
Gender Bias Faced By Girls and What We Can Do: One Student's Perspective and Appended Information from the Center

As part of her university experiences, Biwei (Vivian) Huang worked at the Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. She indicated a particular interest in gender bias. As she delved into the literature, she decided she would like to write-up her personal perspective. This document provides her take on the topic along with an appendix from the Center outlining some things schools can do.

Girls grow up with fairy tales. I liked fairy tales very much when I was little. In my bedtime dreams or daytime fantasies, there would always be story like this: a beautiful princess is trapped by an evil woman who is old, ugly, and envies the beauty of the princess. The princess would wait for a brave, handsome prince to fight against the evil woman and rescue her. Finally, the prince would marry the princess and they would live happily ever after.

As a grown-up, I started to question the images and messages conveyed in my childhood fairy tales. Should girls always be slim, light skinned, and beautiful? Should girls always be docile and submissive? Should girls always be waiting for rescue, rather than fighting by themselves? Is marrying the prince the best way for the princess to “return the favor”?

In what follows, I examine how the values conveyed from fairy tales and social media are biased and how these ideas influence girls' social and academic life. I also offer a few suggestions for parents to help overcome gender bias.

Bias in Traditional Fairytales

“Fairytale are the common thread throughout the fabric of childhood in the United States” (Neikirk, 2009). Fairytales are one of the most important parts of childhood life, especially for girls. I listened to fairytales on tapes, and I begged my mother to buy me cartoon books based on the stories.

From experience, I know some children's stories teach them socially desired qualities (e.g., honesty from Pinocchio, bravery and cooperation from the Three Little Pigs). However, gender bias is also prevalent, especially in what is conveyed in traditional fairytales about feminine values, characteristics, standards of attractiveness, and life goals.

*This resource was initiated by Biwei (Vivian) Huang as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

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For example, in many traditional fairytales, good females are portrayed as young, slim, fit, and as having light skin (e.g., Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White). Snow White, for instance, is described as having “skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and with hair as black as ebony;” In contrast, bad girls are fat, have darker skin, and use heavy makeup and stepmothers are old, bad tempered, evil, and usually envious of their stepdaughter’s beauty and youth. These biases are even more pronounced in the movie productions of these tales and in social media.

Moreover, good females are not often portrayed as possessing significant abilities, intelligence, or power. Rather, they are dependent on others. For example, Snow White has to wait for the seven dwarfs to save her the first two times she is tricked by the Queen, and the third time it is a prince who rescues her. Cinderella also has to wait for the prince to find her. These plots convey that girls do not have to be active in determining their fate – at least not those who are stereotypically beautiful and docile.

Implicit as well are the norms conveyed about life roles (marriage, heterosexuality). The prince rescues the princess, they marry, and live “happily ever after.” Marriage seems to be the best way for girls to “return the favor;” it is the solution for problems; it brings endless happiness. Ironically, the hunter and the seven dwarfs also play a role in saving Snow White, but clearly, marriage must be between a prince and a princess. This reinforces ideas about social class. And, of course, the greatest achievement for girls is to find the Mr. Right, which makes heterosexual interpersonal relationships the norm.

Gender Bias in Media and in School Settings

Some may argue that fairy tales are too old-fashioned to influence today’s females. Be that as it may, gender bias remains prevalent in contemporary media and in school culture.

Gender Norms in Movies

Just focusing on movies, gender bias is rampant. In general, among the top 67 movies in 2012, 55 of the leading characters were male, and gender stereotyping is pronounced.

Females in many genres of film are sexualized, dominated by men, and often in need of saving by the male characters. Even when females are the leading characters, it has been pointed out that gender stereotypes often are used to “soften” the character. For example, in *The Avengers*, the only heroine (while able to fight as well as the male superheroes) is still sexualized (e.g., she is a pretend prostitute at the beginning and the only character who cries). In *The Hunger Games*, at one point the gutsy heroine becomes quite emotional and is shown kissing her teammate.

Think about the movies you have seen recently.

And think about what the gender norms you see in the majority of television shows, and television and magazine ads. What influence do you think these images have on girls’ concepts of beauty and relationships among different genders?

Gender Norms in Disney Movies

Disney movies are among the most popular for young people in the U.S. Many Disney's movies have been based on fairy tales; these (and most other Disney products) perpetuate biased gender norms and stereotypes.

Characters such as Princess Ariel in the Little Mermaid, Aurora in the Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Cinderella are youthful, white, and have a slim yet curvy body. Evil female characters, such as Ursula in the Little Mermaid, are old, have darker skin tones, and are often obese.

Moreover, females are often drawn with bare stomachs and cleavage, and the comments and reactions about them underscore females as sex objects. According to Martin and Kazyak (2009), in Disney movies, "women are often almost caught naked by men." These depictions convey the idea that women are valued by men mainly for their bodies.

Gender Norms in Schools

Researchers have found that many facets of school culture reinforce gender stereotypes and biases and accentuate gender differences and inequities. Examples of such problems include differential experiences related to classroom participation, socialization of behavior, textbook content, and more.

With respect to participation, in some classrooms girls have been found to have fewer opportunities than boys to engage in discussions, perhaps because teachers and students expect girls to be passive and quiet while boys are expected to be active and talkative. For instance, in both small-group discussions and whole-class activities, researchers have found that girls' opinions are viewed as inferior by their male peers. Boys often interrupted when girls were talking, and girls would arbitrarily be assigned tasks like taking notes during the discussion, rather than being active in carrying out the assigned experiment or offering opinions. In one study, the researchers note that the teacher was not aware of such problems until shown the data.

Socialization processes also may be practiced with gender biases. For instance, male-female differences are reinforced every time a teacher uses gender to group or line up students or handles misbehavior differentially. Data indicate a tendency for teachers to apply "femininity norms" ("be quiet, neat, and calm") and punish girls harder than boys when they manifest opposite behaviors.

In textbooks used until quite recently, researchers found that females were underrepresented. This was reflected in the number of text lines, proportion of named characters, and so forth. Moreover, females and males were portrayed stereotypically (e.g., females shown as nurses, males as doctors and lawyers).

In biology texts used in the 1980s, Martin (1991) found male reproductive organs and reproductive processes presented as superior to females. As an example, spermatogenesis was described as both a “remarkable” and “marvelous” feat with the normal human male manufacturing several hundred million sperm per day. Females were described as *only shedding a single gamete*, and ovulation is described as “destinated” because of the belief that all the ovarian follicles were already present at birth and just sitting on the shelf, slowly degenerating and aging. Menstruation was presented as the “dying”, “losing” and “denuding” of tissues. The description of the process of conception furthered gender stereotypes (i.e., males are active, females are passive). That is, the egg is described as passive and “transported,” while sperm actively “delivers” the genes to the egg and “penetrates” it.

Gender Bias Impact on Girls

Around the age of nine in the U.S., the impact of the gender-biased socialization contributes to problems related to body image and self-esteem (Gurian, 2012). In ensuing years, girls often perceive themselves in terms of their attractiveness to boys. As this is increasingly valued, some try to hide qualities they think would make them unattractive to boys (e.g., being too intelligent). Many girls try to enhance their “sexiness.” And status at school increasingly becomes a major facet of self-concept.

These all are significant concerns for schools and parents. They are associated with higher rates of eating disorders and emotional and academic problems among girls. And because subgroup competitions develop, these concerns play a role in relational aggression (e.g., bullying) among girls.

Academically, gender-biased socialization and depictions affect performance and choice related to some subjects and careers. For example, girls tend to receive higher grades than boys in math and science courses through high school, but they are less likely to choose careers involved science and engineering.

Over the long run, the impact of gender bias shapes destiny for everyone and society.

A Few Suggestions for Parents

Parents should help girls build resistance to gender bias and its negative impact by

- working against stereotypes (e.g., by involving daughters and sons in tasks and activities that traditionally have been thought of as gender-specific)
- encouraging girls to voice their opinions and thoughts
- avoiding overprotecting girls and boys (Overprotection may make them feel incapable of doing certain things. Let them try; let them explore.)
- pointing out and discussing common biases against girls in media and culture (e.g., It is common and probably inevitable that girls will watch certain TV shows that contains stereotypes, such as *Desperate Housewives* or *Gossip Girls*. Discussion of such shows can help children distinguish between what is presented and what is true in real life.)

Appended by the Center Information about What Schools Can Do

We were pleased that Biwei (Vivian) Huang wanted to offer a personal perspective of gender bias. She has provided a good foundation for considering what schools should and shouldn't be doing about the concerns raised.

Gender bias is a concern for all educators and families. Besides promoting gender inequality, gender bias creates learning inequality in the classroom and sets limits on future potential. Students who are socialized into a stereotypical gender role tend to behave in ways that limit their holistic development and often develop learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Schools and families promote gender bias, sometimes consciously, but also through lack of awareness. Addressing gender bias requires awareness and taking active steps to counter the development of stereotypical gender roles. Stereotypical gender role behaviors, of course, manifest in the early years. Children learn from what they hear, see, and are asked and guided to do. So active steps to counter gender bias begin with how early experiences are shaped (e.g., the degree to which toys and dress and other messages are gender-specific).

Below we have synthesized what generally is recommended to schools to counter gender bias. (Some of points also have relevance for families.)

Language. Use gender neutral and inclusive language. (Watch for gender bias in referring to the class [e.g., “you guys”], conducting discussions [e.g., disproportionate use of male examples], and describing roles [e.g., referring to occupations in male-female terms].)

Curriculum. Be certain that materials and activities are inclusive, representative, and appropriately gender-affirmative, sensitive, and balanced. That is, monitor and revise curriculum to promote full development and avoid perpetuating stereotypes. Include a unit on gender bias, and use examples and incidents of negative stereotyping as teachable moments. In particular, explore how the media contributes to gender bias and stereotyping. Encourage males and females to work together cooperatively; avoid gender-specific assignments and groupings.

Equity of Participation. Monitor and ensure that everyone is encouraged to participate and actually does so (e.g., all are asked questions, encouraged to speak up, provided equal time, attention, and assistance). To break down stereotypes, assign tasks that equally place students in non-traditional learning situations.

Socialization and Feedback. Encourage the same positive behaviors from girls and boys. Avoid assigning tasks that involve stereotyped gender roles (e.g., boys carry, girls clean). Promoting gender stereotypical behaviors can contribute to both personal and social problems (e.g., praising girls mainly for being neat, orderly, and working nicely together, while encouraging boys mainly to speak out assertively and be competitive). Quickly address all acts of that make negative gender comparisons or that involve gender name calling, teasing, and harassment; as feasible, use them as teachable moments. Ensure that feedback about learning and behavior is comparable for all.

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