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## **EXAMINING FOR GENDER STEREOTYPES IN CHILDREN'S SPORT-THEMED LITERATURE: A TEACHING ACTIVITY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Engaging students in the learning process is a continual goal of educators. Creating a learning environment that is engaging and meaningful is important and impactful to successful student learning. Furthermore, establishing a learning environment that creates experiences in classrooms to address social and cultural influences is important as we encourage our students to become global citizens. However, Taylor (2003) argues, "one of the most difficult tasks we face when teaching....is convincing students that society plays a large role in directing their behavior and shaping their lives" (Taylor, 2003, p. 300).

How do we come to understand our lives and how we fit into society? What and/or who influences the development of our ideas and beliefs and how we give meaning to them? Coakley (2009) argues that our thoughts are strongly influenced by ideologies. He defines ideologies as "...webs of ideas and beliefs that people use to give meaning to the world and make sense of their experience" (p. 18). He further argues that ideologies "...are important aspects of culture because they embody the principles, perspectives, and viewpoints that underlie our feelings, thoughts, and actions" (Coakley, 2009, p. 18).

There are multiple ideologies (e.g. gender, race, social class, etc.) that can influence how we think or act. Germane to this teaching activity is gender ideology. "Gender ideology consists of a web of ideas and beliefs about masculinity, femininity, and male-female relationships in the organization of social worlds" (Coakley, 2009, p. 19). "Dominant gender ideology in most societies emphasizes that men are naturally superior to women in activities that involve strength, physical skills, and emotional control" (Coakley, 2009, p. 19). Furthermore, gender is a social construct. "Society maintains a different set of normative roles for women and men, and requires of them different responsibilities and kinds of work. One's expected opportunities and outcomes in life correlate strongly with gender" (Taylor, 2003, p. 300). Unfortunately, such prevailing beliefs do not provide universal, unequivocal support for girls and women's engagement in physical activity and sport. In fact, throughout history, sport was largely believed to be a man's domain. Stereotypes created by dominant gender ideology can have a substantial impact on both men and women (Coakley, 2009).

How do we learn these ideas or beliefs strongly influenced by ideologies? One consideration is how we use language, whether it is transferred orally, in writing, or through social interaction. Mead (1934) wrote “through language and interaction, children acquire a social self” (as cited in Taylor, 2003, p. 301). “Language allows humans to make sense of objects, events, and other people in our environment” (Taylor, 2003, p. 301). One example of a space where language is shared and learned is through children’s literature. Taylor argues, “children’s books present a microcosm of ideologies, values, and beliefs from the dominant culture, including gender ideologies and scripts” (2003, p. 301).

### **ACTIVITY FRAMEWORK**

This teaching activity was modeled after an activity designed by a sociology professor (Taylor, 2003). Working with college students in an introductory sociology course, Taylor asked them to read and examine Dr. Seuss children’s books for gender stereotypes in characters and/or themes. Working in small groups of 2-3 people, students were provided with a coding framework (see Table 1) and asked to perform content analysis by counting “...words, themes, characters, paragraphs, items, concepts, and semantics” (Berg, 2001 as cited in Taylor, 2003, p. 304). Using Taylor’s (2003) framework, we adapted the activity to fit our students majoring in elementary education, physical education, or kinesiology.

As we continue to identify ways to engage our students outside of the traditional classroom structure, one possibility is to create situations for students to work on projects with other students outside of their major. The intent behind such activities is to provide students with an opportunity to meet other students they may not have otherwise had contact with and to engage them in material with others who may be formally trained in different capacities, thus viewing it from a different perspective. We, as professors in Kinesiology and Education, respectively, were interested in how this activity might be modified to specifically address the interests of our students. Because of these reasons, we adapted the methodology proposed by Taylor (2003) in several ways. We recruited eight students to participate. Four students had declared a major in Kinesiology or Physical Education and four students had declared a major in Elementary Education. Each student was paired with another student of the opposite gender and from a different degree plan for a total of four student pairs. We posited that pairing students with someone of a different gender and a different major would increase the chance that they may have different perspectives to draw from.

Instead of viewing Dr. Seuss books, our student groups were asked to analyze components of sport-themed children’s books (n=42) for gender stereotypes. The books were selected from a reputable children’s literature picture book list. Students were provided the coding framework from Taylor’s (2003) study (see table 1) with space to make quantitative and qualitative feedback. Little, to no, interference was made by faculty members. We thought it was important for students to reach their own conclusions about what they

viewed (Taylor, 2003). Upon completion of the book reviews, each student was given two reflection questions to consider and return within one week. The reflection questions were: 1) “In relation to gender stereotypes, what was your overall impression of the books reviewed?” (Taylor, 2003, p. 308) and 2) “Reflecting back on your exposure to media as a child on your experiences as a book rater today, what role [does] the media [play] in transmitting gender stereotypes to future generations?” (Taylor, 2003, p. 308).

Table 1 (Taylor, 2003)

Female Gender Stereotypes		Male Gender Stereotypes	
Submissive	Dependent	Dominant	Independent
Unintelligent	Emotional	Intelligent	Rational
Receptive	Intuitive	Assertive	Analytical
Weak	Timid	Strong	Brave
Content	Passive	Ambitious	Active
Cooperative	Sensitive	Competitive	Insensitive
Sex Object	Attractive	Sexually Aggressive	Achievement

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The intent of modifying Taylor’s (2003) activity was to examine if this activity could be meaningful to students in other disciplines. Student’s reflection on participation revealed that this activity encouraged them to be critical consumers of sport-themed children’s literature and other forms of media. Several students commented on the prevalence of gender stereotypes in the literature. One student shared,

I was very surprised that children’s books could have so many stereotypes in them....I was a little alarmed that the books that did have stereotypes for young girls all seemed to be negative showing women as weak and emotional. It does not seem to be something I would want my daughter exposed to.

The recognition of the presence of stereotypical gendered behaviors was impactful for many of the students who participated in the activity. However, one potential limitation of the current coding framework was the lack of a broader description of stereotypes. One student shared,

I was kind of disappointed that we were not able to show the negative stereotypes for guys and the positive ones for girls. I feel that this should have been incorporated into the study because the books were all about guys being macho and strong yet they had their moments where they were caring and sensitive just like some of the girls showed a strong, competitive side to them.

This is a recommended teaching activity to encourage students, regardless of discipline, to be critical consumers of literature (and other forms of media) and it’s impact on their beliefs about gender. An

important consideration regarding the design of the activity is the type of books chosen for students to review. One student commented,

The difficult part of reviewing a good portion of these books was that a lot of them were written as historical fiction books. This made it difficult to review them considering that historically, women were frequently not allowed to participate in some sports. I didn't want to compromise the integrity of the book for depicting an accurate picture...

This student's comments posed an interesting question. The student's thoughts prompted us to reflect on professional practices. For example, do teachers, when reading books to their students, discuss the differences in gender ideology throughout time or do they simply read the text and engage in little, if any, dialogue about the impact of the stereotypes presented to help their own students explore the power of their own ideologies? This is an important consideration as we continue dialogue about how to best prepare future educators.

This teaching activity could be further adapted to include a similar activity with other forms of media, specifically cartoons and/or video games. As one student identified, "I think that we have been trained to believe what the media shows us is truth. It starts with cartoons as a kid and graduates into sitcoms, videogames, and theater as adults." Students consistently identified the media as having the potential to strongly influence gender ideology. Another student shared,

The media plays a huge role in showing these stereotypes to young children not only in these books but in the tons of children's shows on television now....some of these books can be sending the wrong messages to young children limiting them from reaching their full potential.

A primary goal as educators should be to create opportunities for our students to become critical consumers of knowledge. Utilizing activities such as this one can create an environment to encourage critical inquiry and reflective practice.

## REFERENCES

- Coakley, J. (2009). *Sports in society: Issues and controversies*. New York, NY:McGraw Hill.
- Taylor, F. (2003, July). Content analysis and gender stereotypes in children's books. *Teaching Sociology*, 31(3), 300-311.