann Park, another of our participants, begins her cultural geography unit by asking students to describe their family culture and then, working in groups, their school culture. The students choose language and symbols that distinguish each. They then identify cultural expectations for boys and girls as reflected in newspaper cartoons and television shows from the 1950s and 1990s. Comparing the television shows from these two decades helps them to see that current depictions of gender roles do not reflect the way boys and girls have to be. Finally, the students compare these depictions with the real people in their lives. They thereby gain new perspectives on how popular culture images purvey stereotypes and fail to reflect the diversity that students know.

Melody Daigle begins one unit by having her students read *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* (Avi 1992). The class discusses how perceptions of gender roles led to the dilemma of this 19th century heroine, who was persecuted because she learned boys' work as a sailor. Working in small groups, students talk about the behavior now expected of boys and girls. In full-group discussion, they eagerly talk about the pressures they feel to fit preset gender roles.

When Daigle and the Equity Project teachers watched a videotape of this class, they sensed that the students not only welcomed such a discussion, but were relieved to be able to unburden themselves of their feelings. Thus we are finding that children are experts on the pressures they feel from their cultural surroundings. But they may need teachers to create a safe place for discussing limiting gender roles and stereotypes based on race, class, and other characteristics of themselves and to help them name these stereotypes.

For example, after Patty Kissell shared with her 2nd graders ways in which her awareness is heightened in Equity Project seminars, she noticed children volunteering their own insights. "A book I read said 'Pilgrims and their wives,' " one 7-year-old related, emphasizing the word *wives*. "Sounds like only men were Pilgrims, doesn't it, Mrs. Kissell?" When such moments occur, teachers and students become partners in exploring how our culture shapes us.

Adding Up Disparities

Molly Snow integrated her math unit on bar graphs with cultural investigation. She asked her 6th graders to count the number of female and male athletes featured in the sports section of the local newspaper. Students kept records for a month, and then

made graphs comparing the numbers. This exercise led to discussions about why male sports predominated.

Pauline Mallory challenged her 7th and 8th graders to carry out similar research in a Vermont Math Portfolio project—part of the state's pilot program in using qualitative as well as quantitative assessment methods. Mallory read aloud a news story about a 10-year-old who surveyed her classmates about the amount of their allowances. The survey showed that girls received less than boys even when they did more chores. Mallory invited her students to develop, administer, and report on a survey of their own classmates to see whether such a gender gap existed. Their results varied considerably, but the students did find that, overall, girls received less money for doing more chores.

These math projects exemplify curriculums that connect students' cultural milieu and the math skills and critical perspectives they need to decipher their world. Students want to learn skills that help them see through and into their world, as an X-ray lets us see into an otherwise opaque body. Like cultural X-rays, the projects reveal pressures to act in certain ways. They also help children answer key questions of identity: Who am I? Where do I stand compared to others? Where am I headed?

What Is Normal?

When my predominantly white college students survey articles and ads in the magazines they read, they find that most of the people depicted are white, affluent, slender, heterosexual, sighted, and able to walk unassisted—except for athletes, who often are African-American men. That this profile reinforces stereotypes is obvious.

I encourage my students to see how such images may harm them by asking them: Who are you when you compare yourself with these images? Where do you stand compared to these people? Very few students see themselves mirrored here. But they often say that these images represent what is normal, and therefore they and others who don't match the profiles are abnormal. They also agree that because they've grown up watching these recurrent images, their aspirations have been influenced by them.

Our students also join us in asking hard questions of textbooks and course units: Who are we and where are we in this curriculum? A class at Burlington's Hunt Middle School, for example, reviewed several textbooks to determine how many and what types of women and men were depicted. "Did you see your own life or that of your parents in these illustrations?" their teacher asked. "If not, what messages did you get about your own worth and place in history?"

This assignment, in which students found far more men than women represented, came shortly after teachers in the Equity Project discovered that even in a new history text, *The American Nation* (Davidson and Stoff 1995), white men predominated, while the contributions of white women, people of color, and people with disabilities seemed to be tacked on as an afterthought. Students may counter such findings by arguing that few white women and people of color made history. But this claim depends on whether the focus in the study of history, literature, or any other subject is primarily on the public achievements of people who became famous (McIntosh 1983).

Recasting History

For an 8th grade unit on the U.S. Constitution, Equity Project teachers realized that asking all students to research and role-play the events at the Constitutional Convention would tell only part of the story. Accordingly, they invited half their students to assume the roles of wives like Abigail Adams, whose insightful voice we know, and the roles of anonymous shopkeepers, cooks, laborers, and children of all ethnic groups and classes.

As the authors of *How Schools Shortchange Girls* observe, history that includes those responsible for "the cyclical nature of daily life, the making and mending of the social fabric," reflects most of our lives and in so doing reinforces our self-worth (Wellesley Center for Research on Women 1992). Conversely, students' identities are assaulted by invisibility, underrepresentation, and stereotyping, as well as by an emphasis on individual achievement that overshadows collective and collaborative achievement.

In short, our project seeks to do what Paulo Freire (1970) has advocated: To teach children "to perceive critically the way they exist in the world," so that they can grow up to be truly literate, able to name their world, and be free.

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