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TV and Zines: Media and the Construction of Gender for Early Adolescents

Gender is central to the lives of young people both within and outside of the context of schooling. "What does it mean to be a teenager?" is a question important to both boys and girls in early adolescence. These research notes are a part of a larger ongoing research project—Issues of Gender and Literacy for Early Adolescents—where we are examining issues of gender, the construction of gendered identities, and the spaces for gender in school practices and curriculum. The schools involved are rearticulating possibilities for alternative school experiences and curriculum for boys and girls through single-gender programs. In these notes we discuss the role that media play in the lives of early adolescents and how these youths see themselves as gendered in relation to the popular media.

In Canadian schools there is a growing concern about issues of gender, the inequities between boys and girls (Blair, Rolheiser, & Reschny, 1995; Canadian Teachers' Federation; 1990a; Rice & Russell, 1995), the gendered nature of school harassment (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1990b; Kaufman, 1993, 1997; Larkin, 1994, 1997; Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, 1994; Staton & Larkin, 1992), the need for discussions of gender in curriculum and pedagogy (Ellis, 1993; Robertson, 1992; Rogers, 1985, 1997), and the gendered nature of literacy (Blair, 1998; Cherland, 1994; Ricker-Wilson, 1999; Wason-Ellam, 1997). Coeducational schooling, based on the premise that the same means equal for both genders, has been the norm in public education in Canada and the United States for most of this century (Riordan, 1990; Tyack & Hansot, 1990). The recent emergence of single-gender classrooms and programs has brought into question many of the assumptions inherent in the understanding of equality and has raised many issues regarding the gendered nature of space in schools.

The research reported in these notes took place in one such single-gender program in a large junior high school in a predominantly White upper-middle-class suburban community in western Canada. The data were collected from grade 7-9 students through brainstorm sessions, surveys, and informal interviews.

Popular media are prevalent in the lives of Canadian adolescents. Media contribute in significant ways to adolescents' construction of gendered identities. In our interviews with these youth, two separate media surfaced as

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central to the lives of these early adolescents: magazines and television. Popular television shows and teen magazines are key influences in developing and sustaining gendered lifestyles for adolescents through glitzy photos, snappy dialogue, and enticing ads. Visual and oral messages transmit the prevalent ideologies underlying gendered identities and work to support the salience of the male-female dichotomy. Popular media today, as throughout the last half of this century (Tinkler, 1995), provide adolescents with messages that contribute to the definition of femininity and masculinity and the benefits of their adherence to these categories. Boys watch action and adventure shows and televised sports; they read magazines that focus on activity and sport. Their role models are adult men who are strong and in control. Girls watch shows focusing on friends and relationships; they read fashion magazines. Their role models, often female adolescents, show them how to look good, how to belong to the "right" crowd, and how to please their peers. These two constructions of gender are different from each other, almost in opposition. There is little middle ground.

Boys and girls also deal with these media forms in different ways. Television shows and magazines are shared among girls as they watch favorite shows together, pass popular magazines around among each other, and talk about what they see and read. Their meaning-making is constructed collaboratively and shared through their talk. They compare stories and opinions in their private discourse. The boys' interactions with these media, on the other hand, belong to the realm of public discourse. They read few magazines, usually not the same ones, and they do not talk to each other about the contents. Boys' viewing of television is much more individualistic; they do not talk much about the television shows except to compare sports events, in which case it is more likely to be a group public display of either camaraderie or competition.

The girls in our study see images of possibility for themselves constantly portrayed in television and popular magazines. They see other adolescent girls similar to themselves featured in articles, ads, and television shows. Their interests—romantic, fashion, cultural—are presented specifically for adolescent viewers. These media forms do not represent adolescent boys in the same way. Most male roles represented are adults, whether it is in sport (e.g., hockey, football, soccer), action films, or magazines. The boys themselves pointed out that often magazines focus on such things as equipment, technology, vehicles, and so on, without showing human figures at all except for occasional adult male sport figures. The adolescent males featured in media are often presented as romantic interests for the benefit of adolescent girls.

Advertising is intricately interwoven throughout all aspects of media, and the commercial messages are complicit with the patriarchal structures supported in the media. The individualistic and capitalist nature of patriarchy can gain only by portraying love, beauty, and popularity, and belonging as commodities that can be purchased and applied. The patriarchal system demands that youth of both genders "buy into" this ideology. Advertising, prevalent in television and magazines, objectifies females and presents them as merchandise available for purchase. Advertising, television programming, and

magazine features work together to tighten the boundaries of gender identity, reinforcing the male-female binary that ensures continuation of a patriarchal system.

If education is intended to maintain the status quo, then issues of gender are threatening for educators and students, issues to be avoided or treated superficially. If, however, an aim of education is to create truly equitable opportunities and critical thinkers who might question existing practices and beliefs, then these issues, simmering underground, need to be brought to the surface and examined in educational settings. The media, as represented here through TV and Zines, provide a wealth of points of entry for teachers to apply a critical literacy framework in their classroom explorations of gender.

The development of single-gender programs in Canadian schools is raising issues of gender and enabling us to examine the role of schools in serving the needs of all youth, including those with a range of gendered identities. In this ongoing research we are continuing to explore the intersections of gender and literacy as well as the role of media in the construction of gendered identities with the view to providing a framework for rethinking and redressing the gender imbalances in curriculum and pedagogy.

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