

MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION, GENDER, AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS
IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The media impact how people perform their gender, and play an important role in the reproduction of gender binary. Media representations of gender can be described as hegemonic in the sense that, because of their complexity, they contribute to the reproduction of gender norms by otherwise agentic audiences. Media literacy education offers useful strategies for helping audiences question media representations of gender, allowing them to trouble the hegemonic system that keeps inequalities in place. This dissertation answers the question: How do high school students respond to the instruction in a media literacy program informed by gender studies and scholarship on media representations? To answer this question, I used ethnographic methods and the case study approach. My main findings are: (1) Classes that involve analysis of media representations of gender have an agenda-setting effect on students, helping them notice problematic media messages and connect them to social problems and inequalities. (2) Media and gender classes can encourage students to engage in social action, even without the teacher's prompting. (3) Media and gender classes are not part of a standard curriculum, and teachers choose to include them because they are passionate about gender inequalities. This is why these teachers might lean towards the protectionist approach. (4) Students might embrace teachers' message about the value of gender equality and diversity, but keep their implicit biases unchecked. Teachers should think of ways to address these biases in the classroom. (5) In order to help students acquire a balanced set of media literacy skills, it is important to work on all competencies of the AACRA model of media literacy education: Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect, and Act.

To my Mom:

Words cannot express how much you mean to me.

I love you, always.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation I explore how we can effectively teach students about gender in the media, and discuss the challenges of helping young people become critical consumers of gender representations. Using scholarship on media reception (Hall, 1980) and active audiences (Bobo, 2002; Jenkins, 1992), the concept of hegemony developed by British cultural studies (Lash, 2007), Butler's conceptualization of gender (1990), and principles of media literacy education (Hobbs, 2011), I based the dissertation on three broad premises: (1) The media impact how people perform their gender, and play an important role in the reproduction of gender binary; (2) Media representations of gender are hegemonic in the sense that, because of their complexity, they contribute to the reproduction of gender norms by otherwise agentic audiences; (3) Media literacy education offers useful strategies for helping audiences question media representations of gender, allowing them to trouble the hegemonic system that keeps inequalities in place.

In this dissertation I use Butler's description of gender as performative (1990). Gender binary emerges through discursive practices, and through repetitive daily actions performed by ourselves, and others towards us. Our gender identities are shaped through interactions with a variety of social institutions, such as family (Rhodes, 2005; Fine, 2010), school (Pascoe, 2007; Pollack, 1999), religion (Rubin, 1993[1984])—and the media, which enter the life of children from an early age (Daily Media Use among

Children and Teens, 2010; Zero to Eight, 2011). The media also offer a space for discursive practices that reproduce gender binary.

However, that does not mean that people are duped or forced into reproducing gender scripts. Scholarship on audience reception shows that audiences are agentic—they are actively using media texts for their own purposes and interpreting them in a variety of ways (Cooper, 2009; Rand, 1995). Media fragmentation and the complexity of media texts also make it difficult to argue that media audiences are brainwashed into reproducing gender norms. The concept of hegemony initially coined by Gramsci and further developed within British cultural studies offers a way to explain how the status quo of gender binary is reproduced despite audiences' agency. Because media representations of gender are hegemonic, audiences willingly reproduce the status quo, even when they are against it.

Hegemony is described as adaptable and thus nearly impossible to disrupt (Gramsci, 1971). This does not mean that all attempts to fight against the status quo are futile. I argue that educating ourselves about the hegemonic nature of media representations of gender, actively questioning them, and helping others to do so will allow us to at least trouble the system of inequalities.

The process of questioning media representations of gender can be informed by principles of media literacy education, which has a long history of exposing power relationships reflected in media texts (Masterman, 1985). Media literacy education is valuable for dealing with hegemony also because it helps students to connect media representations to real-world inequalities, and use their understanding of issues reflected/reinforced by the media for social action (Hobbs & Moore, 2013). Incorporating

critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and the philosophy of progressive education (Dewey, 2008[1916]), media literacy education emphasizes praxis-oriented learning that can help students recognize the workings of hegemony, and use knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom to trouble it. Incorporating not only media analysis but also media production (Goodman, 2003), media literacy education can be used to teach a new generation of media producers how not to reinforce hegemony with texts they create.

Courses that encourage students to reflect on media representations of gender exist in a number of colleges and universities, and in some K-12 schools—although they are not necessarily labeled as media literacy education. Nevertheless, little qualitative research has been done to gather evidence on whether – and if so how – these programs work. Because of the lack of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of such programs, we do not know yet how to answer such questions, as: What elements of media literacy education do teachers incorporate in their media and gender classes? What are their motivations for discussing media representations of gender with students? Do teachers discuss with students the complexity of media representations? Are students receptive to teachers’ messages about gender in the media? What elements of these programs are the most effective in making young people think about the hegemonic status quo of gender norms? What elements of these programs students respond to most positively? Are these programs conducive to social action?

Using principles of media literacy education to teach students about the complexity of media representations of gender might sound like a good idea – in theory. In practice, however, educators willing to do so may encounter challenges they have not ever imagined. Since teaching young people about gender involves encouraging them to

question their worldview, this kind of instruction might produce negative reactions.

However, few studies explore resistance in classes where media representations of gender are discussed. Turnbull (1998) showed that during such classes students might display subtle resistance; for example, they might agree with the teacher only because they do not want their peers to laugh at them. Buckingham (2003) pointed out that, because students understand that they are supposed to be critical of the media, they might assume a critical stance to please the teacher, not because they really understand how to deconstruct media messages or are immune to media stereotypes. Hobbs (2011) noted that students do not enjoy criticizing media texts they love, which might lead to them disagreeing with the teacher's message.

Another challenge that teachers might face is connected to the danger of reinforcing gender binary by simply discussing it in class. It is nearly impossible to analyze media representations of gender without talking about "men" and "women" as two distinct social groups. Even as teachers are trying to fight against gender stereotypes they might be inadvertently reproducing them. Both Buckingham (2003) and Hobbs (2011) also talk about the danger of losing nuances when discussing the role of the media in people's lives. Guided by the best intentions, teachers passionate about their subject might manipulate students into accepting "right" interpretations of media texts. They might also emphasize the idea that the media have negative effects on people, without taking into consideration audiences' agency.

In order to make instruction about media and gender more effective, we need to deepen the exploration of what works and what does not work in classrooms where educators discuss media representations of gender with students. Using Hall's (1980)

encoding/decoding model, we should investigate whether students are developing oppositional readings of media texts, or whether they are simply reproducing the dominant reading. Scholarship on media literacy education can help us find out whether young people develop critical autonomy, or whether they just repeat teachers' interpretations. Using the concept of hegemony, we might want to look at students' ability to see how media representations can co-opt values of social justice movements. Finally, using the concept of gender binary, we can explore whether young people indeed start questioning the dualism of gender in the culture around them.

Although media and gender classes can be found on different stages of the educational system, in this dissertation I chose to explore how they function in high school. Because young people experience media representations of gender from an early age, the earlier they start reflecting on them, the better. Therefore, I argue that we should first of all explore how classes on gender and media function in schools—as opposed to colleges and universities. Another reason to do so is that, although these courses can be found in some college programs (e.g., in media and communication studies), not all college students have a chance to be exposed to such conversations. Furthermore, not all people go to college, so if they do not talk about hegemonic media representations at school, they might never have a chance to learn about them later in life. School programs—especially, in public schools—have the potential of reaching more people than college/university courses.

At the same time, deep discussions about media representations of gender are more likely to happen in high schools than in elementary or middle schools. Educational program should be adjusted to stages of cognitive development (Santrock, 2008);

discussions about ideologies, and about the complexity of media representations of gender might be too complicated for younger students. In addition, some parents might feel that talking about gender issues is inappropriate for younger students.

While popular culture is a place where hegemony is reproduced, it also offers a space where power inequalities can be challenged. It appears that a social system based on hegemony is always one step ahead of any subversive action, adjusting and evolving together with resistance it encounters. Nevertheless, the history of feminism and the social rights movements shows that positive change *is* possible. Knowing how hegemony works, through the media or otherwise, we can keep devising new strategies of resistance; while some of these strategies will inevitably be co-opted, others will yield tangible results (Milestone & Meyer, 2012). Education offers a space for exposing the workings of ideologies for the next generation of audiences to see. The potential of education—in particular, media literacy education—for subverting hegemony should not be underestimated.

This project explores media and gender classes in high school using ethnographic methods and the case study approach. As part of the case study, I observed three classes taught by two teachers in one high school, interviewed the teachers and their students, and looked at texts and artifacts produced by the young people. My main research question was: How do students respond to the instruction in a media literacy program informed by gender studies and scholarship on media representations? I also wanted to know what educational approaches teachers use for media and gender classes, and whether these approaches are effective for helping young people understand hegemonic media representations of gender. I lay out and analyze thick descriptions collected during

this case study, contextualizing them through analysis of media and gender educational materials available online, as well as through interviews with four additional high school teachers and with high school students outside of the case study.

My findings indicate that media and gender classes in high school have an important agenda-setting effect on participating students. Although young people's perceptions of the units I observed differed according to their backgrounds and personalities, most of them enjoyed the classes and used knowledge that they had acquired to pick apart media texts outside of school. Media and gender classes have a potentially long-lasting effect on students' perceptions. I was able to interview several young people who had taken these classes one or two years ago. Many of these students were still enthusiastic about things that they had learned, and enjoyed analyzing media representations of gender on their own. The classes changed not only students' perceptions but also, in some instances, their behaviors. A number of young people told me that they engaged in social action by sharing with their friends and families what they had learned about gender inequalities and problematic media representations.

At the same time, my findings reveal that, when students learn about the value of gender equality, this does not necessarily mean that the teacher's work is done. Young people might embrace positive values promoted by feminism, and still have biases and gaps in their knowledge that prevent them from understanding how hegemony works. To describe the gaps and implicit biases that do not allow young people to see how they might be implicated in maintaining the system of inequalities, I use the term *half-changed minds* (Fine, 2010). I explain why honoring students' opinions and interpretations in the classroom is important for exposing their half-changed minds and dealing with them.

Although teachers in media and gender classes might see students' resistance as counterproductive and try minimizing it, I argue that resistance is an important part of the learning process, and that it can be used to further understand how the hegemonic system manifests itself through young people's perceptions.

This study has implications for communication theory and for media education practice. Building on Hall's encoding/decoding model, I argue that students' half-changed minds lead to negotiated readings of media texts. This should not necessarily be seen as a problem, but as a stage on the way towards developing oppositional readings that would dismantle and challenge dominant ideologies embedded in media messages. In terms of media literacy practice, I argue that to be able to challenge the hegemonic system of which the media are a part, students should develop a balanced set of media literacy skills. Young people's competencies should include not only an ability to do media analysis, but also to reflect on their position within the hegemonic system, and to engage in social action that would challenge gender inequalities.

CHAPTER 2

TROUBLING HEGEMONY THROUGH MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

In this chapter I outline main theories, concepts and schools of thought that have informed this project. I show how the notion of gender was complicated by Butler, and discuss the role of the media in the reproduction of gender binary. I then talk about active audiences and complex media representations to show that the relationship between media representations and our gender identities is far from simple. I use the concept of hegemony to further complicate this relationship. Finally, I synthesize these theories and concepts to explain how we can use media literacy education to help audiences analyze media representations of gender, and uncover the hegemonic system behind them.

Reproduction of Gender Binary, and Performative Gender

The idea that people are socialized into rigid gender roles was first explicitly articulated in the writings of De Beauvoir (2011[1949]), who noted that, “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 283). Several years after De Beauvoir wrote these words, sexologist John Money introduced the term “gender role,” and proposed to use the notion of gender to talk about social conventions that help people determine who is male and who is female by the way people behave (Money & Hampson, 1955). Since the 1970s, feminist scholars and activists have used the term “gender” as an analytic category that served to ease the exposure and investigation of male dominance and female subordination (Hawkesworth, 2005). Some feminists began to describe gender as a social construct (Alsop, Fitzsimons & Lennon, 2002). Gradually feminist scholars started seeing it as a *process* or *performance* that begins as soon as a person is born, and does not end

until she dies (Butler, 1990). In this dissertation I use Butler's scholarship to discuss how media representations impact people's gender identities.

Historically, gender difference has been connected to the difference between sexes (hence the dualism), and proclaimed natural (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Butler (1990) argued that not only gender differences, but also sex differences are socially constructed. Moreover, Butler pointed out that gender binary creates sex binary, not the other way around. Our understanding of biological differences is shaped by our belief in cultural differences. In other words, gender norms do not follow from biology, but construct our understanding of biology.

If culturally constructed differences are the reason we perceive both gender and sexuality as a binary, the question then becomes, how these differences come to exist in the first place. For Butler, gender binary is an outcome of repetitive social practices that we engage in throughout our lives, and of discursive practices that produce identities while appearing to merely represent them. Both of these types of practices offer an important connection between Butler's theory and our discussion about media representations of gender.

In her theory of performativity, Butler (1990) describes gender as a set of social scripts that shape our identities through interactions with various social institutions. Our gender identities are formed through our own performances and performances of others towards us. These gender performances are structured in a way that constantly reinforces gender binary by creating an illusion that "female" and "male" natures are distinct and do not overlap.

As a powerful and pervasive social institution, the media play an important role in shaping our gender identities. Using Butler's theory, I argue that the media shape our gender identities through performance and through discursive practices.

We interact with media texts, and communicate with other people using media tools, constantly performing our gender in the process. An example of the former would be consuming media texts that conform to our gender identity, e.g., reading *Cosmopolitan* if you identify as a woman, or *Maxim* if you identify as a man. An example of the latter would be constructing our online identity on Facebook using markers of gender. We are also hailed by media texts in a sense that they target us based on our gender identities—e.g., chick flick films for women and action films for men. In addition, other people communicate with us using media tools—e.g., commenting on a picture that we posted on Facebook. Online harassment of women who have tried to criticize video games would be an example of how things can go wrong when people have others perform gender towards them through the media.

Second, the media participate in shaping our gender identities through discursive practices. This aspect of Butler's theory of gender directly relates to media representations. The media portray gender binary as something natural and inevitable, while in fact creating this binary by presenting audiences with ideals of emphasized femininity and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). These ideals are what Butler calls "phantasmatic"—they are unachievable, yet they guide our actions as we are constructing our identities. Same as performance, the discourse of gender in the media constitutes the real, although many people see this cause-effect relationship working the other way around.

For Butler, both performativity and the discursive nature of gender offer opportunities for subversion. Repetition of performative acts allows for a possibility of change, and so does the mutable nature of gender scripts contained in our discursive practices. In fact, we can see change happening as media representations of gender evolve over time—compare sexist ads of the 1960s with strong female characters like Lara Croft, or the tough and silent Marlboro Man with vulnerable and plagued with internal conflicts Don Draper from *Mad Men*. There are also multiple examples of changes in the way the media perform gender toward us and we perform gender towards the media. For example, many popular women’s magazines nowadays target their readers not as housewives but as empowered businesswomen who enjoy their sexuality. The question, however, remains, how much these shifts do to actually trouble gender binary.

Active Audiences and Complex Representations

Butler’s theory of gender is useful for investigating how the media shape our gender identities. However, in order to understand audiences’ interactions with media representations of gender we need to draw on scholarship that explores the complexity of media texts and audiences’ interpretations. In this section I discuss several theories that elucidate these issues. These theories all come from the broad field of cultural studies.

Cultural studies originated in Great Britain, and to this school of thought we owe the diverse literature on popular culture and everyday life. More specifically, thanks to British cultural studies we have rich scholarship on the complicated role of media texts in our lives. Founders of this school of thought (Hall, 1980; Hoggart, 1957; Williams, 1966) suggested looking at popular culture as a site of contestation, where “dominant ideologies and powerful interests can be challenged and resisted, adapted and reproduced”

(Milestone & Meyer, 2012, p. 5). While nowadays the majority of media scholars have recognized the complexity of media representations, and of the relationship between audiences and media texts, I argue that it is also important to remember that these representations are ideological, in a sense that they reinforce dominant ideologies even if they seem to challenge them.

One of the key theories that shaped the current scholarship on media representations is theory of the polysemic media texts by Hall (1980). According to Hall's encoding/decoding model, audience members create different interpretations of media messages based on their positionality, which rests on the intersection of socio-economic status, race, gender, age and other axes of identity. At the same time, according to Hall's argument, while oppositional and negotiated meaning-making is possible, the dominant reading is still very likely to happen. Hence, dominant ideologies get reproduced despite audiences' agency.

Scholarship of British cultural studies was transferred to U.S. soil, and not without some important changes. While the British school of thought was grounded in Marxism and preoccupied with discovering ideologies embedded in popular culture, the U.S. version of the field is influenced by pragmatic, liberal-pluralist tradition (Hardt, 1992). Hall's model inspired many scholars to explore the agentic nature of media audiences, their ability to interpret and use media texts in many different ways according to their experiences, assumptions and needs (e.g., Bobo, 2002; Cooper, 2009; DeVane & Squire, 2008; Rand, 1995). U.S. cultural studies downplayed the ideological side of media texts, and instead focused on subjectivity and power of media audiences.

According to theories of active audiences, people are independent meaning-makers who use media texts for their gratification, and reject ideas that are not relevant for their life circumstances (Cooper, 2009; Fiske, 1989). Consumers are seen as textual poachers (Jenkins, 1992), who play with media texts, almost unconstrained by their authors' intentions. Even though media representations contain certain problematic ideologies, once we start looking at what audiences actually do with media texts, it becomes harder to make any definite conclusions about their impact (DeVane & Squire, 2008; Rand, 1995).

Making predictions about the influence of media representations on audiences' perceptions and actions becomes even more difficult if we take into consideration the sophistication of media texts, combined with the increasing fragmentation of the media. Scholars note that media representations of gender have become increasingly sophisticated over the years, and offer audiences a wider variety of scripts to choose from (Gill, 2007). Mainstream media texts are now populated by strong female characters that are active and independent (Hains, 2012). Men are invited to relate to loving fathers, sensitive husbands, emotional friends, and attached sons abundant in films and on TV (Mackinnon, 2003). At least some members of LGBT communities can find themselves represented, and often in more nuanced ways than before (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Shugart, 2003) The ever increasing number of media outlets offers media texts that cater to people with a variety of tastes, backgrounds and interests.

Even though media texts became significantly more complicated, representing different subjectivities and realities, we should remember that this complexity is often a result of an attempt to maximize revenues of media companies. Even within a fragmented

media market, media texts are produced to be attractive to the largest possible audience. Although media producers might appear to push the envelope with more daring representations, we should remember that the main impetus here is not to change the status quo but to attract new audiences while keeping the old ones happy—in other words, to increase the revenue. We should be careful distinguishing between more nuanced media texts and ones that foster ambivalence in order to please as many audience members as possible.

The question of how exactly media texts influence audiences does not have a simple answer. Getting into intellectual fights to prove to somebody that a certain strong female character is a product of sexism and has bad influence on young girls might be just wasting our breath. We also should remember that for some people these representations can be empowering. It is more important to remember that

media representations are grounded in contemporary ideological assumptions and discourses about worldviews and belief systems, in general, and gender in particular. Thus, gender representations are understood to be signifiers of dominant modes of ideology in which they are rooted, as well as at the same time the practices of these ideologies. (Lemish, 2008, p. 1945)

Instead of examining the elusive accuracy of representations, we should be more preoccupied with exposing ideologies that are embedded in media texts, and analyzing how these ideologies are implicated in power inequalities (Lemish, 2008).

Although I share the optimism of scholars who write about active audiences and fragmented media markets, I believe that in order to understand the role of media representations of gender in our lives it is important to go back to the source of cultural studies, and to look at the ideological basis of media texts. And this is why I turn to hegemony, a key concept of British cultural studies.

Hegemony

The concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) can help us explain both the growing sophistication and variety of media portrayals, and the dearth of representations that offer scripts outside of the dualism of masculinity/femininity. According to the concept of hegemony, inequalities remain in place because people are encouraged to actively participate in their own oppression by the system. Media audiences may question the dominant readings of media texts (Hall, 1980), and produce interpretations that were not envisioned by those who created them; however, questioning does not necessarily mean that the real change can happen.

The concept of hegemony is more useful for understanding why power imbalances persist than the Marxist notion of ideology. While Marxism's ideology is immutable and allows dominant social groups to maintain power by obscuring reality, hegemony can be—and is—actively challenged by audiences. The challenging does bring out change, but this change does not mean the disruption of the status quo. Pieces of the system might shift or be replaced, yet the system as a whole remains in place. For example, the fact that the U.S. media now includes many very active liberal outlets that question conservatism and capitalism does not mean that these ideologies are truly disrupted.

Another important concept of British cultural studies, which helps us understand how hegemony functions, is co-option.

It refers to ideologies maintaining their hegemonic status by including aspects of opposing or new ideologies into their own frameworks, thus broadening their appeal and avoiding resistance in new social climates. (Milestone & Meyer, 2012, p. 18)

If we use the example of the liberal media, we might note that dominant ideologies seem to welcome discourses that challenge them. Allowing liberal media outlets to exist means incorporating resistance but in a way that makes a more substantial remodeling of the system very difficult.

The same dynamics can be found in the case of media representations of gender. Dominant ideologies of patriarchy and heteronormativity allow and even welcome the growing sophistication of media texts, even if the latter seems to challenge them. Co-opting subversive ideologies of feminism and social rights movements, hegemonic system “sells” them to audiences who are appeased to find a growing variety of strong female, vulnerable male, and LGBT characters. Audiences might feel that they have the freedom to choose from diverse media representations, and to interpret them any way they want. Yet the scope of interpretations is still significantly influenced by limitations of media texts, despite their apparent improvement. In Bird’s words (2003): “We may be able to make creative, individual meanings from this torrent of messages and images, but we can still only work with what we’re given” (p. 3). For example, in her famous exploration of romantic novels Radway (1984) concluded that women use reading novels to challenge patriarchal ideology, yet they cannot find a true escape from the patriarchal environment they are caught in.

The fact that hegemony allows for multiple interpretations and subversive readings may create an illusion that power imbalance has been eliminated. Negotiated and oppositional readings of media representations of gender can and do happen. However, even if audiences reject the preferred reading, they still have to make sense of dominant ideologies. Media representations of gender are part of the hegemonic system

because they help to maintain audiences' consent by constantly adjusting their messages to accommodate subversive ideologies.

If the complexity of media representations and audiences' agency gave us hope that the situation with media representations of gender is not so bad after all, focusing on hegemony allows us to assume a more pessimistic—and, as I argue, realistic—position. The concept of hegemony explains that audiences are not fooled or forced to accept dominant ideologies—they do so willingly. The hegemonic system seems to be practically indestructible. Although it might seem that media representations allow to perform gender in many different ways, certain gender scripts still remain privileged. For women, it is White heterosexual able-bodied emphasized femininity, and for men – White heterosexual able-bodied hegemonic masculinity.

Although these considerations make the situation appear hopeless, I argue that we should still do everything in our power to trouble hegemony. This is important if we want to at least minimize inequalities and power imbalances present in our culture—including those connected with gender, sexuality, race, class and physical ability. One way of dealing with these inequalities is by making people aware of the workings of dominant ideologies, and helping them to think of productive ways of disrupting them. I argue that one way of doing that is through education in general, and media literacy education in particular.

Using Media Literacy Education to Trouble Hegemony

How can we help young people understand the hegemonic nature of media representations of gender? How can we use discussions about media texts to reveal to students the unconscious performance of gender and discursive practices through which

the status quo of gender binary is reproduced? How do we help them to think about troubling this hegemonic system? I argue that media literacy education—which combines learning to access media texts and tools, doing media analysis, reflecting on one’s own relationship with media texts, producing media, and engaging in social action (Hobbs, 2011)—offers useful strategies for achieving these goals.

Media literacy scholars point out that the knowledge accumulated by media studies about the way people interact with the media can be used to help students to be active media consumers, critical thinkers and lifelong learners (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 1998; Masterman, 1985). According to the National Association of Media Literacy Education, “[t]he purpose of media literacy education is to help individuals of all ages develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today’s world” (Core Principles of MLE, n. d.).

It can be challenging to explain to high school students how gender is performed, and how sophisticated representations are in fact hegemonic. Students might simply not be prepared to talk about such abstract concepts as hegemony, performativity and gender binary. This is where media literacy education can be helpful. According to Buckingham (2003), “[m]edia education generates a degree of enthusiasm and enjoyment that is all too rare in contemporary schooling; and it offers a form of educational practice that is not just engaging for students, but also intellectually rigorous, challenging and relevant to their everyday lives” (p. X). By using media literacy education, we can make discussions about these complicated issues appealing for young people.

I argue that of particular value for troubling the hegemonic gender binary is the media literacy model of AACRA (Hobbs, 2011). According to this model, media literacy instruction is the most effective when it contains five elements—Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect, and Act—each of them standing for a set of media literacy competencies. *Access* involves being able to use media tools proficiently for finding information, and knowing how to process this information on the most basic level. *Analyze* competencies are necessary for students to be able to critically engage with media texts. Activating competencies that fall under the rubric of *Create* means helping students use media tools for producing their own media texts. *Reflect* is necessary for understanding how media texts impact one’s own life, and exploring one’s own assumptions about the media. Finally, *Act* competencies are necessary for students to be able to use the other four competencies and knowledge they acquired in media literacy classroom to make a positive change in the world.

The first element of the AACRA model—Access—is fairly basic: media literacy skills begin with the ability to “read” a media text (comprehension), to look for information in media texts, to turn on a computer, to write an email, to use a DVD player for watching a film, etc. The other four competencies are more sophisticated and thus necessitate more explanation.

Analyzing media texts means questioning them in a systematic way that exposes their constructed nature, their purpose, embedded values, and information that is hidden or omitted. Media analysis in class should help students to develop independent critical thinking—an ability to critically engage with media texts outside of the classroom: “As students practice questioning media and other information, they may begin a process of

internal questioning every time they encounter media messages, without prompting from the teacher” (Hobbs & Frost, 2003, p. 334). This ability to analyze media texts independently and without the teacher’s prompting is termed *critical autonomy* (Masterman, 1985). According to media literacy scholarship, to develop students’ critical thinking and help them become life-long learners, educators should employ the pedagogy of inquiry (Hobbs, 1998). Instead of giving students their own interpretations, or pushing them towards “right” answers, the teacher should ask questions that would guide young people’s thinking, but also allow them to explore ideas that the teacher has not considered (Hobbs, 2011). For instance, in order to analyze media texts, teachers can ask the class: Who is the author and what is the purpose of the message? What techniques are used to attract and hold attention? What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented? How might different people interpret the message? What is omitted from the message? (Hobbs, 2011, p. 57). As media literacy education incorporated Freire’s (1970) model of educational dialogue, during media analysis the teacher is encouraged to allow students to challenge her opinions, and treat them as experts in their own right. Thus, the classroom discussion becomes a learning process both for students and the teacher.

Critical analysis should be organically connected with reflection on the role of media representations of gender in students’ lives. Young people may know well how media texts are created and how media industries work, but not be able to see the connection between media representations of gender and the way they themselves perform gender in their everyday lives. Students may think that gender stereotypes in the media influence “others,” not them—the so-called third-person effect. If students do not

completely understand the way hegemony works, they might believe that if they are not forced to do something, nobody has the power over them.

Some media education scholars argue that one of the best ways to help young people understand the constructed nature of media messages is encouraging them to take part in media production (Goodman, 2003). Media production can help students to express their voices (Fleetwood, 2005), and share with peers and adults their opinions about the importance of equality and diversity (Goodman, 2003). I argue that teachers can help students use digital and media tools to create and disseminate media messages (e.g., photos, videos, websites) that will undermine mainstream hegemonic messages.

The taking action element of media literacy education is informed by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and the philosophy of progressive education (Dewey, 2008[1916]). The purpose of critical pedagogy is to help students see their individual experiences as a part of social relations based on the imbalance of power. As hegemony is based on consent, students may not recognize how they are oppressed by and implicated in the system. Critical pedagogy can be used not only to reveal this oppression, but also to translate the knowledge about it into praxis. Students should be taught to connect what they are learning about media and gender in the classroom with their experiences outside of school. The philosophy of progressive education (Dewey, 2008[1916]) draws the connection between education and democracy, and points out that education should teach young people the importance of civic engagement. Young people should learn not only about the power of hegemony, but also about the importance of challenging ideology through their everyday actions.

The five elements of the AACRA model do not exist separately. These competencies are interconnected, and reinforce each other. Being able to access and comprehend media texts is necessarily before one can engage in media analysis. Creating media helps students to analyze media texts that somebody else have created. Reflecting on the role of the media in one's own life, students can become more thoughtful media producers. Students can become motivated to participate in social action after they have been able to successfully analyze media texts and reflect on their own attitudes towards them. Media production can be a form of social action in and of itself.

Access to media texts and tools, critical analysis, reflection, media production and action are five elements of media literacy education that can help students not only understand the complexity of media representations of gender, but also reflect on this complexity in relation to their own lives and gender inequalities in society; question their own implication in the status quo of hegemony; using digital tools, share with others what they have learned; and think of a variety of strategies that can be used in everyday life to trouble the dualism of gender.

CHAPTER 3

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER AND THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ABOUT THEM

This chapter provides the context necessary to understand the purpose and structure of my dissertation project. I start by describing in detail the scholarship on media representations of gender. I then outline literature on using media literacy education to teach students about gender, and introduce notions of protectionism and empowerment. Finally, I discuss what we know about students' reactions to discussing media texts. I finish the chapter with a list of research questions that guided data collection and analysis.

Media and Gender

Critical scholarship on media and gender has been significantly influenced by feminist media studies. Feminism has played a crucial role in bringing gender inequalities to the fore of society's attention, and feminist media scholars were the first ones to emphasize the need of examining gender in the media (Van Zoonen, 1994). Initially they were mostly interested in the way the media reproduced patriarchal oppression by showing women as submissive and dependent, and thus promoting the idea that women's role in society is significantly less important than men's (Tuchman, 1978). Partially in response to this criticism, media representations have been gradually changing. Over the years, media representations have become increasingly sophisticated, and co-opted some of the feminist messages (McDonald, 1995). Recent feminist media studies take these changes into consideration (Gill, 2007). Media representations also reflect

transformations within feminism that have led to the development of more nuanced theoretical tools to analyze the intersection of gender with such vectors of oppression as race, sexuality, class, age, and able-bodiedness (Bobo, 2002; Hains, 2012; Rand, 1995).

There exists a substantial body of work on media representations of gender and sexuality (e.g., Bobo, 2002; Bordo, 1999; Cooper, 1999; Crymble, 2012; D'Acci, 2004; Dines & Humez, 2011; Gross, 2001; Gross & Woods, 1999; Hains, 2012; Merskin, 2011; Shaw, 2014). Scholars discuss media representations of women (Bobo, 2002; Cooper, 1999), men (Bordo, 1999; Gill, 2003) and sexual minorities (Gross, 2001; Mercer, 1993; Shaw, 2009). Some authors see little improvement in media portrayals and directly connect gender inequalities with media texts (Kilbourne, 1999). However, the majority of media scholars point out that while media representations remain problematic, people have a certain degree of freedom as they interpret these messages (DeVane & Squire, 2008; Hall, 1980; Rand, 1995).

All these works share the view that gender is culturally constructed. As gender is merely a construct, it can be considered a representation of material reality. Therefore, media representations of gender are *representations of representations* (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004), and looking for reality behind them is a futile enterprise. Dyer (1999) notes that rejecting some representations as stereotypes is unhelpful: using stereotypes in narratives is inevitable because this is how people categorize and understand the world. Dyer's interpretation of stereotypes is similar to that proposed by D'Acci (2004), who noted that we should not expect to find "reality" underneath categories we use to make sense of the world. People view the world *only* through the categories they create, and any "reality" is always socially constructed.

Studies based on reception theories (Hall, 1980) find that interpretations produced by audience members with different backgrounds and life experiences are wildly different (Bobo, 2002). The multiplicity of factors that influence interpretations makes them virtually unpredictable. Even when a viewer sees a character like her suffering or dying, she can still find this message empowering if it speaks to her needs (Cooper, 2009). “The muffled protests against oppression [can be] found in the very practices which seem to most graphically implement and spell out the patriarchal wish” (Gaines, 1990, p. 23); even representations that appear to reinforce inequalities in the most blatant way can be liberating for those whom they appear to oppress (Radway, 1984; Rubin, 2011).

The growing sophistication of media texts turned them into *possibility spaces* (DeVane & Squire, 2008) that allow for multiple uses and interpretations. As media representations are becoming increasingly nuanced and ironic, it is more difficult to claim that a certain text can influence audiences’ perceptions of gender in a certain way (Gauntlett, 2002). This new kind of ambiguous, polysemic and playful media texts makes it hard for feminist media scholars to continue their critique. For example, Gauntlett (2002) points out that because men’s magazines are heavily ironic, they should not be interpreted as misogynistic and patriarchal.

Scholars have shown that many viewers creatively appropriate and interpret media texts (e.g., Jenkins, 2008). According to Jenkins (2008), not only media texts, but also their consumers have changed.

If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active. If old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. If old consumers were isolated individuals, the new consumers

are more socially connected. If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public. (p. 18-19)

The variety of possible uses and meanings that media texts provide to consumers, and the changes in the way consumers interact with the media (Jenkins, 1992) make any fixed interpretation of the latter's impact on audiences incomplete.

Even though the image of endless consumer creativity is appealing, "we must come to grips with the fact that audience activity and creativity is not always an option" (Bird, 2003, p. 171). Although media representations have become more sophisticated, this complexity may be confusing for audiences, sending them mixed messages (Gill, 2007).

Women learn from the media that they can be powerful, but only if they conform to certain standards of femininity (Hains, 2012). When in the 1990s more and more strong female characters started to emerge who were capable of fighting villains side by side with male protagonists, or even on their own, it appeared that the situation was changing for the better. However, feminist media scholars quickly noted that women on the screen are allowed to be strong only when they are White, young, able-bodied and well-dressed (Hains, 2012; Kilbourne, 1999). Douglas (1995) pointed out that although women have been increasingly able to see themselves represented as active, smart and independent, they are receiving a concealed message not to go too far in their fight for gender equality, being "[p]ulled in opposite directions – told to be equal, yet told we were subordinate" (pp. 8-9). Douglas uses a rather harsh term to talk about women (including herself) affected by these portrayals – "cultural schizophrenics" (p. 8).

From a very early age, girls consume media texts telling them about the importance of appearance (Durham, 2008). Throughout women's lives the media keep undermining their self-esteem to make them buy beauty products and services (Kilbourne, 1999). New types of media messages did not eliminate this pressure. They show that women can be strong, but they must still remain attractive. The media portray women as able to succeed both in business and private life, and have time to always have perfect make-up, outfit and nails, but they show that as something easily achievable. This seemingly empowering message is damaging because it makes being a superwoman look easy and ignores important problems that women experience—the lack of help from men at home, wage inequality at work (Fine, 2010), or glass ceiling that prevents women from climbing the career ladder with the same pace as men (Williams, 2011). It also masks the fact that women are still seen by some men as different from and even inferior to them.

In her ethnographic study that involved discussing female characters with young girls, Hains (2012) discovered that her subjects “believed in and spoke passionately about girls’ strength and abilities” (p. 262) – an important improvement from Tuchman’s time of symbolic annihilation (1978). However,

[w]hen characters’ physical appearance and behaviors did not align with the norm, they were subject to harsh criticism from the girls ... – a skill that the girls were all too quick to turn inwards, for in some cases, they were painfully aware that they did not measure up to the ideals that dominate our media and culture. (p. 263)

It is not only women who are receiving contradictory media messages. As a response to feminist criticism and social changes, the media started to produce new kinds of male imaginary. The 1980s have been marked by the emergence of so-called New Man (Nixon, 1996). These media representations showed men that they were allowed to

be more sensitive and care about their appearance. However, this shift was far from a neutral phenomenon, for it was a “limited and socially divisive development, which tended to affect men differently and unequally, according to such factors as age, class, race, or sexual orientation” (p. 134). Lemish notes that “the new type of sensitive man is becoming more acceptable as long as it is clear that he is not only sensitive but also successful” (p. 1950).

New Lad, which joined—some claim, substituted—New Men in media texts starting from the 1990s, was also characterized by ambiguity (Benwell, 2003). On the one hand, New Lad imagery draws from the heroic discourse of hegemonic masculinity – strong, violent, silent and fearless. On the other hand, this imagery uses irony to undermine the ideal, playfully criticizing and mocking men who strive to achieve it.

Nowadays men learn from the media that they should somehow combine sensitivity and empathy (typically viewed as feminine qualities) with characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005): aggressiveness, fearlessness, silence (Gill, 2007; Pollack, 1999). Like women in Douglas’s (1995) analysis, men are in danger of becoming “cultural schizophrenics.” William Pollack (1999) draws examples from years of counseling young and old male patients to describe how detrimental this confusion is for men. They are forced by the community to be “masculine” yet expected to be caring, thoughtful and soft. Pretending to be tough in order not to be ridiculed as mamma’s boys, men grow up unable to get in touch with and express their emotions.

Hegemonic masculinity is best represented by White middle to upper class middle-aged heterosexual men. However, true hegemonic masculinity is an unattainable ideal, not unlike the trope of the perfect female beauty so often used by the media. Apart

from this ideal, there are many other kinds of masculinity: older and poorer men, African-Americans, gays, etc. However, media texts still portray them as less prestigious.

Nowadays men's self-esteem is compromised by media texts that aim to make them continually buy markers of prestige and products that promise to keep male consumers fit and attractive (Bordo, 1999; Schoeder & Zwick, 2004). Those who hungered for equality got it, but not the way they were hoping. Sexualized images of men and women now permeate popular culture, creating insecurities in both sexes alike by portraying an unattainable ideal of an always groomed and ageless body (Bordo, 1999).

Members of the LGBT community also receive mixed messages from the media. Although sexual minorities occasionally can see themselves represented in media texts, these portrayals are scarce, lack nuances, and do little to help people with non-mainstream gender identities understand their rights and opportunities (Gross, 2001). When, on rare occasions, members of the LGBT community get a chance to create media texts for large audiences, they have to deal with the "burden of representation" (Mercer, 1993) and often fail to meet expectations placed on them by members of their group (Kahn, 2006). Of course, sexual minorities can also creatively appropriate media texts. For example, Rand (1995) described subversive practices of queering the Barbie doll (I consider mass-produced toys as another form of media texts). Consumers have found multiple ways of playing with the famous doll's meanings, using it to enjoy fluidities of gender and sexuality. However, thinking about this creativity we should curb our optimism.

While the active audience tradition has taught us that we, the audience, have a significant role in creating and operationalizing that effectivity, we cannot pretend that the power of corporate media producers can somehow be vaporized by the magic wand of audience creativity... [M]inorities, whether

defined by ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or such less-considered categories as age or religion, frequently feel alienated and marginalized in mainstream media culture. They have to “work” harder to share in the pleasures of the active audience, since mainstream media mirrors dreams and ideals they do not necessarily share. (Bird, 2003, pp. 168-169)

On the one hand, scholars claim that we should refrain from univocally condemning media portrayals without taking into consideration the variety of interpretations and responses produced by different members of the audience. On the other hand, it is evident that the media do play a role in shaping people’s gender identities. Perhaps most significantly, media texts reinforce gender dualism (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) by promoting the idea that available gender scripts fall into two distinct categories: femininity and masculinity. In Fausto-Sterling’s words “[t]he way we traditionally conceptualize gender and sexual identity narrows life’s possibilities while perpetuating gender inequality” (p. 8). Emphasizing differences between men and women, the media reinforce audiences’ conviction that gender differences are inevitable, and everything that escapes this dualism is suspicious.

Media Literacy Education and Gender in the Media

A number of scholars work specifically at the intersection of media literacy education and gender studies and/or discuss ways of helping audiences to critically engage with media representations that reflect prevalent gender norms (e.g., Berman & White, 2013; Bullen, 2009; Chung, 2007a, 2007b; Graydon, 1997; Kamler, 1994; Merskin, 2004; Pozner, 2010; Reichert, LaTour, Lambiase & Adkins, 2007). These authors discuss the importance of critically analyzing media messages in the classroom in order to help students understand how media representations can reinforce gender inequalities in society.

It is important to discuss these studies in relationship to two main strands in media literacy education – protectionism and empowerment (Buckingham, 1998). These strands can be compared with traditions of media effects and active audiences in media studies. Protectionism in education and scholarship on media effects are based on the idea that media texts can have direct influence on audiences, and that this impact is often problematic. Empowerment as an instructional approach and theories of active audiences offer a much more optimistic look at the situation, describing audiences as agentic, learning from the media and using media tools effectively. If protectionism attempts to save people from negative media effects, empowerment model aims to help students use media texts and tools to their full potential. Media literacy practitioners who lean towards protectionism focus on shielding students from problematic media influence by giving them media analysis skills; while educators who favor the empowerment model see young people’s passivity as a problem, and developing students’ agency and voice as a solution.

Most media scholars have by now recognized that the relationship between audiences and media texts is very complex, and audiences are neither “zombified” by the media, nor completely free from the media’s influence. Similarly, most media literacy educators and scholars fall somewhere on a continuum between protectionism and empowerment. A media literacy educator usually has certain opinions about the media that she wants her students to share, which does not mean that she never allows students to challenge these ideas or develop their own opinions. However, it is also not uncommon for an educator to choose a more protectionist stance. Although none of the studies I describe in more detail below uses a strictly protectionist framework, many are inspired

by the idea that students need to better understand media representations of gender because the latter can have problematic impact on their lives.

Bullen (2009) discusses the advantages of using media literacy education to make young girls aware of media ideals. She describes several programs (Reel Grrls, TVbyGIRLS, and Beyondmedia Education) that “use the tools of media and analysis to combat the defeating and limiting messages young people receive everyday” (p. 151). Chung (2007a) advocates for using visual arts classroom for discussions about stereotypical representations of gay men and lesbians. She also suggests using media analysis and media production to deconstruct sexist messages of hip-hop and thus empower female students (2007b). Pozner (2010), who in her book on reality TV leans towards a more protectionist approach, not only deconstructs sexism and racism in media texts, but also provides the reader with tools to analyze them and challenge media industry.

Some critical media scholars who do not specialize in media literacy education recommend using its principles to counter problematic media messages. For example, Batchelor, Kitzinger and Burtney (2004) found out that in U.K. media messages about sexual behaviors women are portrayed as more interested in emotions than sex, and responsible for protecting themselves against unwanted pregnancies and STDs. They also note that there is not enough positive images of lesbians and gay people. The authors suggest that health educators should use media texts in the classroom, as “it is possible that the media can open up new ways of talking/relating about issues and prompt new conversations and interactions” (p. 674). Analyzing sexist messages of hip-hop lyrics and videos, Rose (2008) suggests that we might use prime-time media literacy programming

to make young people reflect on how these messages emerge, and how they function. In a similar vein, Robillard (2012) analyzes African-American girls' reactions to portrayals of sexual behavior in rap and R&B music videos. She concludes that these videos contain images that romanticize unequal male-female relationships and reinforce unhealthy gender roles. The author suggests that media literacy can be used to enable girls to decipher and reject these sexually laden and overtly sexist messages. In her study about young girls' understanding of the media, Durham (1999) shows that girls are affected by norms of gender and sexuality promoted by the media even when they believe to be immune to them. She argues that media literacy interventions should take race, class and peer dynamics into consideration in order to be effective.

Although many scholars suggest using media literacy education to combat the negative influence of gender stereotypes, little research has been done on existing media literacy programs informed by gender studies. A number of quantitative studies evaluate effects of media literacy interventions on students' perceptions of media ideals, usually ideals of femininity (e.g., Coughlin & Kalodner, 2006; Engeln-Maddox & Miller, 2008; Silver, 1999; Wilksch, Tiggemann, & Wade, 2006; Yamamiya et al., 2006). These studies lean toward the protectionist paradigm, often citing literature on negative media effects. They mostly discuss how the media influence girls' and young women's self-esteem, eating habits and sexual behaviors, but sometimes also look at male students' perceptions of these portrayals (Wilksch, Tiggemann & Wade, 2006). The studies conclude that using media literacy education to combat negative gender stereotypes is effective and warranted (Silver, 1999), discuss developing more sophisticated ways of evaluating media literacy interventions (Engeln-Maddox & Miller, 2008), note that

longer media literacy interventions are better than shorter ones (Watson & Vaughn, 2006), and that female students are effected by them more than male students (Reichert et al., 2007).

These quantitative studies usually aim to answer simple yes/no questions. Was the intervention effective? Should we use media literacy in schools to counter problematic influence of media ideals? These questions are important; however, they tell us little about the complexity of in-class interactions, of changes in students' perceptions of media representations, of factors that can make such programs more effective.

A few studies use qualitative methods to examine how media literacy programs or interventions work. These studies provide a more nuanced picture of teaching and learning that take place in these programs (Keown, 2013; Ryden, 2001). Keown used mixed methods to explore the impact of an arts-based media literacy program on the leadership efficacy of adolescent girls. Informed by Bandura's self-efficacy theory, the research investigated the impact of an art-based media literacy curriculum on the leadership self-efficacy of adolescent girls. Keown obtained qualitative data through observations, art analyses, and interviews. She looked at how "mastery experiences, modeling, verbal encouragement by peers, and background characteristics affected leadership efficacy in Project Girl participants" (p. iii). Keown concludes that media literacy programs like Project Girl enhance girls' self-efficacy skills.

Ryden (2001) used personae analysis to examine how media literacy videos about media and gender (e.g., Kilbourne's *Slim Hopes*) are structured and how young people react to them. The findings of the study are intriguing. Ryden points out that media literacy videos sometimes use techniques that run counter to the critics they are making,

e.g., using male narrators while criticizing patriarchy, or talking about propaganda through claims that the viewer is supposed to accept without questioning. In addition to that, Ryden notes that educators using these videos in their classes should be prepared for unanticipated reactions from students. For example, people of color might feel excluded if the narrator is White. Images of sexualized women that videos to criticize objectification might prime some female viewers to think longingly about the unattainable standards of perfect femininity.

Although quantitative studies help the researcher get more generalizable results and are useful for showing to policymakers effectiveness of certain programs, it is qualitative research that illuminates nuances of in-class interactions. The quantitative studies listed in this section usually rely on participants' self-reports. Self-reports are certainly important for determining effectiveness of media literacy programs, as they can show how these programs prime students to think about the role of media representations in their lives. However, when it comes to gender norms, people often do not notice their own biases. For example, when Hains (2012) talked with girls about strong female characters, their statements appeared to show self-confidence and empowerment. Yet, qualitatively analyzing their conversations Hains discovered that the girls were not as confident as they wanted to appear. Similarly, Durham's study (1999) revealed that girls can believe that they are not affected by norms of gender and sexuality in the media while in fact they are.

The contribution of this dissertation to the media literacy field lies in exploring in more depth programs where issues of media and gender are discussed, and focusing on students' reactions. While some scholars mentioned in this section use research about

media and gender as part of their theoretical foundation (Silver, 1999), they seldom talk about the complexity of media representations that I outlined earlier. None of them describes media representations of gender as hegemonic. I argue that that it is important to explore whether teachers discuss this complexity in the classroom, and if so, how they explain it to students.

Challenges in the Classroom

The literature says little about the complexity of interactions in the classroom where media representations of gender are discussed. Strictly speaking, I found only one study that was specifically dedicated to students' reactions to such classes (Turnbull, 1998). However, a number of authors discuss challenges that media literacy educators should take into consideration. These challenges include students' subtle and open resistance, inability of teachers to connect to young people's experiences, the danger of reinforcing problematic ideologies that teachers want students to deconstruct, and some teachers' tendency to steer students towards "right" answers.

Scholars note that students can reject teacher's message in an explicit or subtle way. Buckingham (2003) pointed out that young people often challenge teacher's authority simply to raise their own prestige among peers. In this case they reject teacher's message without even making an attempt to understand it. In case of subtle resistance the teacher might be unable to correctly interpret students' behavior, and believe that young people accept her message. During in-class discussions students might go through the motions of criticizing media texts and industries, but remain confident that media messages affect other people, not them. Once students "get" that the teacher wants them to be critical of the media, they start criticizing media texts, but that does not mean that

they really understand how to deconstruct media messages or are immune to media stereotypes (Buckingham, 2003). Buckingham (2003) noted that many of these problems arise when “ideological analysis... fails to connect with students’ lived experience – and hence also fails to make much difference to them” (p. 115).

Turnbull (1998) argued that students might say what they think the instructor wants to hear because they are unwilling to be ridiculed by peers or get a bad grade. Similarly to Buckingham, Turnbull suggested that young people might not be engaged in a conversation and remain silent simply because the teacher fails to connect class material to their experience. Turnbull (1998) discussed how critical and progressive pedagogy can fail to address classroom interactions, and, instead of empowering students, might result in alienating them. She also noted that when students discuss issues that are bound up with their life experiences, it is difficult for them to be detached and analytical. Because gender identity is a highly personal issue, students can resist teachers’ interpretations of media texts that contain gender stereotypes. Working in an Australian high school, Turnbull discovered that female students’ relationships with media texts criticized by teachers were more complex than the teachers thought. Students criticized these texts during class discussions, but continued to value their messages. Media texts chosen by teachers were problematic from a feminist point of view, but at the same time they provided role models beyond traditional gender roles that the female students’ families favored. By not taking students’ interpretations of the discussed texts into consideration, the teachers failed to connect with the girls.

Directly connected to the previous discussion about the complexity of media representations is Buckingham’s (2003) point that when teachers try to make students

aware of problematic media representations, they run the risk of oversimplifying the media texts they analyze. Buckingham notes that if educators offer students only a simplified explanation of how media representations function, young people might be unable to go from it to a more nuanced understanding. He discussed how this oversimplification manifested itself in one series of lessons about images of women in the media:

Although the material that was being studied was fairly complex, the argument was constantly reduced to simplistic conclusions about the negative influence of the media: women's magazines, which were the primary focus of study, were implicitly accused of a straightforward form of *victimization* of women readers. The pre-defined critical position effectively prevented the students from arriving at a more nuanced account which did justice to their everyday reading and uses of these texts. (pp. 117-118, emphasis in original)

Another challenge of trying to make students aware of biases contained in popular media texts is that young people do not appreciate it when teachers make them feel ashamed of their media tastes (Hobbs, 2011): "When teachers choose to deconstruct media messages that students consider to be pleasurable, there can be an emotional fallout" (p. 119). Since many media literacy scholars note that teachers must use texts that students love in order to engage them, this creates a dilemma for media educators. How can the teacher encourage students to think critically about their favorite shows without making them feel that she is criticizing their taste? If students come out of the classroom without getting at least a bit suspicious about messages contained in media texts that they like, that would mean that a media educator has failed. But attempting to make young people suspicious, the teacher runs the risk of alienating them. The delicate balance is not easy to find.

Media educators should also make sure that they are not reinforcing stereotypes contained in texts they choose to criticize. Hobbs (2011) notes that “media literacy videos may increase prejudicial responses, even when the goal of the video is to diminish such feelings” (p. 119). Pozner (2010) believes that stereotypical portrayals partially explain the appeal of popular culture. Discussing sexism and racism of reality shows, she notes that “we continue to watch because these shows frame their narratives in ways that both play to and reinforce deeply ingrained societal biases about men and women, love and beauty, race and class, consumption and happiness in America” (p. 17). Taking into consideration that stereotypes make media texts enjoyable and that students do not like when the teacher criticizes what they enjoy, we can see why media literacy educators find themselves in a catch-22 situation.

Using media texts to talk about gender inequalities has its advantages and disadvantages. Talking about gender is tricky. Issues of gender are relevant for young people because gender is a crucial part of their identities. The teacher can be sure that most of the students will have something to say about gender stereotypes (although that might not necessarily be what she is anticipating). However, discussions about gender can also strike a bit too close to home. All young people feel the pressure to perform gender according to social norms, but not all of them would acknowledge how uncomfortable this pressure makes them feel. They might not even be aware that they would like to construct their gender differently from the way they are supposed to. Young people might not mention this internal conflict because they are afraid of being ridiculed, of looking weak or “weird.” On top of that, gender is a sensitive issue because it is associated with sexuality, which is still seen as problematic in Anglo-Saxon societies

(Rubin, 1993[1984]). Even in our seemingly progressive era many feel uncomfortable about lifestyles and behaviors subversive of sexuality norms. Gender is seen as directly connected to sexuality; therefore, it is similarly problematized. As a result, young people may avoid discussing some issues connected with gender norms because they do not want to feel uncomfortable. Students might have very strong opinions about gender but will be unwilling to get into discussions on how they arrived to these opinions.

Although some educators believe that we should tread carefully when we critically engage with students' favorite texts, and with such issues as gender norms and sexism, others suggest that it is good to be provocative. Only by pushing students out of their comfort zone can we make them take notice of the gender inequalities that they are surrounded by, or perpetuate with their own actions. It is important to discuss in class the value of gender diversity. However, to make sure that diversity will not be simply a word for students, teachers might have to ask them some uncomfortable questions. Educators who want to teach through conflict must remember that this strategy might make some students withdraw from the discussion, and others – to start a heated debate where ad hominem arguments will dominate over logic.

To be more effective, media literacy programs that help people understand issues of gender should take into consideration the pitfalls of critical pedagogy (Turnbull, 1998) and media literacy education (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2011). They should also consider the challenges of bringing up gender issues in the classroom. Although an educational program may appear effective when students self-report becoming more aware of gender stereotypes in the media, only creating thick descriptions of interactions in the classroom, and of students' reactions to the information about media and gender

can help us understand how this program really works. Thick descriptions will help us reveal subtle biases even in students who think they can resist gender stereotypes in their lives.

Research Questions

Based on the considerations discussed above, this dissertation project explored the following research question: *How do students respond to the instruction in a media literacy program informed by gender studies and scholarship on media representations?*

More specifically, I wanted to know: How do students interact with each other and the instructor? How do they react to the information that they learn in the course? How do they behave during the course? What is their opinion about media representations of gender? How do students choose to perform their gender in class? In what ways does the curriculum challenge the ways in which they define their gender identities, if at all? How do students' reactions differ based on their gender and/or race? In what ways do students resist the program? What are teachers' expectations of students and how do these expectations influence instruction methods? Do teachers talk with students about the complexity of media texts, and if so, how do they explain it? What are the teachers' expectations about the effectiveness of the program? How do the teachers negotiate students' subtle resistance? Do the teachers help students develop the five competencies of the AACRA model? Where do the teachers stand in terms of protectionist and empowerment approach? Do teachers use inquiry-based learning?

CHAPTER 4

METHODS

To ensure validity, this study was designed to rest on four methodological “prongs.” They include: (1) a case study of three units taught by two teachers in a U.S. public school (observations in the classroom, interviews with teachers and students, analysis of texts and artifacts produced by students); (2) interviews with several high school students outside of the case study; (3) interviews with four additional high school teachers who tackle issues of media and gender in their classes; and (4) my diary, meant to help me reflect on my position in the school, my feelings, assumption and biases, and the research process in general.

I collected data for the case study—which was the core component of the project—over a period of almost two months in the fall of 2014. My main foci were three units (parts of three separate classes) taught during the 2014-2015 academic year by two different teachers. Each of the three units involved analysis of media texts and discussions about gender stereotypes in the media. Although gender representations in the media were not intended as the main focus of the units, this topic ended up playing a prominent role in the classroom discussions and activities.

To collect the data for the case study, I applied several ethnographic methods. I used triangulation of: (1) participant observation in the classroom; (2) interviews (group and individual) with students taking the units; (3) interviews with the teachers; and (4) analysis of student’s portfolios that contained texts and artifacts produced in class.

The other three prongs were intended to contextualize the data obtained from the case study. Mainly, I wanted to make sure that classes within the case study are representative of instruction about media and gender in high school. Looking at educational materials available online and interviewing additional teachers allowed me to do that. In addition, I interviewed several high school students to make sure that the opinions I heard from young people within the case study were not exceptional. The reflective diary helped me expose my positionality and its influence on the way I collected and analyzed the data.

Following the rules set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which had previously approved the study, the participants were orally informed about the nature of the study and asked to sign consent forms giving me permission to interview, digitally record, and quote them. Students were given assent forms that they could sign if they agreed to participate, and consent forms that their parents needed to sign.

In order to maintain participants' confidentiality, I use pseudonyms. Fictional names are also used to describe the school and its area in order to further guarantee my informants' anonymity. On the following pages the town where the school is located is called *West Cityville* and the school where I conducted my study *West Cityville High School*. Providing information on demographics of West Cityville and its school, I use rounded numbers.

Case Study

Although in West Cityville High School I worked with two teachers and observed three separate units, I unite them into one case study for several reasons. The teachers used the same model of instruction, and structured the units I was observing in a similar

manner. These teachers have known each other for several years; they were good friends since college and spent time together in and outside of the school. The two teachers regularly discussed their classes with each other, shared ideas and tweaked their teaching according to what the other person was doing. In this respect, the older teacher (male) often acted as a trailblazer, trying out new approaches, while the younger teacher (female) learned from him. It must be noted that, although she followed the same general course outline, the younger teacher adjusted assignments according to her understanding of what would work best for students, and sometimes used texts and examples different from those chosen by her older colleague.

I decided to work in West Cityville High School for several reasons. I wanted to conduct my research in a high school environment. I wanted to work with teachers who analyze media representations of gender with their students. Although the teachers that I found defined themselves as critical pedagogues, based on our conversations I concluded that their classes had many elements of media literacy education. Last but not least, the school was located in an area where I could travel daily, and the teachers were more than willing to participate in the project.

West Cityville High School is a suburban school. Although West Cityville may be seen as a part of Cityville (an East Coast city), it is considered to be a separate town. West Cityville's website states that it offers many attractions of living close to a large city (Cityville) at the same time maintaining a suburban atmosphere. As of the census of 2010, the population of West Cityville is approximately 32,000 people. The population is mostly White (close to 90%), with African-Americans and Hispanic/Latinos being the largest minorities (about 4% each). Median household income in West Cityville is about

\$50,000, with a little over 10% of families below poverty level. The town has several schools, including elementary, junior high and high.

West Cityville High School is a public school that teaches students from grades 9 to 12. It has about 1,000 students and 90 teachers. The school is more racially diverse than the town as a whole, with about 75% of White students, 7% of Black students and 15% of Hispanic/Latino students. In terms of socio-economic background, students are representative of the general population of West Cityville, with about 10% of them below poverty level. West Cityville High School has a Gay and Straight Alliance that meets weekly.

Participants

My informants for this study were two teachers from West Cityville High School and students from the three classes I was observing. On the following pages I call the teachers Michael and Rosey. Michael was a second-generation U.S. citizen, with Philippine roots. Rosey was White, and during classroom discussions she on several occasions mentioned her Italian roots. Rosey was in her late twenties, Michael was in his mid-thirties. Michael was the first one to start teaching in West Cityville High School. He has worked there since 2009, and in 2014-2015 academic year he was already tenured. Rosey came to the school later. It was her 5th year of working there, and she was not tenured yet.

For my case study I observed and interviewed students from three classes: English II taught by Michael (E-II-M), American Experience taught by Michael (AE-M), and English II taught by Rosey (E-II-R). The ratio of different races in these classes was representative of the ratio of races in the school. AE-M and E-II-R consisted of 10th-

graders, and E-II-M consisted of a combination of 10th-graders and 11th-graders. E-II-M had 25 students—19 male and 6 female. Of these students I interviewed 19—5 female and 14 male. AE-M had 23 students—12 male and 11 female. Of these students I interviewed 12—8 female and 4 male. E-II-R had 21 students—13 male and 8 female. Of these students I interviewed 10—5 female and 5 male.

All classes in West Cityville High School are divided into three tiers according to students' level of academic achievement. Tier I (honors) consisted of students with the best grades. These students had the highest chance of entering college after graduating high school. Tier II students had not-so-stellar grades, but they could still get into college if they took remedial classes. Tier III students were considered underachieving, and their chance of getting into college were the lowest. E-II-R was Tier II, E-II-M and AE-M were Tier III.

I discussed the tier system with Michael, and in his opinion it was deeply flawed and unfair, because it did not take into consideration factors that made otherwise talented and smart students get lower scores, such as socio-economic status, learning disabilities or family environment. To me, this system, which is not uncommon in U.S. public schools, served as an additional validation for conducting my research with high school students. If public schools consistently mark a substantial portion of their students as unfit for college, conversations about media and gender must take place in school, and not only on college and university levels.

Data Collection

The units I focused on took place during the first quarter of the 2014-2015 academic year. During these units Michael and Rosey taught students to analyze different

popular media texts—animated films, magazine ads and magazine covers, through a variety of critical lenses (Appleman, 2000), among which gender and feminist lenses played a prominent role (I will discuss the distinction below). Throughout the rest of the year the teachers continued analyzing different kinds of texts—for example, novels, short stories and popular songs. Although discussions about gender in relation to media texts took place after I finished my observations, by the end of the three units I reached the point of data saturation.

In order to collect rich data and create thick descriptions of the teachers’ practices and students’ opinions and reactions, I chose the role of a participant observer. Throughout September and October of 2014 I visited the school 17 times, and each time stayed for 4 to 7 hours. During these two months, classes in the units took place almost every day. However, due to my other obligations I was not able to visit each class. In order to observe as much as I could and to see the progress of the classes, I visited West Cityville High School three times a week.

The school had a rotating schedule. Every day during a 7-day cycle, classes started at a different time, and once in a while one class dropped out. Therefore, on some days I could observe all the three units, and on others – only two of them. One of the two periods that American Experience consisted of overlapped with English II taught by Rosey, so sometimes I had to choose which class to observe. Because of the rotating schedule, the length of “windows” between the classes I was observing was different every day during the 7-day cycle. I spent these “windows” either interviewing students outside of the case study, or talking with Michael and Rosey, or going through students’ portfolios.

The third floor of the school, where all the classes I observed took place, conveniently had a writing center, which served as a space for some classes and activities, as a lounge for teachers who worked on this floor, a place where teachers who were willing to help failing students held consultation hours, and a place for meetings of the Gay and Straight Alliance. The writing center was where I spent time between classes, having snacks and/or talking to teachers (mostly Michael and Rosey). In the beginning of the data collection I interviewed students in the writing center, later moving to an adjacent room that was empty during this quarter.

Observations

Both classes taught by Michael took place in one room on the third floor, and Rosey's class took place in a different room. During Michael's classes I was initially sitting at his desk located in a corner at the back of the room, opposite the blackboard—all students' desks in the room were facing the blackboard. However, I could not see some of the students from there, and as they were getting used to my presence in the class, I moved out and started to sit at one of the desks in the back of the class. Desks in Rosey's room were arranged in two rows along the walls of the room, leaving the space in the middle of the room empty. Sometimes they were arranged in one big circle. In this class I sometimes occupied a place next to students, and sometimes sat at the teacher's desk in the corner. As I was observing the classes, I took detailed notes on my iPad. Usually I was sitting in one place during the whole class meeting. When students were working on assignments in groups or individually, I would get up and walk around the classroom, talking to young people and looking at what they were doing.

Every day when I returned home after a school visit, I would copy my notes from the iPad to my computer. I reread the notes, added missing information, and wrote reflection on what I had observed.

Interviewing Students

Rosey and Michael allowed me to pull students from their classes. I was initially concerned that not many students would like to be interviewed. However, it turned out that young people were eager to get out of the class for a short while. Some of them simply enjoyed being interviewed.

I talked to most of the students in groups of three, which allowed them to interact, and at the same let everybody participate in the conversation. On several occasions I interviewed students one-on-one or in groups of two. This happened either because I wanted to talk to a particular person or a couple of students together, or because nobody else was available. Choosing whom to interview and in what combination also depended on things I had observed in the classroom. All but two students were interviewed only once.

Michael and Rosey started their units earlier than expected, so I was not able to interview the students beforehand, as originally planned. Because of that I began observations and interviews with students at the same time. In the beginning of the quarter I used one set of questions, and once I felt that I had reached saturation I switched to the second set. Each of the interviews lasted for 20 to 25 minutes. All interviews were semi-structured. I allowed students to take our discussions in a variety of directions, at the same time making sure that we would talk about media representations and gender stereotypes.

I started the first set of interviews by asking students about their favorite media characters. This strategy helped to break the ice of the conversation as young people were happy to talk about media texts they loved. Then we would discuss stereotypes in general, and stereotypes in the media in particular. The purpose of this discussion was to find out what students thought about media representations of gender. However, I did not immediately ask about gender because I wanted to know whether young people would themselves choose to discuss this topic. As some students appeared to be more knowledgeable than others about issues of gender, I asked them how they had learned about it. After the initial interviews, I reshaped the order and formulation of my questions to make interviews more engaging and effective (for a list of questions see Appendix A).

The second set of questions was intended to find out what students learned in class, what they thought about discussions on media and gender, what they liked and disliked about the teachers' approaches. Many students dwelled on gender and feminist lenses, which I used as an opportunity to ask about their opinions on gender stereotypes and representations. I wanted to know about the impact of the classes, so I asked young people whether they had started noticing new aspects of media texts outside of school. Some mentioned that since the beginning of the quarter they had talked about the critical lenses with their parents and friends, so I added this question to the rest of the interviews. As the unit progressed, I slightly modified the questions based on what assignments students had done in class at this point (see Appendix B).

Interviewing Teachers

I interviewed Rosey and Michael separately using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C). As all of us occasionally had free time between classes, we

decided that it would be best to talk during these “windows.” I scheduled both interviews during the second half of the unit, which allowed me to ask questions based on my observations. Although I used the same set of questions for both teachers, the recorded interviews differed greatly in length, which can be explained both by differences in the teachers’ personalities, and by their speaking patterns. My interview with Rosey was 40 minutes long, and my interview with Michael was 2.5 hours long.

During the interviews I asked Rosey and Michael to describe their teaching philosophy, instructional approaches, and motivations for teaching about media and gender. We discussed critical theory and critical pedagogy, and also talked about media literacy education. I spent some time talking with Michael and Rosey about resistance in the classroom and about their ways of dealing with it.

Apart from the digitally recorded interviews, I had multiple conversations with Michael and Rosey during the “windows” between classes, taking notes with my iPad. Rosey’s schedule did not allow her to have much free time between classes. Michael, on the other hand, was often available. I talked with the teachers about many different things, but made a point not to tell my opinions about their teaching, and not to give away anything that I heard from students during interviews. I was willing to engage in intellectually stimulating discussions, as long as they were not influencing Michael’s and Rosey’s teaching too much.

Students’ Portfolios

I created copies of a number of texts and artifacts produced by students during the units that I was observing—journals, different kinds of printouts and assignments. Rosey and Michael asked students to journal in almost every class. Journal entries included

students' bios, free writing, short entries on a variety of topics (bullying, feminism, critical theory), as well as reflections on different class activities. In the middle of the unit, I looked through these journals, and through some of the other materials stored in portfolios, and made copies using my iPad. They helped me triangulate classroom observations and guided my data collection. During my last two visits to the school, I again made copies of all the available journals and artifacts (some portfolios were incomplete). I also collected pictures of students' artifacts (collages that they produced as part of Hacked Ads assignment) that Michael and Rosey had taken with their iPhones and forwarded to me.

Data Analysis

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) describe qualitative research as a “dynamic dance” (p. 35), as the researcher moves from reviewing literature, to collecting data, to analyzing data, back to collecting data, then again to reviewing literature, and so forth, until she reaches saturation point (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This helps the researcher to better navigate complex social reality that she is trying to make sense of.

Using the paradigm of qualitative research, I started analyzing data as I was collecting it. Every day after a school visit I would reread and organize my notes from that day, and describe my thoughts and feelings in the reflection diary. Soon after having started conducting interviews with students I began transcribing them. This allowed me, from early on in the project, to reflect on patterns that I was noticing during my observations and discussions with informants. After I looked through students' portfolios in the middle of the quarter, I was able to further complicate themes that started to emerge. Once all the data were collected, I re-organized and reread my notes, transcripts

and materials from students' portfolios in order to further refine the themes that I had identified.

According to the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), researchers gather data to formulate a theory, and then continue to refine it using new data. In contrast, according to Burawoy (1991), qualitative scholars should use collected data not to create new theories but to refine existing ones. In my data analysis I drew on both approaches. I used open coding and constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to formulate a new theory, but I was also looking for an opportunity to refine old ones. Describing coding techniques, Strauss (1987) recommended rereading data several times and analyzing it into emerging conceptual categories. While collecting the data, I was rereading my notes and transcripts, and looking through materials from portfolios in order to make sense of the thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) I was accumulating. Having formulated emerging themes, I used them for further coding.

Simultaneously rereading and reflecting on my notes, as well as collecting new data, I was able to notice common patterns soon after the project had begun. Toward the end of the data collection, I created a list of themes that emerged during the data collection. Once the data had been collected, I reorganized these themes into a coherent narrative. The rest of data analysis consisted of rereading the notes, transcripts and portfolios, and looking for examples that would align with or contradict the themes that I had formulated.

Contextualizing the Case Study

To contextualize the case study, I performed the following steps: (1) I analyzed several media and gender lesson plans available online; (2) I interviewed four high school

teachers who, in one way or another, talk about media and gender with their students; and (3) I conducted individual and group interviews with several students outside of the case study.

Analyzing Educational Materials

In order to find out whether educational strategies employed by Michael and Rosey were representative of existing approaches to teaching about media and gender, I analyzed materials provided by three online sources: Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, Common Sense Media, and MediaSmarts: Canada's Center for Digital and Media Literacy.

Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media describes itself as “the only research-based organization working within the media and entertainment industry to engage, educate, and influence the need to dramatically improve, gender balance, reduce stereotyping and create diverse female characters in entertainment targeting children 11 and under” (About Us [Geena Davis Institute], n.d.). The Institute amasses research on negative effects of gender representations, and works with communities, media policy makers and content creators to advocate for “establishing a gender-balanced media landscape” (About Us [Geena Davis Institute], n.d.), especially in children's media. Because the Institute aspires to educate not only current but also future media makers, it has created eight Gender Equality Lessons for Schools that are available online free of charge (Gender Equality Lessons for Schools, n.d).

Common Sense Media is known to educators and parents as a non-profit organization “dedicated to helping kids thrive in a world of media and technology” (Our Mission, n.d.). It “offer[s] the largest, most trusted library of independent age-based and

educational ratings and reviews for movies, games, apps, TV shows, websites, books, and music,” “provides teachers and schools with free research-based classroom tools to help students harness technology for learning and life” and “works with policymakers, industry leaders, legislators, and a grassroots community of concerned parents and teachers to improve the media and technology landscape for all kids, families, and schools” (Our Mission, n.d.). Common Sense Media provides a free set of lesson plans *Girls, Boys, and Media: A Gender and Digital Life Toolkit for Schools*, which consists of lessons for elementary, middle and high school (Girls, Boys, and Media, n. d.).

The third source I chose is MediaSmarts, Canada’s Center for Digital and Media Literacy. It is a not-for-profit charitable organization for digital and media literacy that aims to help children and youth develop critical thinking skills in order to help them become active and informed digital citizens. The website of this organization states: “Through our work we support adults with information and tools so they can help children and teens develop the critical thinking skills they need for interacting with the media they love” (About Us [MediaSmarts], n.d.). I found 17 media and gender lesson plans on their website— for example, “Gender Messages in Alcohol Advertising,” “Marketing to Teens: Gender Roles in Advertising,” and “Sheroes and Heroes.”

Analyzing the lessons plans, I asked the following questions: What is the age of students that will use these curricula? How do these educational materials talk about gender, and media representation of gender? Do they discuss the complexity of media representations? Do they talk about media representations of gender as hegemonic? What kind of activities do they contain? Do they include different elements of the AACRA

model? What kind of media texts do they suggest using in the classroom? Do they prepare the teacher for the challenges of talking with students about media and gender?

Interviews with Additional Teachers

I interviewed four high school teachers who spent one semester, a unit, or several classes throughout a year talking to students about media and gender. These teachers worked in four different schools in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. On the following pages I call them Julie, Peter, Bradley and Loren. I interviewed the first three in person, and talked with Loren over Skype. I chose the teachers for the interviews through purposive sampling—using my personal and professional networks.

Each of the four interviews was approximately one hour long. The interviews were semi-structured, and based on the same interview guide as the ones I had with Rosey and Michael. I had not observed these additional teachers' classes, so I had to rely on their detailed descriptions of classroom activities and students' reactions. I was especially interested in how these teachers determine when students "get" their message about media and gender, and when they reject it. We also discussed the teachers' strategies of coping with students' resistance.

Participants and their Schools

Julie taught English classes in a public high school located in small town in Massachusetts. There was not much diversity in this school. Most of the students were White and middle class. One of Julie's classes (she had created it) was dedicated to sports and popular culture and it had a unit on gender and sexuality in sports. In this unit

students heavily focused on media representations. This unit was a part of an elective course for 12th graders. The majority of students in this course were boys.

Loren taught English classes in a public high school located in a small town in New Hampshire. Most students in the school were White and middle-class, although in the recent decade the level of diversity had slightly increased. The theme of the class in 11th grade was media literacy. The course had a unit on representation, during which Loren spent two to three weeks talking to students about media representations of gender. Every student in the school took this course, and Loren was one of eight teachers who were teaching it. The class was taken by approximately the same number of boys and girls.

Bradley taught a class on mass media in an urban charter high school in Pennsylvania. During the first semester he discussed media with students, talking about representations of masculinity and femininity in almost every unit. Most students in his class were Black or Hispanic, coming from low-income families. All 12th graders in the school took this class. By the 12th grade, a lot of boys dropped out from the school, so the majority of students in the class were often girls. Bradley had created this course several years ago and had been teaching it ever since.

Peter taught a Sociology class in a public high school located in a small town in Rhode Island. Students in the school were predominantly middle-class and White. The course Peter taught was an elective, it could be taken by 11th and 12th grade students. The course had a unit on socialization, within which students spent about a week talking about media representations of gender. Peter had created the course himself and he was the only instructor teaching it.

Interviews with Additional Students

I had interviews with 25 students from West Cityville High School who were not taking the classes I was observing. By chance, it turned out that 11 of them had already taken classes with Rosey and/or Michael, and had discussed media representations using critical lenses. Out of the 10 focus groups I had, 2 consisted only of people who had had this experience.

Interviewing students who had never taken Rosey's and Michael's classes, I used the first set of questions for the case study. My goal was to find out what opinions these students held about gender stereotypes, in the media and otherwise, and what they thought about the role of the media in people's lives. In focus groups that consisted of students who had already taken the classes with Michael and Rosey I used a slightly modified second set of questions. I wanted to know what these young people remembered about feminist and gender lenses, and whether they were still using them to analyze media texts.

Reflective Diary

Qualitative research is characterized by reflexivity – the researcher's awareness of her biases, and of the potential effect they can have on the knowledge she produces (Burawoy, 1991; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Johnson, 2002). Qualitative researchers should be able to reflect on how their findings are shaped by their positionality and that of their informants, by internal contradictions in their subjective positions, and by the differences between them and the researched (Watt, 2007).

Watt (2007) advocates for keeping a diary and regularly taking notes about our feelings, assumptions, expectations, disappointments and personal highlights during data

collection and analysis. Putting thoughts on paper can make the process of reflection more conscious and systematic. Following Watt's advice, I started a diary as soon as I began collecting data. Keeping the diary allowed me to come back to and reexamine thoughts and feelings that I could have otherwise forgotten. I also constantly made notes marked "reflection" as I was working in the school, or going through the collected data. Through the reflective diary I made myself a participant of my own study; therefore, for the purpose of full disclosure, it is important here to clarify here what positionalities I occupy (Darling-Wolf, 1998), and why I am working on this project.

I am a 31-year-old White middle-class female, born in Russia, who is completing her doctoral degree in Communication and Media at Temple University in Philadelphia. I struggle to define my sexual orientation, and although I am in a happy heterosexual relationship I prefer not to call myself heterosexual. I see both gender and sexuality as extremely complex phenomena that defy crude categorizations.

I am passionate about women's rights, I use feminist theory to inform my research, I advocate for gender equality—however, I do not call myself a feminist. First of all, I do not like being labeled. Second, the very root of the word "feminism" to me signals the division of people into men and women. I know that feminism has come to mean much more than that, and that it is thanks to feminist theory that scholars started to challenge gender binary and pay attention to intersectionality. There are some definitions of feminism that I can relate to, for example the one formulated by hooks (2015[1952]).

Feminism... is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (p. 194)

At the same time, I know that there are many kinds to feminism, some of which uphold the idea of gender dualism (Alsop, Fitzsimons & Lennon, 2002). For these reasons, I prefer not to use the term “feminist” to describe myself. This does not mean that, in my opinion, this term is useless, or that I reject the legacy associated with it. Moreover, I believe that schools should spend more time teaching students about feminist movement(s), and about the complexity behind the term “feminism.”

Another important aspect of my personality that, no doubt, has influenced my data collection and analysis, is my elitism. I come from St. Petersburg, which is considered to be the cultural capital of Russia, and one of its centers, alongside Moscow. My parents both have university education and doctoral degrees (my father wrote two dissertations). I have studied for eight years in St. Petersburg State University, the oldest and one of the most prestigious universities of my hometown, and I have a foreign equivalent of a Ph.D. degree from St. Petersburg State University. As a result, I have certain prejudice against people who do not come from cultural centers, like I do, or who are not well-educated. Even if this prejudice might not show in all interactions I have, I know that it shapes my assumptions and certain behaviors. At the same time, it is necessary to note that I am fairly-open minded, ready to admit my biases and fight against them—although that does not necessarily mean that they are eliminated.

My self-realization as an elitist helped me see how, working on this project, I have been judging the teachers because of what I perceived as mistakes and misperceptions on their part. Because I was aware of this bias, I always reminded myself that it is they, not I, who have extensive experience working with high school students. While I brought to the table my knowledge of media studies, feminist theory, gender

studies, media representations of gender, and media literacy education, I was less familiar with actual educational practices in high schools. My awareness and struggle to keep my open-mindedness helped me to experience deep respect and admiration for Michael and Rosey. These feelings were in contrast with the need to judge them that I felt all too often during my work in West Cityville High School. I proceeded with caution, trying to find the balance between these very different attitudes. Creating thick descriptions of the teachers' practices I kept reminding myself that the "truths" I am coming up with are always necessarily partial (Hesse-Biber & Leavy).

My goal is to bridge theory and practice. That is why I chose to work in the field of media literacy education, which lies at the intersection of Communication and Education. My goal is to produce impact-oriented research, and this might make me less objective and more partial.

A good qualitative researcher is aware of how her actions can alter the very social reality she wants to make sense of. Therefore, it is necessary to say a few words about my position in West Cityville High School and my relationship with people there. It would be foolish to assume that my presence there did not impact Michael and Rosey, or the students that I met. In fact, during my discussions with the teachers I several times heard remarks that showed how my presence in the school influenced their thoughts and practices. I saw my interactions with the teachers as a give and take relationship. Without their help, flexibility and patience my project would not have taken place. As a form of giving back, I engaged in many intellectually stimulating and personal conversations with Michael and Rosey, and was an attentive listener when they wanted to run by an idea for

the class, or simply to share excitement or frustration. Without these conversations, my project would have been incomplete.

Last but not least, reflexivity helped me to come to terms with contradictory nature my findings. In order to understand myself, I had to accept that I am both open-minded but at the same time plagued with biases. I was often torn between admiring Michael and Rosey for what they were doing in the classroom, and the tendency to judge their actions. I describe some other contradictions in the following chapters. Initially they made me uncomfortable. However, I decided to I embrace the postmodern attitude to qualitative research, which dictates that there is no one “bottom line” truth about the world. I am guided by my belief that social reality is intrinsically contradictory, that it escapes being described in clear-cut categories. I want my research to show these contradictions as the intrinsic quality of our own selves and of the world we live in.

In the following chapters that describe my findings I do not have a separate section dedicated to reflectivity. Rather, I insert comments that come from my reflective diary alongside the description of findings, because I want my story to develop organically.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYZING MEDIA AND GENDER LESSONS

In this chapter I analyze and assess educational materials for teaching school students about media and gender. The purpose of this chapter is to help the reader get a better sense of media and gender classes within media literacy education, and to provide a context for analyzing actual classroom practices. The discussed materials are available on websites of Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, Commonsense Media, and MediaSmarts: Canada's Center for Media Literacy. It must be noted that none of the teachers I talked to mentioned using materials from any of these sites. Although one teacher outside of the case study said that she sometimes looked for ideas online, she did not name any of these specific sources when she was describing class activities.

General Information

Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media provides a set of eight separate lesson plans, a curriculum titled "Guess Who?" and five videos that go with the curriculum, all created in 2012. The lesson plans include:

- 1) "Do TV Shows and Movies Influence Careers Held by Women and Men?"
- 2) "Do TV Shows and Movies Make Sexual Harassment a 'Normal' Part of the School Experience?"
- 3) "How do I Look?"
- 4) "Males and Females Compete in the Same Arena"
- 5) "Who is Your Hero?"
- 6) "How Do Media Images Impact Self-Image?"

- 7) “When I Grow Up I Want To Be...”
- 8) “Do TV and Film Encourage Bullying in Schools?”

The lesson plans do not specify the recommended age of students. The curriculum states that it is designed for children 6-9 years old.

Commonsense Media provides 8 media and gender lesson plans that can be downloaded together with instructions for teachers called “Teacher Backgrounder.” The lesson plans are divided into three sets.

Elementary school lessons plans:

- 1) “Picture Perfect”
- 2) “Selling Stereotypes”

Middle school lesson plans:

- 1) “Gender Stereotypes Online”
- 2) “Cracking the Gender Code”
- 3) “The Reality of Digital Drama”

High school lesson plans:

- 1) “Feeling on Display”
- 2) “Overexposed: Sexting and Relationships”
- 3) “Becoming a Web Celeb”

The lesson plans were created in 2012.

MediaSmarts: Canada’s Center for Media Literacy provides lessons created for different grades and by different organizations, e.g., MediaSmarts itself, Toronto Board

of Education, advocacy group Men for Change, etc. Below is the list of 17 lesson plans that I found:

- 1) “Favorite Sports and Athletes: An Introduction to Sports Media” (grades K-3)
- 2) “Girls and Boys on Television” (grades 3 to 6)
- 3) “Sheroes and Heroes” (grades 3 to 8)
- 4) “Media Kids” (grades 4 to 7)
- 5) “Comic Book Characters” (grades 5 to 7)
- 6) “What’s in a Word” (grades 5 to 7)
- 7) “Mirror Image” (grades 5 to 8)
- 8) “Gender Stereotypes and Body Image” (grades 6 to 7)
- 9) “TV Dads: Immature and Irresponsible?” (grades 6 to 8)
- 10) “Female Action Heroes” (grades 6 to 10)
- 11) “Gender Messages in Alcohol Advertising” (grades 7 to 10)
- 12) “The Impact of Gender Role Stereotypes” (grades 8 to 9)
- 13) “Learning Gender Stereotypes” (grades 8 to 9)
- 14) “Suffragettes and Iron Ladies” (grades 8 to 12)
- 15) “The Price of Happiness: On Advertising, Image and Self-Esteem” (grades 8 to 12)
- 16) “Marketing to Teens: Gender Roles in Advertising” (grades 8 to 12)
- 17) “Advertising and Male Violence” (grades 10 to 12)

All the lesson plans were created in 2012 and 2013.

Protectionism vs. Empowerment

The Institute on Gender and Media relies on research that leans toward the media effects tradition, connecting the lack of gender balance in the media to gender inequalities in society (Smith, 2008). Consequently, the Institute's advocacy and education initiatives are fuelled by protectionist concerns: "The repetitive viewing patterns of children ensure that these negative stereotypes are ingrained and imprinted over and over" (About Us [Geena Davis Institute], n.d.). The purpose of the educational materials provided by the Institute is to help youth understand the negative impact of media representations, and to "inspire and sensitize the next generation of content creators to focus on gender equality and reducing stereotyping in children's media" (Gender Equality Lessons for Schools, n.d.).

The titles of the first two lesson plans are formulated as questions: "Do TV shows and movies influence careers held by women and men?" and "Do TV shows and movies make sexual harassment a 'normal' part of the school experience?" Although students might answer these questions negatively, the contents of the lesson plans implies that teachers will expect the affirmative answer. After having students talk about media representations, the first lesson introduces a section titled "Real World," which features a text about the wage gap. Then, under the rubric "My opinion" the lesson encourages participants to agree or disagree with the statement: "The way male and female professionals are portrayed in movies and TV shows is a contributing factor to the wage disparity between men and women in the United States." The "Extend Your Learning" section of the second lesson plan encourages students to explore the research that the Institute has amassed: "Research findings reveal evidence of gender inequality and

stereotyping in film and television. Explore the research data and determine whether the media has a positive or negative impact on sexual harassment in schools.” This activity seems to open up a ground for discussion, but knowing the research used by Institute one can assume that students are supposed to conclude that the impact is mostly negative.

The “Guess Who?” curriculum starts by addressing educators the following way:

Children hold stereotyped beliefs about what they think boys and girls are like, and what they are each capable of doing... [S]ome of these views can have negative or even harmful effects, and **the media is a huge influence on kids’ beliefs**... Watching portrayals like this over and over cements **negative stereotypes in kids’ minds**. For girls, this can lead to **low self-esteem, poor body image, and less career ambition** (especially in the STEM fields). These messages can lead boys to feel that females are passive, weak, and generally less capable. (Bolded in original)

The lesson plans focus on problematic representations of women, and it is implied that they are the ones who suffer from media’s influence the most. Similarly, the curriculum emphasizes negative impact of media representations, and portrays girls and women as victims. Boys are also affected by problematic media stereotypes, yet even in this case girls are again those who suffer.

Commonsense Media lesson plans take a more balanced position. On the one hand, teachers are instructed to talk to students about problematic media influence: “Guide students to consider the fact that things like toy companies and television shows send very powerful messages to kids about what is normal, popular, or desirable – both for girls and for boys” (“Selling Stereotypes”). On the other hand, students learn that they have power to interpret media messages in different ways: “Students should acknowledge that media messages can be powerful and can shape our ideas and our behavior, but we can make choices about how much we allow these messages to influence us” (“The Reality of Digital Drama”).

When Commonsense lesson plans talk about problematic media influence, they do not focus only on how girls experience it. “Selling Stereotypes” instructs the teacher to help students “recognize that while some girls are interested in hanging out with friends, beauty shops, decorating, and cupcakes, others aren’t... some boys are not interested in fighting, robots, or being strong.”

Relationship between the media and people’s attitudes is not described as a simple cause and effect one. For example, “Gender Stereotypes Online” instructs teachers to tell students that “the media aren’t solely responsible for creating gender stereotypes, but they certainly can encourage them with images and messages.” And “Teacher Backgrounder for grades 9-12” states: “Teens need to think critically about common attitudes that can fuel issues such as digital drama, cyberbullying, and sexting. Quite often, these issues are rooted in social attitudes, not the technology itself.” A variety of media production activities offered by the lesson plans (more about it below) also implies that young people are positioned as active users of media tools and texts, and not simply as passive consumers.

An important feature of the empowerment paradigm is a tendency to see students as experts who are co-creating knowledge together with the teacher (Freire, 1970). In line with this approach, Commonsense Media lesson plans encourage the teacher to use inquiry-based discussion: “Treat students like the experts. Encourage students to feel as though they’re teaching you about how they and their friends use digital media, and encourage them to dig deeper into issues by asking lots of questions” (“Teacher Backgrounder for grades 9-12”).

Like Commonsense Media materials, MediaSmarts lesson plans also occupy a more balanced position between the protectionist and empowerment poles. The media are described as perpetuating gender stereotypes: “gender perceptions are affected by the media” (“Comic Book Characters”). A text included in “Female Action Heroes” lesson plan states that “media messages about gender stereotypes... perpetuate traditional male and female roles.” “Media Image” lesson is designed to help students acquire “an understanding of how the media can pressure young people to be thin.” At the same time, the lesson plans do not imply that the influence of media texts is uniformly negative. A text featured in “Favorite Sports and Athletes” states: “Such images can be a powerful influence on those who experience them, and may suggest ‘scripts’ to be imitated.” The verbs “can” and “may” imply that not everybody is affected by media texts in the same way. One of the objectives of “Gender messages in alcohol advertising” is for students to learn that the media “reflect and reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes” towards gender. This phrasing suggests that that media texts not only shape attitudes but are also shaped by them.

According to the MediaSmarts lesson plans, when negative influence does take place, both men and women can be negatively affected. Comparing pressures that men and women experience, “Gender stereotypes and body image” states: “There is pressure for men or boys to look like these images, but mostly, they face pressure to do or act in certain ways, rather than look a certain way.” Another lesson plan explains:

Believing stereotypes also limits our personal choices in determining our own interests and skills. For example, a boy who likes flower arranging might worry about being called a ‘wimp’ if he does this. A girl who wants to become an engineer might not choose this career because it is considered a ‘male’ profession. (“Gender Messages in Alcohol Advertising”)

The educational materials in my sample occupy different positions on the protectionism-empowerment continuum. These lesson plans show that, even when students are positioned as active learners, the teacher's purpose is still to protect them from problematic media messages. Protectionism is often constructed as something outdated, as a paradigm we need to get away from (Buckingham, 1998). However, we should remember that the idea behind media literacy education is that the relationship between audiences and media texts is never entirely unproblematic. Even when students are assumed to be active and independent, they are seen as needing the teacher's help. Otherwise, media literacy education would not be necessary.

Media and Reality

All the educational materials I analyzed at some point compare or contrast media and reality. In "Picture Perfect" by Commonsense Media, when students discuss a picture of a digitally altered lemon, the teacher is told to explain to them that "lemons don't look like that in real life," Later the teacher is told to ask students: "Even though the lemon in this photo isn't real, what do you like about the image?" In "Gender Stereotypes Online" teachers are instructed to "have students note the similarities and differences between the real people and their avatars."

The first lesson of the Geena Davis Institute has a rubric titled: "The Real World" which states: "Studies show that men earn more than women in the same careers. Read the excerpt below from USA TODAY and underline one detail that catches your attention." Prior to this section the lesson has students discuss media representations, so it appears that "the real world" is contrasted against the world of the media.

The third lesson plan states:

Television, movies and even manufacturers can influence how people view themselves. They all can reinforce negative stereotypes for young girls and boys today. In order to overcome these messages, students must begin to acknowledge that they all portray *false images* about what is normal physical appearance for males and females. (Emphasis added)

Although the word “reality” is not used, this activity appears to describe photoshopped images as unrealistic. The use of the term “normal” to describe physical appearance also deserves attention.

In the MediaSmarts lesson plans media representations are on several occasions talked about in relation to reality. In the “Comic Book Characters” lesson plan students learn that “stereotypes are less real... than their real-life counterparts,” and that media representations “can influence [children’s] ideas about the real people in their communities.” In “Female Action Heroes” teachers are instructed to ask students whether characteristics portrayed in a video about superheroes “accurately reflect the qualities of real boys and girls.” “The Impact of Gender Role Stereotypes” explains why it is problematic when we “begin to like the stereotypes more than real people.” One of the objectives of the “Learning Gender Stereotypes” lesson plan is to “understand the importance of distinguishing between fantasy (what happens on television, in the movies and in ads) and reality (what really goes on in [students’] lives).” In “Media Kids” students have the following homework: “[B]oys select one comic or ad that features a realistic male image, and a second ad or comic that features a stereotypical male image of boys and teens. Girls have the same assignment, with female images.”

By comparing media texts to reality the materials in all the three sets create a dichotomy between representations that reflect reality, and those that distort it. According to D’Acci (2004), people view the world only through the categories they create, and any

“reality” is always socially constructed. Hence, if we judge media texts based on how close they come to representing reality, we will miss the complexity of multiple “realities” that people inhabit.

By focusing on the binary “media vs. reality” to describe media representations, the lesson plans that I analyzed obscured the complexity of media texts. However, it would be unfair to blame those who created these materials. Getting into deep philosophical discussions about the nature of reality was not their priority. Comparing the media to reality is a common trope that makes sense to many people. Hence, it is logical that this trope was incorporated into these educational materials. In addition, some of them are intended for elementary and middle school students, for whom it would be difficult to participate in such abstract discussions.

Stereotypes

All the three sets of educational materials take an issue with gender stereotypes in the media. Stereotypes are described as something unrealistic, harmful – something one needs to recognize and overcome.

Media Smarts lesson plans describe stereotypes as problematic and negative: “When we unconsciously try to live up to the impossible standards of stereotypes, we can do physical and emotional harm to ourselves” (“Gender Messages in Alcohol Advertising”). “Gender Stereotypes and Body Image” want students to understand “the potentially damaging effects of living up to stereotypes, and how they can lead to abuse and violence against ourselves and others.”

Educational materials provided by Geena Davis Institute stress that gender stereotyping is rampant in the media, and suggest that overcoming these stereotypes will

lead to a more equitable society. For example, the third lesson plan states: “Research shows that stereotyping is prominent in media today, especially in television and movies.” The lesson then proceeds to state that “television, movies and even manufacturers can influence how people view themselves” and explains why this impact is problematic. The eighth lesson invites students to read about “research and resources to change female portrayals and gender stereotypes in children’s media and entertainment.” The “Guess Who?” encourages students to “talk about good stereotypes and bad stereotypes.” Stereotypes in the media are juxtaposed with “reality” or “real life” (see Pic. 1).

Q3. “Think about the ways these men and women act on TV, movies, and video games—are they stereotypes, or are they just like *real life*?”

NOTE :

Please record the votes in the before box below:

BEFORE	BOYS	GIRLS	AFTER	BOYS	GIRLS
STEREOTYPES			STEREOTYPES		
REAL LIFE			REAL LIFE		
I DON'T KNOW			I DON'T KNOW		

Pic. 1 – Activity that juxtaposes stereotypes and real life.

Commonsense Media lessons plans talk about stereotypes in a more nuanced way.

For example, “Selling Stereotypes” states that “gender stereotypes sometimes can be limiting.” The lesson plan explains:

Stereotypes can make some people feel like they don’t fit in, or that they should try to be something that they are not. Stereotypes can also encourage people to assume, or believe without question, that there are differences between groups of people. (“Selling Stereotypes”)

Careful wording—stereotypes influence *some*, stereotypes *can* have a difference—allows for more sophisticated discussion.

Dyer (1999) in his seminal work on stereotyping noted that stereotypes are not intrinsically “good” or “bad.” It is the way they are used that matters. Stereotypes are a by-product of the ability to think in categories, which is essential for being human. We would never be able to completely eliminate stereotypes. Same as in the case with “media vs. reality”, the educational materials that I analyzed did not go in such details. Obviously, we cannot demand that each teacher who tackles media and gender in her or his classes would discuss the processes of abstract thinking and categorization with students. However, it is important to remember that by not problematizing the notion of stereotype we might lose an opportunity to explain the complex nature of media representations to students.



Pic. 2 – Velma from *Scooby-Doo*.

I would like to separately note a problematic statement that “Female Action Heroes” lesson plan from the MediaSmarts sample makes about stereotypes in children’s

media. The lesson features a text “From Sailor Moon to the Legend of Korra: Female Action Heroes” which at some points states that “*Scooby-Doo*’s Velma was smart but unattractive” (see Pic. 2). Talking about gender stereotypes, the author inadvertently reinforces the ideal of emphasized femininity, which again suggests that the discussion about stereotypes should be further complicated.

Gender Binary

Butler (1990) noted the problematic and phantasmatic nature of the gender binary, which is reproduced through performative and discursive practices. In this section I assess how the chosen educational materials tackle this issue.

Q1. “Are there some interests or hobbies that *only* girls like, like dolls or playing dress-up, and some interests or hobbies that *only* boys like, like sports or science? Yes or No?”

NOTE :

Please record the votes in the before box below:

BEFORE	BOYS	GIRLS	AFTER	BOYS	GIRLS
YES			YES		
NO			NO		
I DON'T KNOW			I DON'T KNOW		

Pic. 3 – Activity that juxtaposes boys and girls.

The educational materials offered by the Geena Davis Institute never complicate the binary. The main problem, as these materials portray it, is that women are misrepresented, not that men and women are seen as two distinct non-overlapping groups. The lesson plans and the curricula encourage students to compare media

representations of men as opposed to those of women. The first lesson plan starts with the following assignment: “In the T-chart below, list at least 5 male characters and 5 female characters from the shows and movies you enjoy.” The second lesson plan asks: “Who is more likely to be sexually harassed in school? (boys or girls)” The third lesson plan prompts students to “list the top three BEST LOOKING male and female characters in TV/movies” (emphasis in the original). The juxtaposition of “male and female” or “boys and girls” can be found in other lesson plans as well. At the same time, the complexity of gender spectrum, and the variety of femininities and masculinities are not discussed. Similar to the lesson plans, the curriculum emphasizes the division into two genders. Many activities encourage students to juxtapose boys and girls (see Pic. 3).

The lesson plans provided by the Canada’s Center for Media Literacy discuss gender roles and stereotypes in a way that may inadvertently reinforce the gender binary. For example, in “Marketing to teens” students are supposed to analyze an ad campaign targeting one gender and then to redesign in to target an opposite gender. In “Media Kids” students “deconstruct gender portrayals and depictions of boys and girls in the media.” In “Gender Stereotypes and Body Image” students fill in two boxes “Act like a Man” and “Be Ladylike” and then discussed cultural expectations and limitations for both genders. In “Gender Messages and Alcohol Advertising” students learn that “women and girls metabolize alcohol differently, which means that alcohol passes more quickly into their bloodstreams. As a result, they get drunk faster, hooked more easily, and suffer consequences of drinking more severely than males.” This statement both reinforces the gender binary and implicitly puts blame on women who drink irresponsibly without taking into considerations the “particularities” of their female physiology. Gender

binary—or gender as a continuum—is not discussed in these teaching materials; therefore, the problematic messages that might reinforce the dualism of gender are not mitigated.

Although the Commonsense Media lesson plans often juxtapose boys to girls, one activity (in “Gender Stereotypes Online”) appears to be designed to help students think about gender as a continuum. Students are encouraged to think about how “different interests, subjects, and activities that teens might pursue” might be placed on the gender scale (See Pic. 4).



Pic. 4 – Gender scale.

In this instance, the Commonsense Media lesson plans offer the teacher an opportunity to discuss and problematize the gender binary. At the same time, “Teacher backgrounder” does not say anything about the gender continuum, so it is unclear whether teachers will be indeed prepared for having this discussion.

These materials have another possible limitation: they describe gender as social and gender as biological: “Gender has to do with social identities and roles. Gender is about how a culture defines terms like “masculine,” “feminine,” and everything in between. Sex, on the other hand, is a matter of anatomy and biology” (“Teacher Backgrounder”). “Selling Stereotypes” instruct the teacher to tell students that “boys and

girls are born with some differences. But other differences are just ideas created by people.” It is true that some people are born with penises, and others – with vaginas (some also have both). But can we use these in-born characteristics to divide most of the people into two clear-cut groups? (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) According to Butler (1990), sex is as socially constructed as gender. Our perception of gender as a binary shapes the understanding of sex. Using the comparison of biological sex to socially constructed gender as a way to combat the gender binary might not be productive.

Although it is close to impossible to talk about media representations of gender without comparing portrayals of men and women, it is important to remember that this comparison can reinforce gender binary. To deal with this problem, media and gender classes should include discussions about the diversity of masculinities and femininities. Teachers should clearly explain what gender binary is, and why it is important to see gender as continuum.

Intersectionality

Discussions on intersectionality are practically absent in the analyzed educational materials. The authors of the materials do not seem to be familiar with, or interested in, this notion. Race, sexuality and class are sometimes mentioned, but not in a way that would explain how these axes of identity intersect with gender. Every lesson plan of the Geena Davis Institute has an illustration in its header, and some of these illustrations show children of different races, which signals that the creators did want students to think of racial diversity. However, the first lesson plan features a problematic statement. It has a text about the wage gap that argues: “Women and people of color do not choose to earn less.” This quote seems to imply that women can be only White. The only time sexuality

is mentioned is in the second lesson plan, in an activity that encourages students to say whether they have seen this type of harassment in the media: “Someone being called gay or lesbian in a negative way.” This exercise might be seen as problematic not only because it does not talk about intersectionality, but also because bisexuality, transsexuality, pansexuality and other sexualities are omitted.

People of different races are shown in the videos that come with the “Guess Who?” lesson plan, but race is not explicitly discussed in any curriculum activities. Sexual orientation is also not discussed, which might be explained by the curriculum creator’s fear that bringing up this issue with children under 10 can be too controversial. The “Guess Who?” curriculum finishes with an empowering statement: “It doesn’t matter if you are a boy or a girl, you can be and do and play and like whatever you want!” This statement fails to note that some boys and girls are more privileged than others because of their race, sexuality, socio-economic status, physical ability and religion.

MediaSmarts lesson plans talk about race, class and sexuality on several occasions. For example, “Comic Book Characters” lesson plan states: “Culture and class stereotypes are also prevalent on television. Traditionally, blacks were portrayed as either happy-go-lucky servants or dangerous criminals, and while these stereotypes linger, we are now seeing what might be described as upright, intelligent, middle-class black characters.” “The Impact of Gender Role Stereotypes” asks students to answer the following question: “Sometimes we do use our ‘membership’ [in a certain social group] to hurt others, without even knowing it. Can you think of examples (either with race, gender, or any other social disparity) where you have done this?” “Learning Gender Stereotypes” lesson plan includes an article that quotes a sociology professor on the

prevalence of heterosexual romance in advertising. At the same time, discussions about heteronormativity in media representations of gender are by and large absent in these lesson plans.

“Teacher Backgrounder” in Commonsense Media lessons for high school suggests: “Have students research how attitudes about boys and girls have changed over time, and the extent to which these differences relate to race, class, and community culture.” Although the differences between sex and gender are discussed, sexuality, race and other identity axes are not.

The analysis of the educational materials suggests that intersectionality is largely absent from discussions about media representations of gender. Although race, sexuality and class are occasionally mentioned, the intersection of different aspects of identity is not discussed. The lack of preoccupation with intersectionality sometimes leads to problematic statements, for instance, that women and people of color are two distinct social groups.

The AACRA Model

This section addresses how Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect and Act competencies are supported by the analyzed materials.

In terms of correspondence to the AACRA model of media literacy education, the MediaSmarts lesson plans prioritize media analysis. Students are encouraged to pick apart a variety of media texts. While on a number of occasions students are asked open-ended questions about texts in question, in lesson plans dedicated to advertising they are expected to divide representations of masculinity and femininity into several categories provided by the teacher. For example, in “Gender Messages in Alcohol Advertising”

students look at a series of ads and organize them according to the following female stereotypes: sexpot/bimbo, man eater, rebel, prize, party girl. “Advertising and Male Violence” lesson plan tells students about five themes or archetypes in media representations of men: “attitude is everything,” “the cave man mentality,” “the new warriors,” “muscles and ‘the ideal man’,” “heroic masculinity,” “censuring un-masculine behavior.” Although these categories provide a foundation for media analysis, they might limit students who would like to categorize media representations differently.

Several lesson plans have activities where students create media messages, or at least put themselves in the shoes of media producers. In “Female Action Figures” young people “assume the role of television producers who wish to create a television series about a male or female superhero free of gender and other stereotypes.” In “Marketing to Teens” students learn about gender stereotypes by “taking an ad campaign they have seen, which is specifically directed to one gender, and redesigning the campaign to target the opposite gender.” In “Media Kids” the teacher is instructed to “have the students create a proposal for a sitcom that they would like to watch.” In “The Price of Happiness” students “work as groups to create and act in mock television commercials that parody advertising techniques.”

In terms of access, several lesson plans have students read a text and show their comprehension by discussing it and/or answering questions about it (e.g., in “Female Action Figures,” “The Impact of Gender Role Stereotypes,” etc.). In terms of reflection, in the “Favorite Sports and Athletes” lesson plans the teacher is instructed to “ask students how they feel when they get hurt in sports and what they think could be done to improve this aspect of sports.” In “Gender Stereotyping and Body Image” students need

to write a journal entry using a following prompt: “Have you ever experienced a situation where you were expected to act a certain way because you were a girl or a boy, even though it may not have been the way you felt like acting?” Later in the same lesson students “reflect on what has been discussed... How do they feel about these issues?” There are no specific activities that would have students act outside of the class on what they have learned about media representations of gender. However, the importance of social action is briefly discussed. In “TV Dads,” one of the lesson outcomes is that students should be able to demonstrate “an understanding that, as informed and empowered people, they can use their own skills and tools to bring about positive change.”

MediaSmarts lesson plans briefly discuss the constructed nature of media texts. One lesson plan – “Suffragettes and Iron Ladies”—deepens students’ understanding of how the media producers’ biases impact the way media texts are constructed. Students talk about who makes the news, or about how many reporters are male and how many are female. Lesson plan “What’s in a Word” discusses how the language that media producers use contains subconscious biases that marginalize women.

The educational materials produced by the Geena Davis Institute prioritize media analysis. The curriculum states that it aims to “foster active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create.” Yet upon analyzing both the curriculum and lesson plans I noted that the purpose of these educational materials is, first of all, to communicate to students a very specific message: media representations of women are stereotypical and damaging for girls. Media analysis exercises are designed to help students have this realization.

Only the second lesson plan includes a media production activity, encouraging students to create a PSA against sexual harassment. Students are encouraged to think about target audience, develop their message and choose a way of distributing it in their community. This exercise can also be said to develop Act competencies, because it allows students to be socially active:

Think about what you would want students and adults in your school community to know and do about sexual harassment in your school. Follow the steps below to create your own PSA and **share what you have to say** about sexual harassment in your school. (Bolded in the original)

The lesson plans also feature several reading comprehension activities that develop students' Access competencies. Every lesson plan has a text that students are supposed to read and discuss in class. The curriculum offers no texts for discussion. The videos that come with it are not intended for media analysis, but for conveying a gender equality message. Each one of them shows young people trying to guess what a person in question—described as baker, firefighter, judge, etc.—looks like. Children are surprised to discover that most of these people are women (except a nurse who turns out to be a man). These videos might be said to develop viewing comprehension.

Commonsense Media lesson plans are the most balanced ones, although they also privilege media analysis. Some of the media analysis activities specifically serve to help students understand that media texts are constructed. For example, in “Picture Perfect” students learn how images can be digitally altered, and discuss how that can influence people's perceptions of themselves.

Media production plays a prominent role in these lesson plans. “The Reality of Digital Drama” explains how to “engage students in a long-term, media-creation project.” “Overexposed: Sexting and relationships” tells teachers:

Have students complete the activity on the Over the Line Student Handout. Then have them create a short online, multimedia presentation explaining how they would use social media to teach teens about sexting. Encourage them to use free online tools such as Prezi (www.prezi.com), ShowMe (www.showme.com) or VoiceThread (www.voicethread.com).

Several lesson plans tell the teacher to help students share their ideas about the class “using a journal or an online blog/wiki,” which is another form of creating messages using media and digital tools. Students are consistently encouraged to think about themselves not only as media consumers, but also as producers, who can use media tools to share their messages with others.

Media production is advocated for but it is not shown uncritically. Teachers are encouraged to think about students as media producers who may use digital tools for empowerment, but may reinforce gender stereotypes in the texts they create. For example, “Teacher Backgrounder” for elementary classes states: “And because kids today are not only media consumers but also media creators, they may mirror these stereotypes while texting, messaging, posting comments, or developing their own digital works.” Thus, the purpose of these lesson plans is not only to help students be active consumers but also to become responsible producers of media texts.

The lesson plans also have some activities that fall under the rubric of Access. For example, “Selling Stereotypes” has a viewing comprehension activity. Students watch a YouTube video and then discuss what they understood from it. “Gender Stereotypes Online” lesson plan has an activity where students work with a website called SecretBuilders. “The Reality of Digital Drama” has another viewing comprehension activity with students watching a video titled “Discussing Digital Drama” and filling in a handout with information that they learned from it. In “Overexposed: Sexting and

Relationships” students watch a video titled “Ally’s Story – Second Thoughts on Sexting” and answer questions to show that they understood the video.

Several activities foster students’ reflection abilities. Each lesson has a similarly structured closing activity: “You can use these questions to assess your students’ understanding of the lesson objectives. You may want to ask students to reflect in writing on one of the questions, using a journal or an online blog/wiki.” The teacher is thus consistently encouraged to help students reflect on the purpose of the lessons, and on their own learning. “Picture Perfect” has an activity that combines media production and reflection:

Students should design the cover of their magazine, either on paper or using an online tool such as Glogster (www.glogster.com). What would the headlines be? What image(s) would be on the cover? Encourage students to reflect on how they might feel about their own appearance after reading that kind of magazine.

“The Reality of Digital Drama” has students “reflect on their own impressions of digital drama.” In “Feeling on Display” students “reflect on their own experiences with photo editing, posting, commenting, and tagging – and draw connections between these experiences and broader social messages about gender.”

In Commonsense Media lesson plans I found only one activity that falls under the Act rubric. The “Picture Perfect” lesson plan tells students about a girl who “started an online petition called ‘Seventeen Magazine: Give Girls Images of Real Girls!’ for people to sign. In it, she asks Seventeen Magazine to promise to always include some real photos – ones that are not altered.” The teacher is instructed to have students think of how Internet can be used for social action:

Ask volunteers to say whether or not they would sign Julia’s petition, and explain the reasons for their decision. Then engage students in a discussion

of how Julia stood up for what she believed, and how the Internet gives people the chance to share important messages with others across the world.

The AACRA model offers a balanced way to develop media literacy competencies. However, in reality analyzing media texts is often emphasized, while other competencies are underrepresented. Although we might want to develop our students' skills in the most balanced way possible, it would be wrong to criticize teachers who emphasize media analysis. Competencies of access are so basic that many teachers would feel they do not need a special exercise to help students develop them. Many teachers would not have enough resources or experience to engage in media production. In addition, media production involves many messy and unpredictable activities that many teachers would not feel comfortable to get into (Hobbs & Moore, 2013). Reflection is often included into other activities, and not presented as a separate exercise, that is why some lesson plans might not list it separately. And although encouraging young people to become civically engaged social actors is highly desirable, many teachers might feel that helping students to engage with their communities is beyond their expertise.

Conclusion

The analysis of educational materials for teaching about media and gender reveals the importance of nuanced approach to assessing teachers' practices. Although some scholars condemn protectionism, even media literacy educators committed to empowering students are propelled to do work in this field because they think that media messages are in some way problematic. Although too much protectionism might obscure the complex relationship between audiences and media texts, a certain amount protectionism might be essential for teaching students about the media.

In the previous chapters I discussed the complexity of media representations of gender. However, this complexity may be not be easy to discuss in a school setting, where students might not be prepared for abstract philosophical conversations about the nature of reality and the process of categorization. The analyzed lesson plans simplify a discussion about media representations, but it is not yet clear how one can usefully complicate it without confusing or boring students with abstract notions.

More problematic is the educational materials' inability to discuss issues of intersectionality, or emphasize that gender is a continuum – not a binary. Reinforcing the gender binary simply by talking about “men” and “women” in the media is a danger that teachers should be aware of. Not discussing how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, physical ability, age and religion can also create misperceptions about the way different people experience gender inequalities. Creators of educational materials for media and gender classes should either be more trained in gender and feminist theory, or work with somebody else who is. Otherwise, media and gender classes risk reinforcing problematic beliefs and attitudes that they are fighting against.

Finally, a balanced media literacy class would reinforce different competencies of the AACRA model. However, sometimes this is not easy or even possible. For example, teachers might simply have no equipment and time to do media production (although it is important to note that media production does not mandate the use of technology). They can feel that helping students to become civically engaged is beyond their expertise. Teachers might not be familiar with the AACRA model, or choose not to use it because their approach to media literacy education is different.

In the following chapter I use this context to analyze practices and motivations of six high school teachers, focusing on the two that I worked with in West Cityville High School. I look at the way they balance between protectionism and empowerment discussing media representations of gender, and at how complexity of representations, gender binary, and intersectionality come into play. I also discuss the way the teachers use different elements of the AACRA model in the classroom.

CHAPTER 6

TEACHERS AND THEIR PRACTICES

In this chapter I describe my findings about the six high school teachers I worked with as part of my dissertation project. The two teachers from West Cityville High School—Michael and Rosey—were my key informants. Interviews with the other four—Loren, Peter, Bradley and Julie—helped me contextualize my case study. As I did not observe these additional teachers in the classroom, I can only speak of what they told me.

Educational Approach

In their teaching, both Michael and Rosey relied heavily on principles of critical pedagogy, and their main goal was to help students use critical theory to see the complexity of the world around them. Neither Michael, nor Rosey had heard about media literacy education before I came to their school.

Teaching students about critical theory, Michael and Rosey used educational approach formulated by Appleman (2000), who suggested analyzing texts through so-called critical lenses. Because the lenses played a key role in classes I observed in West Cityville High School, I discuss them here in some detail. In the beginning of the quarter, Michael and Rosey gave students a handout from Appleman's book, which provided definitions for the following six lenses: archetypal, feminist, Marxist, historical, psychological, and reader-response. The author called them "criticisms" or "schools of critical theory." The archetypal lens was intended to help students see "narrative designs, character types, or images that are said to be identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams and even ritualized modes of social behavior" (p.

155). The purpose of the feminist criticism was to “see cultural and economic disabilities in a ‘patriarchal’ society that have hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities and women’s cultural identification as a merely negative object, or ‘Other,’ to man as the defining and dominant ‘Subject’” (p. 155). Marxist criticism focuses “on power and money in works of literature. Who has the power/money? Who does not? What happens as a result?” (p. 156). The historical lens required “that [the reader] apply to a text specific historic information about the time during which an author wrote” (p. 158), and allowed to reveal inconsistencies about the text and the historic reality it is describing. Psychological/psychoanalytic theory required “that we investigate the psychology of a character or an author to figure out the meaning of a text” (p. 157). Finally, proponents of the reader-response criticism noted “that literature has no objective meaning or existence. People bring their own thoughts, moods, and experiences to whatever text they are reading and get out of it whatever they happen to, based on their own expectations and ideas” (p. 157). The printout also described New Criticism, deconstruction and structuralism, but these lenses were not used in the classes.

As Michael explained to me, he added to the main six lenses another one which he termed “gender lens.” He felt that the feminist lens in the way it was described by Appleman focused on how women are oppressed, and did not allow students to discuss that men are also negatively affected by rigid gender roles. It is important to note that Appleman’s definition is, in fact, limiting, as it does not reflect the complexity of feminist movement(s) and feminist theory.

Although it seems that the feminist and gender lenses are just two of many lenses that students were supposed to learn about, these lenses were of special importance to

Michael and Rosey. Interviews with students showed that for many of them the gender and feminist lenses were the most prominent ones, whether because young people felt that they understood them better, or because they could relate to them.

Of the four other teachers, Julie and Bradley combined media literacy and critical pedagogy in their classes. Loren focused on media literacy education, and Peter identified with critical pedagogy and humanistic education. Julie was familiar with media literacy education and used its principles before she started teaching the course on sports, Bradley learned about media literacy as he was creating his course on mass communication, Loren learned about media literacy education when she started teaching at the school where she worked at the time I was talking to her, and Peter only learned about media literacy education from me when we first met a year before the interview.

This variety of educational approaches shows that not every teacher who analyzes media texts in the classroom identifies as a media literacy educator. That might be explained by the fact that media literacy education is not part of the standard curriculum. Many teachers simply do not know the name of this educational movement. However, once I told Michael and Rosey about it, they agreed that what they do can be called media literacy education.

Teaching Context

In order to better understand teachers' practices, it is important to know the context of their work. Out of the six teachers I talked with, five worked in public schools, and only one—Bradley—in a charter school. The public school system has been criticized by a variety of scholars for its economic disparities, educational standards that prioritize a few core subjects over helping students to become well-rounded individuals,

and standardized testing that puts major constraints on teachers' creativity (e.g., Bricker, 1989; Kozol, 1991; Ravitch, 2013). In most public schools classes are too big for the teacher to be able to address each student's needs. Teachers often "teach to the test" because their salaries and even their jobs depend on students' scores. As a result, curriculum is seldom balanced. Not enough emphasis is put on developing students' communication and collaboration skills, teaching them about the value of being civically engaged citizens and life-long learners. Teachers who want to help students develop these "additional" skills seldom feel supported by administrators, who are primarily preoccupied with the school's cumulative testing score because it determines funding.

With their regimented schedules and strict rules, schools are sometimes compared to prisons (School is a Prison, 2013). When I was working in West Cityville High School, I could see why. Students were not allowed to go out during class—even to the bathroom—without a written permission from a teacher. Breaks between classes were less than five minutes long, which barely allowed students to get from one classroom to another. Once in a while announcements were made by a disembodied voice coming from invisible speakers. When I was going through students' journals, I found one entry that showed how students might feel in this environment:

I've realized that... we are forced into a building every day for seven hours... We are not allowed to have contact with the outside of this building unless it goes through administration. When we are treated in such a way we turn off.

In this situation teachers are forced to assume the responsibilities of prison wardens, monitoring and disciplining students. If during my conversations with Michael I saw him as a gentle and emotional person, in class he would assume a different persona. He was strict and sometimes even harsh, telling young people not to walk around school

without written permissions, threatening noisy students to send them out of the class, arguing with those who disagreed with him, and otherwise showing his authority.

However, this transformation should not strike us as unusual if we take into consideration the environment that Michael had to work in. It is important to note that, even though Michael was strict in front of the class, he was much more gentle and caring working with students individually. He was willing to help failing students after school (which was not part of his work load), and he talked with disruptive students individually trying to understand their circumstances. On several occasions he shared lunch with a student whose father took too long to pay for school meals.

In my diary I noted that I did not like Michael's strictness, or the way he talked to students during class discussions – but then I had to remind myself about all the pressure and constraints that he was experiencing. Michael deserved admiration simply because he chose to talk with students about critical theory and the media although his students were not tested on these topics.

Among the other three public school teachers, only Loren worked in a school where media literacy classes were part of the curriculum. When public school teachers introduce media and gender classes, it is often on their own initiative and without much support from the school system. Even though in the rest of this chapter I am going to say things that might be seen as criticizing teachers, it is important to commend them on choosing to discuss media representations of gender despite all the constraints that the school put on them.

Protectionism vs. Empowerment

All the teachers I talked to in one way or another discussed the importance of protecting young people from problematic media messages, including media representations of gender. For example, Rosey said that her aim was to make sure that students “don’t just treat other people and treat themselves based on a bunch of, like, propaganda that’s pushed down their throats.” Julie told me that her goal is “to help people uncover the messages that media transmits, especially about underrepresented groups.” She saw her aim as helping students understand how they are affected by the continuous reproduction of gender inequalities by the media. Bradley spent a substantial part of his course talking to students about gender because “there is an illness... within this demographic of kids that we’re teaching... their behavior is resembling of a lot of [media representations we discuss in class].” He then explained his point further:

Our boys disrespect the females so much to the point where sometimes the degradation becomes acceptable and normal even for females... Like, our females, they walk around here, piles of makeup on, they are, like, sixteen. Obviously, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to be beautiful. But must we do it to the point where it’s degrading people?

At the same time the teachers talked about striving to empower students. Michael told me that critical pedagogy taught him about the importance of “trying to get [students] to understand that I don’t want them to be regurgitators of information, [but]... creators of information.” Talking about his education philosophy, he explained: “I think that as much as I have to teach my students I have an equal amount to learn from them.” He also told me that it is crucial for him to apply “democratic ideals to a classroom environment”, to make sure that he gives students authority over their own education. Michael described critical theory as inherently empowering for students, who can use this

new tool to see ideologies imposed on them by society. For Michael, the critical lenses were valuable because “looking at the world through multiple perspectives we can have a healthier understanding of the information that’s being presented to us.”

Julie’s main goal was to give students tools that would help them keep uncovering hidden messages outside of the class.

What I like to think is that I have helped them to own tools that they will take with them for the rest of their lives, that will change them inalterably in the way that they understand media messages. And that’s the goal. The goal is not to indoctrinate them, the goal is to give them the tools so they can make their own decisions.

In line with the goal of media literacy education to help students become life-long learners, Loren told me: “I want [students] to think critically at the end of our lesson, then to go on through the rest of their lives and just keep thinking about what we’ve done, and examining media.” Bradley also emphasized that he allowed students to form their own opinions about issues they discuss in class: “I don’t preach the gospel. I just kind of like give or show them water and hope that they drink it.”

In the case of the four teachers outside of the case study, it was impossible for me to compare their perception of the need to balance between empowerment and protectionism with their actions in the classroom. However, working with Rosey and Michael I was able to triangulate between their words and actual practices. While during our conversations Michael talked about the balance of protecting students and empowering them, in the classroom I saw him leaning more towards the protectionist approach. On several occasions he told students that they are negatively affected by ideologies embedded in media messages. In order to persuade students that using the critical lenses is beneficial for them, Michael said: “The media are trying to eat you,

getting money from you, while you we getting a screwed up perspective about what is normal in life.” On several occasions the teacher emphasized that the media are spreading a false feeling of normalcy that kids are buying because when they are young they do not have real defense mechanisms in order to shield themselves against problematic ideologies. For example, he said: “You can say, it does not affect me, but you were exposed to that since you were four, and by that time you were four these stereotypes have shaped your thinking.” During one of the discussions with students I heard him passionately say: “Recognize how these expectations were sold to you!”

Rosey made fewer strong statements in the classroom about negative effects of the media. On one occasion, however, she told a student whom I shall call Melissa: “You don’t notice that because you have been brainwashed.” On another occasion I witnessed the following discussion:

Rosey: Remember there was a song saying like fifty times, “I’m the man, I’m the man, I’m the man”? [She sings the line]

Several voices: Yeah! We love this song!

Rosey: How can you like this song?! Will anybody make a song that says “I the woman, I am the woman, I am the woman”?

In this case Rosey pronounced her judgment on a song whose message she deemed problematic.

At the same, Rosey allowed students to express a variety of interpretations. For example, when Kevin told her: “I think we should put money into hunger, and then into feminism, it is more important,” she did not silence him. Instead, she replied: “We can do both things at once,” and even stopped a female student who started to argue angrily with the boy. When Melissa said that she did not see messages sent by women’s fashion magazines as problematic, Rosey replied: “I like your observations, you are very honest.”

Media literacy scholars note that teachers' desire to protect students from problematic media messages might lead them to steer students towards certain interpretations (Hobbs, 2011). If teachers are convinced that the media have a negative influence, they might want young people to share this opinion and admit that some media texts are "bad." When teachers are preoccupied with protecting students, they might lose an opportunity to help the latter develop nuanced interpretations of media texts. The case of Michael and Rosey showed that in terms of protectionism an empowerment there might be a contradiction between teachers' philosophy and their actions in the classroom. One possible reason for this contradiction is teachers' passion about the subject, and their enthusiasm about "saving" young people from problematic ideologies.

Enthusiasm about the Subject

All six teachers I talked with demonstrated considerable enthusiasm about teaching students to deconstruct media representations of gender. Apart from Loren, the teachers chose to discuss media texts with students on their own initiative. And even Loren did not have to talk about media representations of gender with her students, because each teacher in her school who worked with the media literacy course structured it differently. Yet she chose to spend 2-3 weeks discussing this topic, and to come back to it repeatedly throughout the rest of the year.

The teachers' passion came from their belief that gender inequalities exist, and that they are reinforced by the media. In Julie's words "women are sublimated in most sectors of society, and it's very hidden," hence, careful media analysis is necessary to uncover it. Peter pointed out that it is important to explain to students "how women are put into a minority group that lacks power." Peter believed that the media play a crucial

role in reproducing gender inequalities because they socialize people into rigid gender roles. He talked with students about the way the media portray gender differences “because they are constantly exposed to it. And it helps to bring forward much better understanding of everything that they are constantly exposed to.”

Michael and Rosey talked about fighting against rigid gender roles with particular conviction. During our long conversations and my observations in the classroom I started to see why this fight was so important to them. Michael told me that growing up he experienced pressure to conform to standards of masculinity: “I have a memory from third grade of a kid making fun of me because I wore a pink shirt to school... I was always very sensitive and emotional, and was made to feel ashamed of that.” He described this pressure as a “force that was making me feel alienated.” Michael grew up in a religious Catholic family, and used to be an altar boy. Growing up he made friends with people whom his religion did not accept. That further complicated things, and made him seriously question the culture he was a part of.

Then I became friends with people who were gay. And I had an aunt who was a lesbian. And I knew that those people were no different than anyone else, but my religion was telling me that they were a sin against nature. And the heterosexual patriarchal society that surrounded me also told me that they were wrong. And my aunt Betsy was one of the nicest people I knew. And... I’m like getting upset thinking about it... Cause like it’s so fucked up that you can be a kid and people could tell you that the people you love are wrong, based on their ideological belief.

Michael’s story implied that he saw critical theory—and gender theory in particular—as liberatory both for himself and for the students he was teaching: “Alienation is something that I understand. If I can get kids to have a cleaner view of the world that empowers them to not to kill themselves, or to not feel alone, then I’m doing something good.”

Rosey appeared to be fueled primarily by her motivation to protect female students from harmful messages that they encounter: “The girls in my class are very beautiful human beings, they are very smart, but their whole life has taught them to just be quiet.” Rosey told me that boys are also negatively affected by the media, but in a way that often hurts girls: “I just think that girls learn [from the media] how to be girls and boys learn how to treat girls, or what the ideal girl is for them.”

Like Michael, Rosey’s background predisposed her to be very sensitive to gender stereotypes. During one of the classes she told a story of how she had been bullied about her nose as a girl. Rosey hated her nose so much, that one day she gathered all the money she had and made an appointment with a plastic surgeon. However, when she was in the doctor’s office for the first consultation, sitting in his big chair and listening to all the terrible things he had to tell about her nose, the absurdity of the situation struck her. She burst into laughter right in the chair, and left the office to never come back. Talking about the way gender stereotypes affect her, Rosey also mentioned that her family put much more pressure on her than on her brother to get married, which she saw as unfair.

For Michael and Rosey, teaching about critical lenses was not simply a job but a way to make a positive change in the world. As Michael put it: “I just found in that a calling, an opportunity to do something in the world. Like, what’s gonna be my thing, how I am gonna make my mark.” The teachers were willing to spend time after school to work with failing students in the writing center, they took an active role in the Gay and Straight Alliance, and they were willing to have conversations outside of class to help young people better understand issues of gender. For instance, during the time when I was working in the school, Michael found out about a transgender student whom her

peers were calling “it.” Michael told me that he was looking for opportunities to talk one-on-one to students who engaged in this bullying, because he felt that the administration was not doing enough to stop it.

The teachers I talked to all cared about the topic of media and gender, and some had a special emotional connection to it. If I had worked longer with Loren, Bradley, Peter and Julie, I might have learned details from their background that could explain their motivations. I suspect—although I do not have direct evidence to prove it—that the level of teachers’ enthusiasm might have a correlation with the degree of their protectionism. If teachers believe that media representations of gender have a negative influence on students, they might want to do their best to persuade young people that this influence, and gender inequality that it reinforces, are real. What might be lost in the process is the discussion about nuances of media representations, and of the audience’s relationship with them.

Complexity of Media Representations

Looking at Michael’s and Rosey’s educational practices from a media scholar’s perspective, I perceived some of their methods as problematic. I did not see much discussion about the sophistication of media representations, about the variety of possible interpretations of media texts, or about active audiences. I previously mentioned that the teachers chose to include the reader-response lens in the list of critical theories to discuss. However, this lens did not receive much attention neither from them, nor from students. I could not even understand what the teachers meant when they talked about it in class. Examples for this lens in students’ portfolios were confusing. During my conversations with young people nobody talked about reader-response. It was only when I looked into

the Appleman's book, that the purpose of this lens became clear to me. The definition seemed to be very much in line with what the scholarship on active audiences and media reception says. I suspect that this lack of emphasis might be connected with the teachers' fear of allowing students to produce their own interpretations. As much as Michael and Rosey wanted students to express their voices, they were also afraid to let these voices reflect harmful ideologies, which, according to the teachers, affected students since the day they were born.

Buckingham (2003) describes how the nuances of media representations might be lost in the classroom where teachers want students to understand how women are oppressed in societies shaped by patriarchy. I believe that I saw a similar dynamic in Michael and Rosey's classes when they started to discuss specific media texts with students.

The units that I observed featured three major activities: screening *Toy Story* and *Pocahontas*, and a Hacked Ads assignment. Michael and Rosey used *Toy Story* to model analyzing a media text through the critical lenses. They explained to me that watching *Pocahontas* was intended to let students use the critical lenses on their own. The Hacked Ads assignment involved analyzing a magazine cover or ad, and creating a collage that would expose and/or undermine the text's hidden message. This exercise was designed to help students practice using the critical lenses with another type of medium. As the class was analyzing media texts during these activities, Michael and Rosey noted on a couple of occasions that what they were offering were *their* interpretations. At the same time, they never discussed alternative interpretations, and did not provide many opportunities for students to challenge their opinions.

As the class was watching *Toy Story*, Michael and Rosey were giving explanations. Using the feminist lens they pointed out how leadership roles were taken by male characters (Buzz and Woody), while women were portrayed as damsels in distress (Bo Peep). Using the gender lens the teachers argued that male characters were shown to solve their problems through violence. Applying the archetypal lens, they talked of how Buzz symbolically died and was reborn before he changed his worldview, etc. From time to time Michael and Rosey asked students questions, e.g., “How do these men solve their problem?” As Michael and Rosey had particular ideas in mind, they were guiding young people to form similar interpretations.

I observed the screening of *Pocahontas* in the two classes taught by Michael. Before the screening he told students: “Remember that annoying thing I did as we were watching *Toy Story*? I was talking all the time... Now I am not going to do that.” However, I could see that it was difficult for Michael to relinquish control and let students create their own interpretations.

As soon as the movie started in one of the classes, Michael jumped up from his seat and said almost with indignation: “It starts in London?!” Michael was pointing out to students that a film about a Native American girl did not start by portraying her world but rather the world of the future settlers. As the movie was playing, he occasionally made remarks and asked questions that revealed his interpretations. When the screen showed Englishmen in the sea travelling to the New World, Michael said: “So I just ask you, where are the women?” Stopping the movie at another place, Michael told students: “I am going to throw you a bone. How is Pocahontas’ reaction to John Smith [when she sees him for the first time] reinforce what is valuable about male gender? It is showing us

what the ideal male is.” In this case he asked students a question and then immediately answered it himself. Michael was so enthusiastic about critical theory that he could not help analyzing things himself.

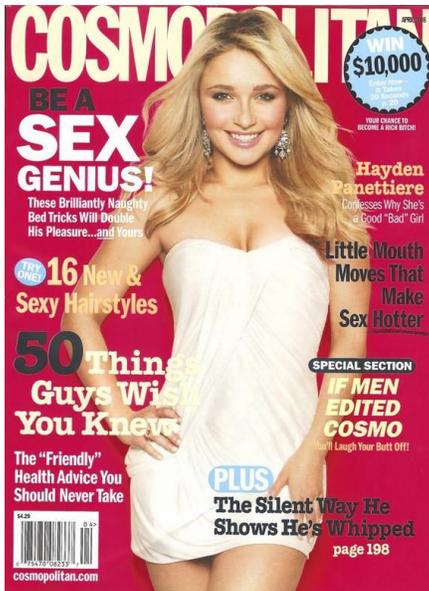
When time came to do the Hacked Ads assignment, Michael had a heated debate about *Cosmopolitan* covers with one of the classes, which I want to focus in more detail here. The teacher showed young people a cover with the actress Hayden Panettiere on it (See Pic. 5) and asked what they were seeing. A couple of students said that the actress was sexualized. However, some others did not agree. For example, one male student noted that she looked “like any woman on her wedding day.” To persuade students that Hayden Panettiere was indeed sexualized, Michael focused on her cleavage. Then a student I shall call Rodrigo said: “When guys look at girls, they look at their face, it is scientifically proven,” to what Michael replied: “Don’t be so confident about something you don’t know!” Then the teacher pointed out the actress’s pose: “Look at how she stands, is it natural?” To which several students answered “Yes!” Michael started mocking the pose to show that it does not look natural at all, and many students laughed. Eventually, one student said: “It is unnatural and nobody looks like that.” Then Michael started to talk about race. Pointing at the cover he said: “Most women on *Cosmo* covers are white, they look like that,” to what several students said: “No!” To persuade them, Michael opened a page with many *Cosmopolitan* covers on it, which indeed showed mostly White women. However, some students argued that there are enough Black women on the covers, or that Black celebrities have their own magazines.

During this discussion Michael was getting irritated. He made some harsh remarks to students who disagreed with his interpretations. When the teacher argued that

the image on the cover is constructed to draw the viewer's attention to Hayden Panettiere's cleavage, one student said: "You can see her boobs because you imagine that!" To that Michael retorted: "You imagine shit!" When Michael said "You cannot see men on magazine covers standing in these poses, they are unnatural," one student disagreed with him, so the teacher told him: "Chill, you are undermining the conversation."

Michael's remarks showed that for him this discussion was not about having students voice their interpretations, but about persuading them to accept his opinion. Towards the end of the debate Michael said: "*Cosmo* is a microcosm, I don't see how you can argue about that with me! It shows... that women are sex objects... This evidence is overwhelming, why are you resistant considering this mounting evidence?" Continuing his monologue, the teacher argued: "You have been duped to think that is natural when you were kids, before you created defenses... It damages not only females in this room but men too. You have men and women with low self-esteem because of this shit." Michael's statements during the *Cosmopolitan* debate revealed his protectionist stance.

The contradiction I could see in Michael and Rosey's actions is that, although the teachers noted that there can be different interpretations of media texts, they appeared to be concerned that young people might have "wrong" interpretations. This contradiction was especially strong in the case of Michael, who was getting visibly irritated when students did not accept his interpretations. From my position as a media scholar and as a media literacy educator, I saw how during these conversations nuances of media representations and audiences' interpretations were lost.



Pic. 5 – *Cosmopolitan* cover that Michael used in his class.

Gender Binary and Intersectionality

Observing Michael's and Rosey's classes I never saw them talking with students about intersectionality or gender binary. Race was discussed on several occasions. For example, during the heated debate about the *Cosmopolitan*, Michael pointed out that most celebrities featured on its covers are White. When Rosey was analyzing *Toy Story*, she argued that the representation of Mr. Potato Head is racist: he had dark skin and he was shown robbing a bank, which, in her interpretation, reinforced the idea that dark-skinned people are often criminals. During the discussion about Pocahontas, race was mentioned as the teachers compared representations of White settlers and Native Americans. Although Michael and Rosey talked about race, they did not discuss how it intersects with gender and other axes of identity.

Sexuality was also mentioned in West Cityville High School classes that I observed. The biggest discussion that I witnessed took place during the screening of

Pocahontas. That week Michael was upset because of the bullying the transgender student was experiencing in the school. During the screening, Michael suddenly pointed out that there is no homosexual romance in this film. He argued that it was wrong because LGBT individuals do not see themselves represented in Disney movies. This sparked a discussion because most students did not agree that homosexual romance should be included in children's media. As in the case of race, sexuality was discussed in general but not in connection with other identity aspects.

There is a danger that, when teachers discuss media representations of gender in the classroom, they might inadvertently reinforce gender binary simply by talking about “men” as opposed to “women” in the media as two separate groups. It is true that it is practically impossible to discuss gender and the media without naming these categories. Men and women *are* represented as separate groups. However, during such discussions it is important to note the constructed nature of gender (Butler, 1990). As far as I know, Michael and Rosey never talked with students about gender binary. One time I observed Michael telling students that gender is social while sex is biological—a statement that, according to Butler, reinforces gender binary instead of disrupting it. Michael and Rosey also never discussed intersectionality, and focused simply on how women in general are portrayed as weak while men in general are shown as dominant. Loren, Bradley, Peter and Julie also never mentioned anything about intersectionality and gender binary during our conversations.

I argue that one activity in Rosey's class was especially problematic in terms of reinforcing gender binary. It consisted in journaling about a statement “Boys are better than girls” in the beginning of the quarter. Upon examining students portfolios, I found

eights entries that answered this question. Most students chose a neutral approach, stating that “even though boys might be better than girls in some things, girls are better than boys in some things too,” and that “boys and girls are better at different things.” But these egalitarian statements sometimes were followed by such elaborations as: “I think boys are better than girls at sports and lifting things... Boys don’t whine about things but girls have a tendency of doing it.” A few students chose to prove that one of these two groups is indeed better than the other. Not surprisingly, students advocated for their own gender. Anna wrote: “Boys AREN’T better than girls... Boys sweat a lot, smell, and just play sports... Though we need both man & woman [sic] woman [sic] do more and equally do what guys do and better [sic] ” (Emphasis in original). And Ron wrote: “Boys are better than girls because [boys] are naturally stronger than girls, and become stronger as to [sic] girls muscle growth has limits. Boys on average... grow taller.” None of the students wrote something along the lines of all boys and all girls being different. The students compared boys and girls as two distinct groups, which to me signaled that the assignments reinforced gender binary instead of questioning it.

Although the six teachers I worked with were all passionate about issues of gender, none of them had a background in gender studies. This might explain why they did not talk to students about intersectionality and gender as a continuum. I argue that, in order to make sure that gender and media classes do not reinforce stereotypes while attempting to combat them, it is necessary that instructors who teach them get a training in gender theory.

The AACRA Model in the Classroom

In the previous chapter I argued that it is not easy for teachers to include all elements of the AACRA model into media literacy education classes. Media analysis is often prioritized because it is easy to do, and because it is a widely-accepted way to help students learn about media texts. I noted a similar tendency in West Cityville High School classes. Picking apart *Toy Story* and *Pocahontas* were the key activities during the units I observed. The Hacked Ads exercise also included elements of media analysis.

Media literacy scholars note the value of the inquiry-based method for developing students' critical thinking skills and critical autonomy (Hobbs, 1998). Teachers are advised to not simply provide students with interpretations, but to also ask questions about media texts, and to discuss answers even if they go against teachers' opinions. Michael and Rosey were not familiar with the media literacy education approach, and that is perhaps why they did not use the inquiry-based method. Although they did occasionally ask questions, it was for the purpose of steering students to particular interpretations. The teachers produced oppositional readings (Hall, 1980) of media texts that they discussed in the classroom. However, simply trying to persuade students to reject the dominant reading might not be enough to help them develop critical thinking skills.

I did not observe Michael and Rosey engaging students in activities that would develop their Access skills. Although the teachers had students read some short texts, this activity was not structured to enhance reading comprehension. Students simply took turns to read texts aloud, and then moved to a different activity. Some Access activities might have taken place when I was not in class. For example, after viewing *Pocahontas*

students were supposed to write an essay about it on school computers. Thus, I do not exclude a possibility that students did practice Access skills.

The Hacked Ads exercise can be interpreted as developing Create competencies: students produced collages using popular magazines for men and women. The way the exercise was structured implied that this was another way of having young people analyze media texts. Before creating a collage students needed to fill in a printout that included a list of questions, for instance: “What does this image seem to say is valued in the world?” and “What could you conclude about the world based on this image?”

Reflection was also not very prominent in Michael’s and Rosey’s classes. The teachers on several occasions pointed out that young people are affected by the media. Yet, I did not see them asking students to reflect on their relationships with media texts. I found some elements of reflection in students’ journals. For example, when the classes were watching *Toy Story*, Michael and Rosey asked students to write how the critical lenses changed their view of this film, and of the world in general.

Act competencies also were practically not discussed. The teachers told me that the critical lenses empower students, yet they described this as a personal liberation and not as a process of using one’s power to make the world a better place. Although Michael and Rosey themselves engaged in social action by teaching the classes on critical theory, I did not see them talk about the importance of social action with their students.

Loren, Julie, Peter and Bradley also used many media analysis activities in their classrooms. Julie had her students deconstruct a variety of short videos and print texts. She used three different deconstruction techniques: critical discourse analysis, visual analysis, and key questions of media literacy education (Key Questions to Ask, 2007).

Julie stressed that she asked students to deconstruct texts and not to share their personal opinions about issues discussed in them: “This is not about opinion, this is grounding your response in the text. Find it in the text.” Loren had her students look at such media texts as commercials, films, newspapers, YouTube videos, etc. For example, she showed them an episode from *I Love Lucy* where Lucy and her husband switch jobs, and had students find problematic gender representations. Then she showed them an episode from *Friends* (*One without a Poker*), and asked whether representations of men and women have changed over time. Peter spent much time discussing advertising “because students are exposed to it so much.” For example, Peter showed students ads from the Got Milk campaign. The class discussed why many women were in a revealing attire and assumed a sexy poses, while men “are just there” – acting natural.

To model deconstruction of media representations of gender, all four additional teachers screened media literacy documentaries. Bradley showed students such videos as *Tough Guise*, *Hip Hop beyond Bits and Rhymes*, *Killing Us Softly*, *Consuming Kids* and *Dreamworlds*. Peter had students watch parts of *Killing me Softly* and *Miss Representation*. Some teachers also used educational materials that come with the documentaries. Before watching *Tough Guise*, both Loren and Bradley drew a box on the board and invited students to put words and phrases that describe “real man” in the box and those that describe men who are not seen as “real” outside of it. Then they discussed why people see masculinity in a certain way, and what role the media play in these perceptions.

During my conversations with Loren, Peter, Bradley and Julie, none of the teachers talked about developing students’ Access, Reflect, Create and Act competencies.

Although their students might have done some minor activities that fell under these rubrics, the emphasis was on media analysis.

These findings are in line with the results of analyzing media and gender educational materials discussed in the previous chapter. In classes where media representations of gender are discussed, media analysis is often prioritized. I argue that, although this strategy is understandable, in order to make media and gender classes more balanced it is important to have students practice all the five competencies of the AACRA model.

Teachers on Students' Reactions

One of my key questions was: How do teachers perceive students' resistance and deal with it? Michael and Rosey told me that, in their opinion, most students were enthusiastic about critical theory and they learned it with ease. For instance, Michael said: "Once they start to apply it, half the students are starting to get it now, they are starting to see what the goal is, that it is to uncover these sort of hidden messages." For Michael, one of the main reasons students were so eager to use critical theory was that it gave them a feeling of empowerment. In his opinion, applying these lenses, they felt special, they felt like they have what others do not. Even when students were not agreeing with him, he sometimes did not perceive their actions as resistance. For instance, this is what he told me the day after the *Cosmopolitan* debate: "I saw recognition in eyes of students who were arguing yesterday." In his interpretation, "they all laughed... but to me, the reason they laughed is cause it struck a chord with them."

When I asked Michael about resistant students, he said that he seldom came across them: "If I had to put it in terms of numbers, that's like one out of a hundred, that

I'm gonna have such hard opposition that I feel at the end of the day that I didn't reach that kid." Based on Michael's words, I assume that he saw only open resistance as resistance: "They are saying: 'Oh, you are grasping a straw, you are making a big case out of something that isn't really there.' And that tends to be the majority of the kind of resistance that I've encountered." As for the reasons of resistance, Michael believed that "kids sometimes are just gonna be oppositional," and thus they argue "about every little thing," while others are "intimidated by the information. They are intimidated by the methodology, the vocabulary. It all seems foreign to them." Michael explained students' resistance during the *Cosmopolitan* debate by the fact that some young people "just wanna be right about something... they just want the recognition that they can be right sometimes." When I asked Michael whether he thought that students might be resistant in subtle ways, he replied:

The cool thing about critical theory, I think, is that it's really hard to BS your understanding of it. Like, I think you are instantly exposed as a fraud once you start talking about critical theory if you don't know what it is.

Therefore, it appears that Michael saw three possible reactions from students. Either students understood critical theory and enjoyed using it (the majority), or they openly resisted the teacher's message, or pretended that they understood—presumably to get a better grade.

Like Michael, Rosey also believed that most students were immediately affected by critical theory and excited about the critical lenses: "Usually they are blown away that they haven't seen these things before. Like, you start pointing [these things] out, and then they start recognizing them on their own, almost instantly." She told me that boys are usually more resistant than girls:

I think some of the boys, it's hard for them to deal with it, because... they think, the way that we are kind of, like, debunking... and I think for them it feels like we are telling them, "The way you are thinking is wrong. The way you've always been thinking is wrong."

Rosey's way of dealing with this resistance was to offer students more evidence:

"I know that they see the examples... but I think... they need to see it in more places until they almost believe me or believe that it's something that's real." Rosey also told me that "it's really important to be super patient with them because it's almost not their fault that they are ignorant to all these other ways of thought... they are not exposed to a ton of stuff. It's their [West Cityville] bubble." Similar to Michael, Rosey claimed that she could always recognize students' resistance. She told me that when students did not understand critical theory, it showed in their reactions and actions, "because I think they are aggravated or they feel kind of out of the loop when they don't get it."

Julie told me that she encountered a variety of reactions from students – from excitement and acceptance to resistance and negativity. She did not think that the majority of students agreed with her message. On the contrary, she told me about substantial resistance, especially from male athletes, she had to deal with. Julie described it as "a constant collective voice that was trying to undermine me."

It's side conversations, it's small laughter in the back of the classroom, it's a dramatic clearing of the voice before speaking about a subject, it's social cues that go on. No one would actually come out and say, "This is bullshit."

However, she did mention one student who was so irritated by the class that he left in the middle of a discussion about feminism.

Loren told me that reactions differed not only from person to person, but also from class to class. For example, even though girls usually seemed more interested in the topic than boys, the year before the interview one of the groups she was teaching became

really engaged and asked her to have more discussions on how men are represented in the media. In Loren's perception, boys were often more resistant than girls: "I think it's because... it [is] making them feel bad about themselves and maybe their own sense of identity. I try to be very careful with that, and I don't wanna just... show men as misogynist." In order not to alienate male students during these discussions, Loren tried "to not let the boys start to feel bad about themselves and not make it about them but about the culture that they live in." However, girls could be resistant as well. For example, during a discussion about Miley Cyrus, both male and female students did not want to be critical of her because they grew up with *Hanna Montana*. Loren told me that when she encountered resistance, her approach was to deal with it gently. For example, in the case of Miley Cyrus, she invited students to think about the singer's career and about her motivations. If students started suggesting that models in sexist ads chose to be photographed this way, Loren used this reaction to talk about the way media messages are created. Although Loren experienced some resistance from students, she believed that most students eventually accepted her message.

These kids go home and talk about it with their parents, and they teach their parents things when they are watching TV... I think they like it cause they are really learning something new about something that they've always had in their lives, and I think they find that exciting.

In Peter's experience, boys were less engaged during classes on media and gender. Female students, on the other hand, could have strong reactions: "Sometimes the girls do get mad. And the boys are completely ambivalent cause they have, like, 'Oh, she is hot' kind of response for things." Although some girls got angry and showed what Peter described as a "feminist fist," many female students remained indifferent to these discussions. They liked fashion magazines, they wanted to be like the girls on their

covers. There were also a few boys who understood how objectification of women happens and were against it. Students who were interested in the discussion often had “the realization that women are indeed being displayed in a certain fashion compared to men for the exact same product.” For many students it was a revelation. When I asked Peter how he knew that students were getting his message, he told me that he saw the level of their understanding in page-long responses that students needed to write. Class behavior was also a good indicator for Peter. At the same time, he pointed out that students’ reactions can be deceiving and one should look at subtle cues in order to understand them.

Bradley argued that his classes on media and gender were a revelation for many young people: “It’s like an eye opener. I can see it in their faces.” When they watched such documentaries as *Tough Guise* and *Hip Hop beyond Bits and Rhymes* “kids love that... it’s definitely like putting a mirror to themselves. You know, why are you acting the way you are acting? Is it resembling any of this stuff? Lots of times, it is.” At the same time, “some kids completely disagree. And that’s OK, that’s welcomed in class. I encourage it. Like, you don’t have to agree with this, but you just have to present the argument [showing] that you understand [the idea].” According to Bradley, students were more resistant in the beginning of the school year. When they discussed what it means to be a man, male students did so with swagger as they wanted to look cool. However, Bradley told me that male students “buy in early.” Bradley often observed a spike of resistance when the class got to a unit on advertisement: “Because it’s hard for kids to believe that when they are buying [something] that’s coming from some influence.” Bradley believed that he could always see when students were getting his message: “I can

see it. Like, in their faces... Like, the seriousness of it, when they focus. I can tell when they are seeing themselves.” He argued that sometimes students put on a mask and pretend to be someone they are not (especially boys) but he did not believe that students say things that he wanted to hear: “I think it’s genuine, for the most part.” In general, Bradley saw a lot of positive changes in students’ behavior. He quoted students telling things like: “Oh, [Mr. Bradley], I won’t look at television the same way again,” and “I was talking to my mom, and she was getting mad at me... ‘Stop! I wanna watch that movie!’” This last quote shows that Bradley’s students shared what they learned in class with their friends and parents.

The six teachers I talked to had different perspectives on students’ resistance. Michael and Rosey were optimistic, seeing it as an exception. According to Julie and Peter, many young people rejected their message. Most teachers argued that, even though students resist in the beginning, after a while their reactions change. Some, for example Rosey, Michael and Bradley, pointed out that students’ reactions are easy to interpret, while Peter argued that it is not often clear what young people have on their minds.

Conclusion

I analyzed the teachers’ practices from the point of view of a media literacy educator and a media scholar. This position gave me an advantage but also created certain biases. For example, forgetting that the teachers I worked with introduced discussions about media and gender on their own initiative, I sometimes judged their actions too harshly. It is important to remember that not only media and gender classes, but also media literacy classes in general are not a standard part of a school program. There is no uniformly accepted way to teach them, so those who choose to do so draw on

their diverse backgrounds and experiences. Public school teachers have to deal with everyday pressures of the rigid school system, with constraints of a curriculum and standardized testing. Some teachers go above and beyond what they need to do to talk to students about issues they deem important.

It is not surprising that teachers who talk with students about media and gender are deeply committed to the idea to help students understand how the media affect their gender identities. They are passionate about the fight against gender inequalities, and they believe that media texts play a role in reinforcing harmful ideologies. So if these teachers lean towards the protectionist approach, it might be exactly because of how enthusiastic they are about issues of media and gender.

Because many of these teachers are self-taught in terms of media representations of gender, they might not know all the nuances of media literacy education, or about intersectionality and gender binary. Due to their background, and to the constraints and pressures they experience, these teachers might prefer to focus on media analysis. It is important to develop professional development programs that would help these teachers fill in gaps in their knowledge about media literacy, feminist theory, gender studies and scholarship on media representations of gender.

It is also important to note that, although the teachers perceived media representations of gender as ideological, they did not describe them as hegemonic. They focused on the negative effects of media texts and said little to nothing about active audiences. I argue that, in order to help young people understand their relationship with media representations of gender, teachers should acknowledge the agentic nature of audiences and co-option that takes place despite this agency.

Because these teachers are so passionate about media and gender classes, it is possible that their perceptions of students' reactions are biased. For example, teachers might downplay instances of students' resistance because it is so important for them to see that their approach works. In the next chapter I discuss my finding about students' actions in the classroom, and their opinions about media and gender. These findings help us see the big picture of what works in high school classes where media representations of gender are discussed.

CHAPTER 7

STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS AND REACTIONS TO CLASSES

In this chapter I discuss what I learned about students' reactions to classes that I observed in West Cityville High School. I contextualize these findings through interviews with students who were not taking Michael's and Rosey's classes during my field work.

Personalities and Backgrounds

Some students from Michael's and Rosey's classes had already been exposed to information about media and gender—through family, friends, and other teachers—because they liked exploring these issues on their own.

Elizaveta: Do you talk about that with your parents, with your other teachers?

Tilda: Friends, mostly.

Elizaveta: But where did you learn that initially?

Tilda: I like reading things. I read things all the time, articles about this, and about that... and it's just like, you gotta think, you gotta think for yourself, or you are just not gonna learn.

Marcos told me: "The type of people I hang out with gets me thinking. I don't hang out with people who don't think. We might act crazy and ridiculous sometimes but we think, we get each other going." Victoria, a self-proclaimed feminist, described her background this way: "I was born and raised a feminist so I've been around that stuff. So hearing this [about the critical theory] is kind of like a review to me." Dan also said that his family had encouraged him to pick apart media representations: "When we sit down and watch movies, they'd be like, 'You know, I've never understood why they always portray a certain character this way.'"

Anna was probably the most active student in Rosey's class. When they were still watching *Toy Story*, she told me: "It's not new [to me], but it was kind of like new to me how much it was in childhood [sic] movies." Soon after the class started she found and showed Rosey "Like a Girl" commercial by Always (later Rosey showed it to the whole class). The amount of things Anna noticed thanks to the class amazed her. She now was more alert to gender stereotypes not only in media texts, but also outside of them:

It started popping into my eyes a lot. It's kind of crazy cause... You know, the shirt she [Rosey] is wearing today? It says "I love you" on it and my shirt has a heart on it, and it says "Steal my heart." ...It would be weird for a guy to wear this... because women are known for love and that seems like what we are raised to be wanting in life. Guys, they want it too, but it is not as much as we are taught.

To students like Anna the critical theory classes provided an opportunity to better see things they had always suspected, or articulate ideas that they had crossed their minds before.

Dan: I've always thought like that, like I've always noticed that kind of stuff but I've never known there was like an actual theory behind it. And once I found this out I was like – oh, wow, that's pretty cool!

Another factor that made some students open to discussions about media and gender was their experience with gender inequalities. Female students told me stories of how they learned that being a woman can put one in a disadvantageous position. Two girls shared that they were not able to join sports team of their school because of gender stereotypes. Sonia's said: "I wanted to do football, and when I tried out, the coach is like, 'Oh, you are a girl and we don't want you to get hurt.'" And I was like, 'I know how to play football!'" Lara had a similar story to tell: "I have always wanted to play football and when I asked to play football... they told me 'no' because I am a girl." Lara connected her experience to media representations of gender: "If you think about it, [in]

every movie the boys are always playing football, all the time.” Both Lara and Sonia had firsthand experience with the negative effects of gender stereotypes. That is probably why, when the critical theory classes started, they were all ears. Megan, a student outside of the case study, talked about her experience with double standards of gender:

I understand that clothing should be school appropriate but I can't wear half of the things that are in my closet because they either [are] showing a shoulder, or... my shorts are too short. And I just think it is unacceptable because you are teaching guys that women need to respect them, but in all reality men need to respect women.

This example shows that some students both within and outside the case study were predisposed to be interested in issues of media and gender due to their life experiences.

Some enjoyed media and gender classes because the teachers' message made sense to them. Robin was among those who really got into the critical lenses. He told me: “I never really thought about that stuff before [Rosey] handed us the paper [the summary of the critical lenses] and told us to watch *Toy Story*. Literally the minute that the movie started I noticed stuff going on.” Robin's family background might explain his reaction: “My parents don't usually talk about [gender equality]. But after we started watching *Toy Story* I would tell my parents what stuff is going on, what we are doing in class, and when I would tell them that... they would realize and they would be like, “Wow!”... [They] never really noticed that until I told them.” In case of this student, it was his open-mindedness—which seemed to run in the family—that made him so excited. Incidentally, Robin was the only male student who named a woman as his favorite character during our interview – Crazy Eyes from the Netflix show *Orange is the New Black*.

Students' background explained not only their receptiveness but also resistance and/or indifference. One of Michael's students named Steve talked back to all teachers,

was aggressive with students, and often visited the Principal's office. One day Michael told me that he had found out Steve's story. Steve used to live in a poor neighborhood and go to a school with a violent culture where he had to fight a lot to get by. Finally, Steve's mother sent him to live with her ex-husband in West Cityville. The boy was struggling to adjust to the new school. He was also not happy in his new home; he missed his mother but at the same time was angry with her for sending him away. It later turned out that, although Steve was resisting Michael in class, he actually enjoyed critical theory and understood the teachers' message well.

In her class Rosey had two students who often argued with her about the value of feminism—Roger and Kevin. Rosey was surprised by Roger's attitude because she knew that his mother was an active strong woman. During the interview, Roger described his mother as a feminist "cause she usually stands up for women's rights whenever she has a chance." Apparently, his mother did not prepare him for discussions about gender because she thought that he was too young for that.

Roger: I told my mom [about the critical lenses] and then she was like, "I hope it did not ruin it [*Toy Story*] for you, cause, like..." She said it, like, joking but I don't know... she was just, like, "Oh I hope it didn't ruin it for you cause that's an important part of your childhood, and that's important to me, so..."

Kevin's situation was different. His mother might have talked to him about women's rights but he did not listen to her because of their complicated relationship. During one of the journaling activities Kevin told the class that his stepfather sometimes stole his things, but the boy's mother took the stepfather's side. Like Roger, Kevin said that his mother was probably a feminist: "She actually wants to talk about it [the critical theory] to one of the teachers [she works with]... she was like, she kept talking about it..."

I kind of never listen to her...” (Emphasis added). His last remark might suggest that Kevin was angry with his mother for betraying him, and his way of dealing with this situation was to detach from her, and ignore her opinions.

Some resistant students simply liked arguing:

Kevin: I don’t agree with everything, but... I like arguing.

Roger: Yeah...

Elizaveta: You like arguing with people?

Kevin: I don’t know, I just...

Roger: Yeah, same with me...

Kevin: I always argue with people, always find a way to argue with people. I don’t know... I always do that.

Rodrigo, a resistant student from Michael’s class, told me that he did not mind annoying the teacher with his comments. He just wanted to say what he thought. Young people who, unlike Rodrigo, Kevin and Roger, were shy and did not want any confrontation, might have kept silent even if they disagreed with some of the teachers’ statements.

Students might not relate to teachers’ messages about gender equality because of their privileged position. Roger and Kevin told me that they were not very interested in feminism, which might be explained by their male privilege. In contrast, Melissa from Rosey’s class occupied an advantageous position thanks to her popularity, her good-looking boyfriend, and her race (Caucasian). Melissa fitted hegemonic constructions of female beauty, and she clearly knew that people considered her beautiful. She mentioned that people often told her that she should become a model. For this girl, the benefits of fitting within hegemonic standards of femininity outweighed the drawbacks of sexism.

Thus, young people’s personalities and their backgrounds play a role in determining the way in which they react to media and gender classes. If the teachers’ message resonates with students’ preconceived notions, they will be excited to learn

more. If this message clashes with what young people know, it can make them angry. If students do not care about teachers' values, they might be resistant and/or indifferent.

Performing Gender

One of the most striking difference between boys and girls during the interviews (both within focus groups and outside of them) was that the latter named male and female characters as their favorite ones in equal measure while boys named only male characters, with the notable exception of Robin. To the question of why he chose a male favorite character instead of a female one, one boy said: "I am a guy. So I would not say I like Dora the Explorer."

Female students who chose female characters often pointed out that these women are not stereotypical. Sonia introduced her choice this way: "I like Katniss from *The Hunger Games*, mainly because she put herself in a dangerous position to save her family." Dina described Triss from *Divergent*: "She is the main character in the book. She is actually pretty cool. Like, she is brave and she is not afraid to fight for her fraction, she is not afraid to say what's on her mind, basically." I observed the same tendency outside of the focus group. One student outside of the case study, Christi, said: "I like Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter*, cause she is, like, a girl but she is not, like, the damsel in distress, she is, like, a leading heroine... She knows how to do everything, so she is kind of like in charge."

While girls admired positive qualities associated with masculinity—strength, bravery, determination—boys made sure to reject anything that would make them look feminine, or would undermine their heterosexuality. During the Hacked Ads exercise, Stan decided that it would be a good idea to add a picture of "a really ugly guy" to his

collage. Flipping through a magazine, he pointed out at one man in the picture and said: “Maybe him.” As this person did not look “really ugly” to me, I asked Stan: “Is he ugly?” Stan seemed fazed for a second. “I don’t know. You should know, a girl should know better,” – he said and proceeded flipping through the pages. In another instance, Ross was reading anonymous compliments that he received as part of a Compliment Exercise in Rosey’s class. “My compliment: ‘You give good hugs’,” – he read out loud, and then quickly added: “I hope a girl said that.” Rosey suggested: “If a boy wrote that, it is fine too.” To what Ross replied: “It would be weird.”

Students also performed gender through their appearances. There were not many female students who tried to conform to standards of emphasized femininity. Girls often wore baggy clothes, sweatpants and sportswear. Melissa was a notable exception. Some girls occasionally wore light make-up and had pink or sparkly pieces of clothing. On several occasions I saw female students dressed as cheerleaders. Boys, on the other hand, often donned sportswear – sometimes it was uniform of the schools’ football team. John once came to class in a T-shirt featuring a woman in a sexualized pose. Steve donned attributes of “cool pose” Black masculinity (Majors, 1993). He had sparkly ear-studs in both ears, wore a large sign on his chest that said “Steve Skillz,” and once came to the class wearing a hoodie. I spotted a couple more boys with ear studs, and one boy who wore black nail polish. Several students appeared more or less gender non-conforming (I am using this terms very broadly here). One female student (Stefani) told me during the focus groups that she is gay and wants people to call her Max. Tilda had androgynous looks, and she wore a rainbow button on her backpack. Victoria looked so much like a boy that before I talked to her I was not sure what her gender was.

In general, the tendency I saw was that girls allowed themselves to move away from emphasized femininity further than boys from hegemonic masculinity. Girls did not mind praising and donning attributes traditionally associated with masculinity, while boys shunned things that would make them seem feminine or put their heterosexuality in question.

Reactions to the Classes

Because of students' different backgrounds, personalities, and preferences, young people's reactions to the classes varied. Students like Robin and Anna were excited, active during discussions, and engaged while working on assignments. Students like Kevin, Roger or Rodrigo participated in class discussions but often questioned the teachers' messages and interpretations. There were also many students who were moderately active during classes, but during focus groups revealed a deep interest in and understanding of the issues discussed in class. Finally, there were students who were not particularly active in class, and did not show much interest in, or understanding of, class materials. In this section I also address the reactions of students who took Michael and Rosey's classes one or two years ago. The majority of these students were still excited about the critical lenses, although a few had forgotten about them.

Learning from the Classes

Students pointed out that the classes taught by Rosey and Michael were enjoyable, and different from other courses. Victoria from the case study described it this way:

In this class, I forget that I'm in class sometimes, I'm actually engaged in learning in almost every class [meeting]. I walk out of the class with more knowledge than I had walking in there and I can't say that about any other of my classes.

Dan commented: “Critical lenses is something we can actually apply to our life, as of now, and it can change us for the better in the future. Like, Math isn’t gonna change me for the better in the future.” Students outside of the case study had similar reactions. For instance, Sherri described the critical theory class as “one of the classes I learned the most in.” Mary was so excited about the critical lenses that she even re-watched some movies she had seen before “just so that I could just figure out what lens it would be and stuff, it was kind of awesome.”

Some students told me that what they were learning about the hidden layers of meaning in media texts was a revelation for them. Diana from the case study said: “I’m a Disney nerd, I watch Disney like every day, but I still, up until [we watched *Toy Story* with Michael] I did not notice any of that.” Kathy described her experience: “Like, I noticed it before a little bit, but like not as much as like we are learning now.” And Pam outside of the case study shared: “Like, if I watched *Toy Story* before I never would have picked out all the things... I didn’t see it that way. I was, like, ‘Wow, I didn’t realize that.’” Other young people claimed that, even though they had noticed gender stereotypes in the media before, they had not paid too much attention to them until the class started. Ian said: “I’ve always kind of noticed, but it’s never really, I’ve never really thought about it. It never really mattered to me.” Lane, who had also thought about gender representations, noted that in the class “you learn a lot more. [Michael] got my attention.” For these students the class provided vocabulary and theoretical base to better understand media representations. In words of Stephanie/Max: “I see it like the same but I didn’t know that there is like a term for it. ‘Stereotype’, and, like, ‘Marxist’ and stuff...”

Students told me that critical theory had a big impact on the way they consume media texts. Diana said: “And then, like, we talked about it in class, and I can’t watch it anymore without thinking, ‘Oh my god, that’s what they... that’s what they mean in this scene!’” Students could not “unsee” things that the critical lenses allowed them to notice:

Devin: I cannot watch TV anymore, I am noticing it... Like, I was watching some show and some girl couldn’t do a pull up, and this guy came, [and the girl said] “I need help”, and he basically lifted her up for her. She could not do it and the guy had to come. You just can’t watch TV without thinking about it now...

My discussions with students who had had Michael or Rosey as teachers one of two years ago showed that these classes had a long-lasting effect. Young people remembered such concepts as “token character,” “Smurfette effect” (“it is always the girl, always with a group of guys”) and “Bechdel test” (“if two female characters are discussing something, other than men, or their relationship to men, then it passes the test”). Some noted that the effect the classes had was the strongest during the first year. For instance, Derek said: “I remember like looking at it completely differently, and for the whole next year any time I watched TV I just was like, ‘Wow, these lenses are popping up everywhere.’” And Cindy shared: “It was stronger last year because the subject was, like, extremely prominent... I still look at things differently to this day...”

Many students, both male and female, told me that gender and feminist lenses were the ones they remembered and understood the best. Andrea said: “I usually look at like feminist and the Marxist because in lots of movies... they focus on, like, gender and power.” When I asked Devin which lens he liked most, the boy answered: “Gender criticism. I think that it’s more interesting because after watching all the movies and stuff, like, [I see that] people actually do make it seem like girls are weak... And that’s not

right, at all.” And Dan said: “There’s many different [lenses]... The one I really connected to, though, is feminism... cause I feel like that’s what we talked about the most.” Students outside of the case study had similar reactions. Sara said: “I think there was, like, a feminist [lens]... So we could relate because we are girls.” Sherri recalled: “We went over a lot of gender stuff with [Rosey].” Derek said: “If I had to choose one lens, it’d be feminism.” And Mary agreed: “I would have to go along with what they are saying, like, feminist lens mostly.”

A number of students gave specific examples of things they noticed using the critical lenses outside of the class. Devin talked about the TV show *Walking Dead*:

Everybody [needs to] know how to shoot a gun because all the zombies are going after you, so... you, like, have to. But then the guys just don’t realize that the girls have to, like, shoot them too but then they always keep saying, “No, it’s too dangerous for you,” or something. Why is it too dangerous?

In his commentary about the same show, Robin talked about gender and race:

There is this one African-American character, and it’s a girl, and she’s very violent. Like, she’ll chop the heads off, and it’s stereotyping that African-American people are very violent. And then the main character is a White man. He is taking charge, telling everyone what to do. He always, like, saves everyone.

Cindy outside of the case study gave an example from a health insurance commercial: “A [woman] would be talking, and while she’s talking she’ll be, like, folding clothes or taking care of a little kid or something. But if a male was talking about his experience... he’ll be just standing there, well-dressed...” And Derek talked about a food commercial: “The guy was, like, teaching the yoga class and guys are, like, ‘Oh what are you doing? You are not acting like yourself!’ [They] feed him food and he is, like, this buff football player again.”

In a number of cases, the classes affected not only students' perceptions, but also their actions. Although in the beginning of the quarter Jessica had some doubts about Rosey's class ("At first I was I kind of like: 'No, that's... just how you view it'"), her perceptions gradually changed ("oh, wow, that's true") and then she started advocating against sexism: "I'm quick with that now... a few of my friends, they'll like make comments about things, and I'll be like, that's so sexist..." Jessica was not the only one who shared her revelations with others. I already mentioned Robin who was so excited about the critical lenses that he told his parents about them. Students outside of the case study had similar stories.

Elizaveta: Did you, since you discovered all these critical lenses, try talking to your friends or your family about that?

Sara: I brought it up with my family. Made them watch the movie...

Pam: I brought it up with my family a couple of times, because it was just, like, kind of a shocking thing, or surprising. That something can be that out in the open and you never realize it, it just goes over your head.

Derek told how the knowledge about gender stereotypes that he gained in the critical theory class empowered him to advocate for gender equality:

My stepdad would be, like, "Oh, I don't cook," and I'd be like, "Why, is that, like, a female's role?.." I am, like, "This is what you thought, this is what you wanted to think but it's not the truth..." I say, like, all the time.... It's, like, kind of a joke, no not really a joke but, like, I'd throw it out there all the time, but it's, it's like... I use it on my friends, I say it to my family—like, everybody.

At the same time, not all students used this knowledge for social action, even if they felt that change was necessary. For example, when Steve was talking of how the media negatively affect children, he gave an example of his little brother: "He's playing with my stepmother's friend, he's kicking her, and.... 'She is a girl,' like, he thinks, 'She can't...' And I can see it in him, like, he thinks, 'Ok, she is a girl, she can't fight.'"

However, when I asked Steve whether he had tried talking to his little brother about gender stereotypes, the boy shook his head.

My observations in the classroom showed that at least for some students the critical lenses were confusing. When the teachers started screening *Pocahontas*, I heard several young people asking them to explain again what different lenses stood for. My discussions with students showed that even the most outspoken of them focused on four critical lenses out of the six that Michael and Rosey discussed in class. A few students from the case study said that they did not try using the critical lenses outside of the class:

Vicki: I don't really pay attention to that kind of stuff... I really didn't notice... Like, during the class I like notice things but then, like, if I'm watching TV I don't really pay attention.

Elizaveta: What about you?

John: I don't, like, notice it unless I'm looking for it. Like, I'm watching TV, I won't think about any of that unless I am purposely looking for stuff, to, like, criticize.

Although the majority of students—seven out of eleven—who had already taken Michael's and Rosey's classes still remembered many details about the critical lenses, the rest could not recall much. Aaron said about the critical theory class that they “covered a little bit of it,” although then it turned out that they analyzed films (one of them was *Toy Story*) and commercials. Frankie and Helen also did not remember much.

Frankie: I took it sophomore year. I think we talked a little bit about that. Can't remember...

Elizaveta: So you don't remember whether he talked about gender?

Frankie: The lenses?

Elizaveta: Yeah, this thing. He talks about gender a lot. I was curious whether that...

Frankie: Is that where we had to watch something, then write about it through a different lens?

Helen: Oh yeah, I did that in his class two years ago, yeah. I don't think it was really gender specific, though.

I argued earlier that students who were predisposed to be interested in issues of gender liked the critical theory classes. Frankie was an exception to this rule. She was knowledgeable about gender and sexuality: “I’ve researched a lot about... I have a lot of friends who are in minorities, like, sexuality... and I am not straight, so learning about all this stuff and different things opens your mind.” Yet, for some reason, the class she took with Michael was not prominent in her memory. Although Helen took Michael’s class and knew about gender stereotypes, one of her remarks indicated a gap in her knowledge. Describing a TV show, she said: “They are, like, stranded on an island, so it’s not like she can be the stereotypical girl who, like, curls her hair and wears a bunch of makeup, because they don’t have any of that stuff.” This description indicated that Helen had a simplified understanding of gender stereotypes in the media.

Overall, students enjoyed the classes taught by Michael and Rosey and were positively affected by them. For many, the critical lenses were a revelation. Even if some young people had noticed certain stereotypes before, the teachers helped them to analyze them in a more systematic way. For many students gender and feminist lenses were especially prominent, and young people were able to name specific examples from media texts they consumed outside of the class. Importantly, some students told of how they engaged in social action using their knowledge about gender stereotypes to educate others. At the same time, a few students were not affected by the classes in a similar way: they did not understand the critical lenses well enough, and did not try using them outside of the class.

Classroom Activities

In this section I focus more specifically on students' reactions to three main class activities: watching *Toy Story* and *Pocahontas*, and the Hacked Ads exercise.

Many students were excited when Michael and Rosey pointed out things in *Toy Story* that young people had not noticed before. After the class they saw the film with new eyes.

Brian: I didn't really notice it in, like, *Toy Story* until [Michael] actually played it, and pointed it out. And that's when I realized. Before that I was just watching a movie and that was pretty much... I didn't know that there was, like, anything behind it.

Even students who took the class one or two years ago still remembered many details about analyzing *Toy Story*. Sara said: "Like in *Toy Story*... what's her name? Bo Peep. She's like the damsel in distress. So it was like... why can't she be like the one that's above the guy? Why is the guy always saving her?" At the same time, reactions were mixed. Some students who watched *Toy Story* as kids were not particularly happy when the teachers picked apart their favorite text revealing its flaws.

Rodrigo: Yeah, it was hard for me during the *Toy Story*. Cause I love that movie.

Elizaveta: How did you feel when [Michael] was tearing it apart?

Rodrigo: It made me sad.

Elizaveta: Why do you think it made you sad?

Rodrigo: Cause it made me see things in *Toy Story* I never noticed before. So, I don't know... it made it feel different.

Students were amazed and incredulous when they learned about jokes in *Toy Story* that were targeting adults. In almost every focus group students mentioned the scene where Bo Peep seductively tells Woody that she will get somebody else to watch the sheep that night. Many also mentioned the "hooker," one of the toys cannibalized by Sid (See Pic. 6). Students who took the class a while back remembered these details too. Cindy said: "And there was like a toy that had like legs and then, like, the fishing hook,

so it was kind of like a hooker.” And Derek recalled “how Bo Peep is very... I don’t want to say... sexual...” Some students understood the purpose of these jokes. Roger opined that “a lot of it is just like adult humor. Cause, like, parents take their kids to see those movies. They don’t want the parents, like, bored out of their minds, they want parents to laugh.” Others were wondering why somebody would put jokes like that in a kid’s movie, and even found them distasteful.

Many students said that, although Rosey’s and Michael’s interpretations of *Toy Story* were often unexpected, they made sense. Young people noted that most of the time they agreed with what the teachers were saying. However, some admitted that certain interpretations seemed like a stretch to them (for example, the adult jokes).

Elizaveta: Did you agree with all interpretations that he was giving?

Jim: Well, sometimes he would go kind of like far... But most of it, it did make sense.

Elizaveta: So when did you feel that he was getting too far?

Jim: In *Toy Story* there was like a part, a kid [Sid] was wearing a black shirt, and [Michael] was, like, “That means he is, like, evil or something.” Just because he was wearing a black shirt. Like, I don’t know...



Pic. 6 – “Hooker” from *Toy Story*.

During the analysis of *Pocahontas*, students were shocked to learn that the real *Pocahontas* was only 10 years old, and that she did not marry John Smith. This was one of the issues that often came up during the focus groups. Many students were wondering why Disney decided to change the historical facts, and why they made Pocahontas so sexualized. Stella, one of the students who were not particularly talkative in class, said during the focus group:

I don't get why they changed the history of it. It's the kids' movie. It's supposed to teach them... it's not what you wanna be teaching the kids, that she's supposed to be curvy. They grow up and see all the... Tinker Bell too, like how she is dressed... A bunch of characters. Like, all the Disney princesses. Not every girl has to be perfect, and a princess and stuff. That's how they are growing up to be, because... they don't realize that, they are too young and stuff.

When, during the screening of *Pocahontas*, Michael pointed out that Disney movies should not only show heterosexual romance, some students did not agree. Tilda, a student with a rainbow button, said: "But it's a kid's movie." Rodrigo said that it would not make sense. And one male student whom I never interviewed noted during this discussion that, according to the Bible, homosexuality is a sin. However, for other young people this was an important revelation. Stella noted during the interview: "I feel like they have no kids movies showing, like, how things are in the world... how like there's a guy and a guy, or it could be a girl and a girl..." At the same time students pointed out that introducing such a romance would be controversial and not every parent would want their kids to see a movie like this.

When students were working on essays about *Pocahontas*, many chose to write either about gender stereotypes (men shown as dominant warriors, and women, except for the protagonist, portrayed as submissive as weak) or about historical inconsistencies in

the film. There were, however, some notable exceptions. For example, one female student in Michael's class decided to address how mean characters in Disney's movies are always portrayed as ugly (e.g., Ratcliff in *Pocahontas* or Ursula in *Mermaid*), while good characters always have attributes of ideal beauty (e.g., Pocahontas and John Smith in *Pocahontas*). In her essay she concluded that these portrayals could negatively affect young viewers, because children will want to be beautiful as protagonists of Disney movies, and will be biased against people who do not conform to standards of ideal masculinity and femininity.

Finally, for the Hacked Ads exercise students worked in pairs (Rosey's class) or groups (Michael's class) creating collages from covers of various glossy magazines. In general, students told me that they enjoyed the exercise.

Elizaveta: How did you like the Hacked Ads assignment?

Everyone: That was fun.

Monica: Really cool.

Kathy: It was a good idea cause it actually really shows... makes you realize... how often it's happening. It's everywhere.

Stella: Yeah.

Kathy: No matter what magazine.

Others told me that working on this assignment they had some important revelations.

Brian: Now when I see, like, a magazine cover, they are always showing, like, in big letters, a bunch of useless stuff, about free stuff, and swimsuits and stuff like that. And then [Michael] was showing, like, a magazine, and on the bottom it said [in really small letters] "To save the Earth," about, like, recycling and stuff... No one really cares about that. It's more, like, about make-up and stuff like that...

Several students successfully connected this assignment to Michael's and Rosey's messages about gender and feminism.

Elizaveta: So what do you think, what did [Michael] want you to learn by doing this assignment?

Jim: Like the magazine doesn't always portray... as it looks... Like the *Seventeen* girl, you'll never look like her cause she is not seventeen. So you might think you'll look like her but you can never achieve that, cause...

Elizaveta [to Dillan]: What do you think?

Dillan: Just that, like, the truth isn't always the truth. What people think the truth is, is sometimes not... Like everyone thinks that the cover is supposed to, like, show what a beautiful girl is. Nobody looks like that.

And Jessica from Rosey's class said:

They had cars on the cover, but they were in the background, and the only thing that you could see in the front of it is a girl that has barely any clothes on and she is tanned and she is tall, like, you know... And when I was reading it, when I was looking at the cover, I was like, "Why is she there? This is supposed to be about the cars!" And then I looked at the bottom, it says, "Girls and cars, everything the guy can want." I was, like, "Oh, all right." So I, like, had to write everything down [in the graphic organizer], I had to, like, notice little things... If I looked at that cover in the market, I'd be, like, "Oh, whatever... just a magazine for a guy."

As I was observing students hacking ads and magazine covers, I could see different levels of understanding. Some students did exactly what the teachers wanted them to do: attacked the normalcy of these media texts. Tilda and her team (Pic. 7) started with an *Esquire* cover showing *Harry Potter* star Danielle Radcliff as an icon of hegemonic masculinity. He is wearing a perfect suit and seems to be fresh out of a fight. Judging by his confident posture and direct look, we can assume that he is probably a winner. As I asked Tilda's team to explain the meaning of their hacked cover, the girl did the talking. She told me that they found a picture of Radcliff where he looks younger and more like an ordinary person. Around the image they put phrases such as "Beer Binge," "Their messy break up" and "Viagra" to show that normal life is not perfect, and does not have to be. As Tilda was giving her explanation, she used the term "normalcy" that she learned in the class.



Pic. 7 – Hacked cover of Tilda and her team.

Other students had fun doing the exercise, but took it less seriously. Some of the “hacking” they did was intended to produce a funny collage, although they had some good explanations for their creative decisions. Pic. 8 shows an image of the original cover that Kevin and Juan worked on in Rosey’s class, and the resulting hacked cover.

They received a cover of *GQ* showing another symbol of masculinity – the basketball player LeBron James in an expensive suit holding a ball on fire. The boys added green background to the picture, an inscription “Death to emos!” on top, and a picture of a dog getting a haircut while taking a bath – at the bottom. Kevin and Juan kept the sportsman’s head and ball, but entirely changed his body, substituting it with a collage of several women’s bodies. During the presentation they told the class that they chose a green background because this color is neutral (neither feminine, nor masculine), and that their collage made of female bodies was supposed to represent that men and

women are equal. They did not offer a convincing explanation about adding the dog, so I assume they mostly did it because it seemed funny. As for the “Death to emos!”

inscription, this is how Kevin explained it during the interview:

I am not a big fan of emos either but I don't think anyone deserves to die cause they are emos. That's like back in the early 1800s when they said, “Death to all Black people.” That's what I tried to compare it to, which I think is stupid.

In the case of this group, some creative decisions seemed to be in line with Rosey's message, yet others appeared more random, or aimed to entertain.



Pic. 8 – Hacked cover of Kevin and Juan.

Overall, students found the three main activities of the first quarter engaging and informative. Although reactions differed –,with some enjoying the assignments more, or

understanding their purpose better than others – the teachers seemed to have reached their goal of helping these young people to uncover hidden truths in popular media texts.

Resistance and Apathy

All the teachers I talked to for my project experienced students' resistance. Some saw it as inevitable, while others believed that only a few students did not agree with their messages. Turnbull (1998), Buckingham (2003) and Hobbs (2011) point out that resistance in classes where issues of media (and gender) are discussed can be not only open, but also subtle. This section is dedicated to looking at different types of resistance in more detail.

For the purpose of full disclosure, I must admit that I myself was a resistant participant of Michael's and Rosey's classes. This resistance manifested not only in my disagreement with some of the teachers' interpretations, but also in my feelings about their approach to analyzing media texts. Although I did not have any special emotional connection with *Toy Story*, *Pocahontas* was a film I loved as a teenager. I was actually looking forward to seeing it again in Michael's class. Even though I now could see clichés and gender stereotypes I had not known about before, I still liked the film. My favorite song from the film was "Colors of the wind" – it always seemed magical to me (See Pic. 9). As the song started playing, I immediately reconnected to my old feelings about it. This is why Michael's ironic and mocking attitude towards the film was annoying to me. I just wanted to watch it, noticing clichés, stereotypes and historical inconsistencies myself. I did not want Michael to stop the film in the middle; I did not like him making disparaging comments about what was going on the screen. Hobbs (2011) notes the danger of alienating students by criticizing media texts they love. I felt

that Michael did not acknowledge that not all of this audience would be as critical of the film as he was, that someone would want to genuinely enjoy it.



Pic. 9 – Screenshot from “Colors of the Wind.”

My resistance did not mean that I was not learning. In fact, after watching *Pocahontas* with Michael, I noticed new things thanks to the critical lenses. Resistant students I talked to displayed a similar contradiction. The fact that they disagreed with the teachers did not mean that these young people did not like the classes or did not learn from them.

When I asked Steve, one of the resistant students, how he understood the purpose of the critical lenses, he told me:

[To] look at certain stuff a certain way. Like, the way how girls are portrayed. In... almost every movie you see, the girl is played as... she is scared of this, she is fearing that, she is weak. The guy is always like... And that's what basically what its point is, to tell us "Look at how they're making kids grow up." Kids grow up looking at that. Once they see that, they think that that's the way to act.

Steve started talking about gender stereotypes without my prompting. Moreover, he assumed the interpretation that Michael hoped his students to get in his class. It was particularly interesting for me to see that Steve shared Michael's position regarding negative media effects on children. In fact, he emphasized his concern about young viewers, saying that "they are not picking up on it... it's mentally kind of destroying them already." This was another way to say that children do not have defenses against ideologies – something that Michael talked a lot about in class. Noting Steve's "cool pose" masculinity in class, I was not sure how much he could relate to Michael's criticism of gender roles. However, during the interview the boy talked about the standards of masculinity as problematic: "They feel like, oh, they gonna be strong, or they can't feel no type of emotion, like a man... is gonna think that, 'Oh, I gotta be all mad all the time'... It's brainwashing." Knowing that Steve was hardly a people-pleaser and could easily become oppositional if we wanted to, I saw these remarks as an evidence of learning.

Rodrigo was another resistant student from Michael's class. He liked telling his opinions directly, even when he knew that they might irritate the teacher. He argued with Michael on several occasions in class, for example during the *Cosmopolitan* debate. At the same time, my conversations with Rodrigo showed that, like Steve, he mostly agreed with the teacher and even adopted the vocabulary that Michael wanted students to use:

Elizaveta: [Michael] says that these portrayals of men and women are mostly problematic... Why do you think he is saying that?

Rodrigo: Maybe because it's establishing... normalcy of something that doesn't need to be... considered normal.

Kevin and Roger were the only two students who explicitly said that they understood the point of using critical lenses, but they did not like them. Kevin described it this way:

Well, I don't really like critical lenses. I try to, like, forget about them when I am watching TV, but... I always notice, like, when there's the [feminist criticism]... cause she [Rosey] is always like, "That's the gender stuff." I always notice the gender stuff now every time I watch commercials... But a lot of times I try to keep it away.

Roger voiced a similar attitude: "I don't really like the critical lenses cause I'd just rather kind of see things like, how they are presented. But if I had to pick like one criticism I see the most it's probably gender." One of the biggest revelations for these boys was the purpose of feminism. Kevin "always thought feminism is, like, bad people and they are always trying to attack men." Rosey helped them understand that it was not a movement of "women fighting for more rights than men." Even though these students resisted the teacher's message, they were still learning.

The main issue that these resistant students had with the critical theory classes was that the teachers were taking their argument too far. This is what Steve said about the *Cosmopolitan* debate: "He was just going too much into this... Like, some of the stuff he was saying was correct, but once he got too much into it, it was, like, all right, now you are seeing stuff that's not even..." He also mocked Michael's emotional way of arguing with students: "Cause he was just, like, [mocking Michael's intonation]: 'The critical theory!' and... just going on with it... And it was, like, a'right, now you are making us too much understand it to the point where we can't understand it." Steve also explained that he found definitions of the critical lenses confusing. In a similar way, Rodrigo found that Michael was sometimes going too far: "Some of the things that he says, I feel like he

exaggerates it a little bit, and he points out things that don't necessarily have to mean anything. And he just assumes that it all does." Melissa found that not only Rosey but also students who agreed with her were exaggerating: "Like [Anna], I got into a fight with her... because she was, like, taking it so far."

Although the resistant students were learning in class, their position might have prevented them from understanding some of the teachers' important messages. For example, Steve disagreed with Michael about the importance of showing homosexual romance in media texts targeted at young people. Rodrigo challenged Michael's statement that all Black people on *Cosmo* covers look whiter than they actually are: "I know for a fact that this isn't true... the projector that he was using made them look... it was the projector, not the actual magazine. Cause then I looked on his computer screen, and they were fine." Kevin and Roger opined that feminism is not necessary in the United States anymore.

Kevin: I always see men and women are pretty much already equal, at this point. Cause if you look at, like, laws, United States could not really do much about it, cause there are laws already... actually, technically in the United States women have more rights than men if you look at it.

The teachers tried to address these issues in class but time constraints often prevented them from having an in-depth discussion about each of them.

Resistant students differed in their interpretations of the relationship between audiences and media texts. Steve occupied a distinctly protectionist position, claiming that media representations of gender have negative effects, especially on children. Rodrigo chose a more neutral stance between protectionism and empowerment. In contrast, Roger, Kevin and Melissa assumed what appeared to be the "active audience" approach, which led them to argue that it is not necessary to change the way media texts

are produced. Roger told me that women's magazines empower their readers by giving them useful advice about their appearance:

Some women actually enjoy reading those, listening to the advice, taking the advice and putting it in their everyday life... There's like audiences that go with the magazine so they wouldn't be too happy if all of a sudden, people are, like, "Oh, we are gonna change this around cause they are sending a wrong message." To the audience... it's sending the right message cause... that's what they like.

Similarly, Melissa thought that there are plenty of women who enjoy magazines and all the advice they get by reading them, although she noted some problems with images of idealized beauty in magazines.

I don't think that's right that they show little girls, this is what you have to look like... I don't think that's right that they just make them look so perfect cause it lowers self-esteem. But for some people, like, I think it's like a motivation to be the perfect image. But I don't think there should be a perfect image...

If Rodrigo and Steve were resistant to some interpretations but in general wanted to learn more, Roger, Kevin and Melissa demonstrated a certain degree of indifference to the gender and feminist lenses. They did learn how to use them, but they were not sure that it was really necessary to pick media texts apart looking for messages about gender inequalities.

In the case of Roger and Kevin, it might have been their male privilege that prevented them from acknowledging how gender inequalities influence people in the United States. It seemed to me that they boys had inquisitive minds: they liked discussing new things and picking media texts apart. Kevin and Roger told me that they liked questioning things. However, observing them in class and talking with them during the focus group I wondered why they chose to argue with Rosey, and never questioned their own assumption that the fight for women's rights in the U.S. is over. Some statements

that I heard from the boys were openly sexist. For instance, explaining a collage that he and his partner created—it featured rappers in suits surrounded by scantily clad women, Roger said: “Women will chase money, no matter what you say.” These students were not entirely indifferent, but they did not care enough to actively learn about causes of feminism and its purposes.

I have discussed Melissa’s privileged position earlier. It appeared that this girl liked learning about the critical lenses – to a certain extent. She enjoyed using the critical lenses, and agreed that some media messages are diminishing women. Melissa gave me examples of things that she noticed using the gender and feminist lenses outside of the classroom. For example, she described a video about an amusement park: “They were, like, on a rollercoaster and then he is, like, ‘Wow, you scream like a girl.’ I was, like, ‘What?..’ Why does a girl has to scream like that, why can’t a guy?” At the same time, Melissa thought that most differences between men and women are just meant to be, that they are “normal” and therefore should not be questioned. She agreed with Rosey and the actively feminist Anna that women should have the same rights as men. However, she thought that both of them were taking their argument too far.

Some things are just *normal*. For a girl to wear pink and a guy to wear blue when they are newborn and everything... that’s how things *became*. You don’t have to look at it and investigate why it’s like that. There’s just gender differences. Yeah, everybody wants to be equal but just the way they were making it sound... One’s a girl, one’s a guy, there *has* to be some difference.

Her main argument against challenging media messages was: “That’ just already how it is.” By the end of my discussion with Melissa I concluded that what bothered her about feminism was that its goal, as the girl saw it, was to erase differences between men and women. For her that might have been a problem because she was benefitting from her

emphasized femininity. She saw Anna's kind of feminism as too aggressive, and felt that it did not represent her point of view: "Like [Anna], she says, 'People come to school and... if they are in a dress, you can just tell, they are trying to get a guy's attention.' No. I want to get my own attention!"

Observing resistant students and talking to them in class, I noticed some intriguing contradictions. Although these young people argued that the teachers were taking their arguments too far, they still enjoyed learning and shared many of the teacher's opinions. In some cases students' resistance could be explained by the fact that their interpretations differed from those of the teachers. Yet, other students did not want to explore issues discussed in class further because of their indifference. I argue that, when students disagree with teachers that can be part of their learning curve; however, by not caring about issues discussed in class they display apathy that prevents them from learning more about the subject.

Conclusion

Students who took the critical theory classes taught by Michael and Rosey had different personalities and backgrounds, which led them to experience these classes differently. Overall, the majority of students enjoyed the classes and learned a lot from them. Even young people who had some background knowledge about media and gender were able to expand their horizons. The classes had long-lasting effects on a number of young people, who still recalled details after one or two years after taking them, and were using the critical lenses to analyze media texts. The classes changed not only students' perceptions, but also their actions. A number of people used the knowledge acquired in class to educate others about gender equality. This finding is especially intriguing, since

Michael and Rosey practically did not talk to students about the importance of social action. It appears that gender and media classes have a potential to tap into young people's feeling of social responsibility—an effect that should be further explored. At the same time, some students were not particularly interested in the classes, and did not like using the critical lenses outside of school.

My findings helped me to complicate the notion of students' resistance. Some resistant students were learning from the classes. Although these young people did not agree with everything the teachers were saying, or felt that those were exaggerating, they enjoyed learning about gender in the media and accepted some of the teachers' key messages. The teachers I talked to have all experienced students' resistance. Most see it as problematic – as an obstacle to learning. My findings show that resistance can be young people's way to learn. They simply have their own interpretations, and share them with the class without being afraid to irritate the teacher or their peers. However, I found that in some cases resistance was related to the lack of interest in the issues discussed in class. If students feel that the goal of feminism has been achieved, or that women's rights is not their problem, they might not care about the teacher's message. In this situation, apathy of indifference would be a better explanation of their reactions. I argue that this apathy is much worse than the first kind of resistance. If students do not want to learn about media and gender, it is much worse than if they disagree with the teacher.

CHAPTER 8

STUDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT MEDIA AND GENDER

In this chapter I discuss opinions that students within and outside of the case study had about media representations of gender. In the second half of the chapter I focus on intriguing contradictions that their opinions contained.

Media Effects

Discussing the media's role in people's lives, students assumed the protectionist approach advocated by the teachers. Some directly connected inequalities that exist in society to media representations. For example, Ian opined that "not everybody's treated equal and that... could be because of the media. ...The media basically control in a way what we think, or most of what we think." Miguel outside of the case study said that media producers "kind of like force it on everybody else." And Pedro argued: "It's around everyone every day. Like, media. So whatever is on it [sic], people are gonna get influenced by it."

Many students said that the media affect people, especially children, negatively. In the previous chapter I quoted Steve who noted that the media are "mentally kind of destroying" children. Developing a similar idea, Ian said: "I think the media definitely impacts our lives. Especially as a young child. You grow up, you are watching... So as a child you grow up thinking that's what life is." Tilda said: "Kids watch it, and they grow up thinking that's right and they find out half way through it's not, and they are, like, 'What do we do? What does it mean? What is it actually like?'" Joan outside of the case study said: "I think that... when celebrities do stuff, like music videos or concerts and

tours, I think that it makes younger girls kind of more vulnerable because I think that the media affect how girls think about themselves.” Frankie pointed out: “If you are a little girl... all you see is little girls and women not thought of as on the same caliber as men. You grow up thinking you are not as good as them.” And Derek formulated his opinion this way:

The kids are so like sponges, and they are taught at such a young age that... males have to be strong, females have to... cook and clean. If they are not, like, realizing that this isn't reality... it can really ruin their childhood, and the whole life.

Some students who believed in direct media effects pointed out that that problems created by media texts might be solved if better media representations were created. Lara said: “I think if one big movie came out like that, people would realize: ‘Oh, women are just the same as men, they can do the same exact thing as us.’” And in Ian’s opinion “if the media was to... show everyone as an equal, people would then start to realize that everyone’s equal.”

A number of students noted that the relationship between audiences and media texts is not simple. Sonia and Sara argued that the problem is not only in media representations but also in the way people consume media texts.

Sonia: People, when they see it on TV...

Sara: It’s like a disease...

Sonia: It’s like, when a parent that believes that, when they have a child, they gonna tell the child what they believe that then they are gonna pass it on to their kids, and their kids gonna pass it on to their kids. It’s just like a snowball effect of stereotypes.

John argued that people are guided by gender stereotypes and “the media kind of reflects that, instead of, like, the other way around.” He believed that the media do not change people’s opinions about gender roles because “in history there’s always been men in

power. Like we've never had a woman president. Jesus was a man. Santa was a man. Men are always in, like, power." Although some students said that media representations shape people's perception of gender, and others noted that it is vice versa, almost everybody saw some sort of connection between the media and gender inequalities.

Interestingly, students practically never talked about how the media affect them personally. In one focus group that consisted of students who took Michael's and Rosey's classes a while back students discussed that, even though they noticed media stereotypes in the media, they were not completely immune to them. This is how Tilda from Michael's class described her experience with gender stereotypes: "Usually, when I was a kid, I thought that dad worked all the time and mom would stay home and cook, but that wasn't how my life was. So it was just confusing." Notably, she talked about her past experience, which might suggest that as the time of this conversation she believed not to be affected anymore.

At the same time, some young people specifically stated that the media do not impact them. For example, Marcos emphasized: "It does not affect me. I am not a person to feed into stuff like that. I know what real life is like. I just watch that stuff for my entertainment, it does not mean I agree with it." Ian said that before analyzing media representations of gender in Michael's class "[he] understood all that stuff but it just did not really affect [him]." Stan told that because he "grew up in diversity," he did not care about media stereotypes:

I don't really pay attention to that. If you get to know me, I am somebody who is laid-back... I don't really care. You can be who you wanna be. So I don't really pay attention to the stuff like that [in the media]. I may see it, but I may be... not avoid it... overlook it. I won't notice it.

Kelly, a student who never took the critical theory class, talked about the negative impact that the media have on children. However, she argued that “if you believe that everyone’s different, and you are just watching it, it’s not gonna brainwash you.” As I probed further to understand her position about the media, she said: “People are just watching it for entertainment, what’s the big deal about it?” Kelly did not think that problematic media representations affected her, because she learned from her parents that everybody is different, and she was only consuming the media “for entertainment.” These students’ perception of media influence, thus, could be described as a third-person effect. Remarks made by Kelly, Marcos and Stan might suggest that they believed themselves to be immune to gender stereotypes in the media because they considered themselves open-minded.

Most students talked about a relationship between media representations of gender and gender inequalities. Many pointed out that the media have direct negative effects on people, especially children. Others saw this relationship differently, arguing that people’s perceptions are more or equally important in creating/reproducing inequalities. Most students who talked about problematic media effects pointed, however, that they themselves were not affected by media texts, since they are not children anymore and they cannot be as easily brainwashed.

Students’ opinions about media effects are a manifestation of a popular discourse about the media, which is not unique to the U.S. culture. Maharajh (2014) in her recent study talked with British schoolgirls about media representations of gender. The students opined that the media have negative effects on girls, but not on women. According to my findings, the idea that children are victims of problematic media messages was

reproduced both by the teachers and by students, some of whom had probably already heard about it from their parents or other teachers.

Gender Stereotypes

Many students were quite knowledgeable about gender stereotypes in the media, and had strong opinions about them. Tilda said: “It’s annoying. Cause it’s not true, it’s not how the real world is. Like, the media portray things completely differently. Like, not every wife is cooking and cleaning at home.” For this student, gender stereotypes were irritating because “it’s the same thing over and over again.” Anna talked about gender stereotypes with passion:

They make girls seem, like, we are weak, we can’t do what guys can do. And they make girls seem... I hate when people say that woman belongs [sic] in the kitchen and men belong hunting and actually working, women should be housewives and everything... No, we should not! I can work as hard as you can.

Not only girls, but also boys talked about media representations of gender as unrealistic and unfair. Dan pointed out:

They portray women as these images that everybody wants to be or what we think we wanna be, when really, like, realistically you would never go out and see somebody that looks exactly like they do in a magazine... And it’s unfair, cause you are creating this image that nobody could ever fit into.

Students named a variety of problems with media representations of gender. Anna said: “Women are, like, weaker, and men always have to save them because they cannot do anything for themselves, helpless... The man always comes and saves the day because he is, like, the hero of the whole plot.” Talking about the TV show *Sons of Anarchy* Ian noted: “All their wives are basically staying home, and basically just take care of them... they are basically cleaning up after them.” Temperance said that men in the media “are the strong ones who never show emotions, who have no emotions.” Sonia brought up

another important issue – that women are considered less capable than men who work in the same profession:

It's... [a show] called *The Doctors* and they have three male doctors and one female doctor... Yesterday their topic was cancer... and when they were talking about all the research, all the research came from male doctors. And I was, like, "Why there could not be doctors who did the research on the girl who were female?"

A number of students outside of the case study were also aware of gender stereotypes in the media. Joan said that in the media "sometimes the man controls the woman when in reality that's not the case all the time." Tina said that "women are dainty and they are just kind of there. There are a lot of older books, women don't really have voice in them." Ronda notes that "the obvious [stereotype] is that women are supposed to clean and cook, and men go out and work," and Christi added that "in family [TV] shows man's always the leader of the family." Some male students who never took the critical theory classes also came up with examples of problematic media representations. For example, Bill noted: "[In the media, girls], like, they need that guy in order to be somebody... And I think that what they are doing in the music videos is showing that... girls, they can't do stuff boys can..." Miguel pointed out that in video games "usually males are dominant." Talking about the media, Tom pointed out that "the man is supposed to be more tough [sic]... not supposed to have, like, feelings... or not allowed to cry or anything like that. And the woman is supposed to be more soft [sic] and gentle, more caring." In Gabriel's opinion, "the biggest stereotype is... the physical one. Think of every actor ever. Especially on TV now. The dudes are over six foot completely chiseled... [And women] are really tiny, they are, like, unnaturally curvy."

Some students talked about the complexity of media representations of gender.

Hugh and Frankie had interesting insights about strong female characters. Hugh said:

“When they... put a female, like, in an action movie, they make her look usually very good, sexy, to appeal to men. Not usually rugged, dirty...” And Frankie pointed out:

You have like superhero movies: it would be a bunch of guys and then one girl and they think that’s OK for representation of people. But one girl and four or five guys, it looks like she is there as a novelty and not like a person that they are.

Bill talked about the contradictory image of Nicki Minaj: “She is showing that girls could do it but she is also showing that they are kind of acting like some type of... I guess, of slut or a skank, sometimes.” Megan, who never took the critical theory class, knew about objectification: “I think that the media... people think that women are like objects and all that, they don’t have feelings, women can be treated however they deserve to be and it’s just not like that in the real world.” Alonso and Dan discussed the complexity of media representations during our conversation about Disney’s *Mulan*. Alonso pointed that *Mulan* is a rare film where a woman is a hero. However, Dan argued that this character is only “somewhat” better than other Disney princesses. The boys then explained that to reach her goals Mulan had to pretend she was a man.

Alonso: She had to like act like a man. To be ready for the war. And then there was also a song inside the movie where they were saying...

Dan: “Be a man”...

Alonso: Yeah, to be a man.

Dan: They are still setting up those... expectations as a male.

Elizaveta: So she had to pretend that she is a man...

Dan: Yeah. Even though she was better than all the man on her team in everything, she still had to pose as a man.

The boys argued that this representation is problematic both for men and women, because it equals being a man to being strong and tough, and signals to women that to achieve

something in life they might need to reject their femininity. One of the biggest insights about media representations of gender came from Anna. This girl had a revelation during the Hacked Ads exercise that she was really excited about: “I noticed by looking through women’s magazines that it is all about pleasing a man, being beautiful for a man, and in men’s magazines they just talk about sports.” Research by such scholars as McRobbie (1991) indeed shows that women’s magazines usually give advice to the reader on how to find, please and keep a man by improving her appearance, cooking skills or sexual prowess. Man’s magazines, in contrast, never give such advice to their readers, instead treating them as adventurers not interested in serious relationships.

In this section I quoted students who were passionate and eloquent in talking about gender stereotypes in the media. However, not all students had something to say. Several young people had trouble naming any gender stereotypes, even though they had already talked about them in Rosey’s and Michael’s classes. During a number of focus groups, students were silent for a while when I asked them about gender in the media. Some gave examples from the class, but did not go beyond that, and did not connect these stereotypes to gender inequality in general. I had more silent moments during focus groups with students who had not taken Rosey’s and Michael’s classes, which indicates that the critical theory classes made a difference in students’ understanding of media representations of gender.

Constructedness

My interviews and observations indicated that the constructedness of media texts was not sufficiently discussed in the critical theory classes. Having analyzed media representations, some students started to wonder why they are created in a certain way.

Jessica: When I looked at [the magazine I analyzed], [the model on the cover] was, like... had her shirt up, she was, like, holding her shirt up and stuff, all weird position and everything. So I was, like, I was thinking, like: “What makes her so comfortable being... just doing that? Like, what makes her not care about being, like, a guy’s entertainment, basically?”

Elizaveta: So what’s your answer?

Jessica: I don’t know. I just thought about it. And I was, like, “Why is she doing that?” Maybe it is her job, but...

Jessica was not the only student who thought about the way models are photographed.

However, if she was unsure about the answer, others thought that they knew it already.

One male student from Michael’s class said during the *Cosmopolitan* debate that models on the covers “had a choice to be photographed like that,” meaning that they did it willingly. When I talked to Melissa about the Hacked Ads exercise, she suggested that female models might be enjoying being portrayed as sexually appealing: “Girls like the attention from guys. So, maybe she knew that guys would look at and she’d be, like, ‘Well, it’s me on the cover.’” Although it is true that models are not forced to be photographed in a certain way, and that they enjoy attention, this is only one part of a story. These students’ remarks showed why it is important to address the structure of media industry during media and gender classes.

Some students had interesting insights about the way media texts are constructed.

Tilda had an assumption that it has something to do with reproducing the familiar.

Elizaveta: And you mentioned that that Doctor Who would never be a woman. What do you think about that?

Tilda: That’s stupid, that’s like a great opportunity to get more people to watch it. But they won’t do it. Because it always has to be the same, I guess...

Some students came to the conclusion that media texts are created in a certain way because of audiences’ expectations. Discussing how women on magazine covers and in ads are photoshopped to look thin, Andrea said:

They just make it look like that so that people... try to buy their stuff... Cause people look up to those [models], and then they are, like, “Oh, I wanna be like them, I wanna be skinny, be, like, flawless and stuff.”

Talking of how Disney made *Pocahontas* older than she was in reality, and created a love story with John Smith, Kathy argued:

[People find it] more interesting when something is going on, plus an average love story. Cause without that it's just some girl that meets this guy. And every other Disney movie... or most of them... you find a guy and a girl... the girl is perfect, the guy is handsome... And they end up falling in love. So it's like what they [media creators] think they are supposed to be doing. That has to be in the movie.

Although some students wanted to know why media texts are produced in a certain way, Michael and Rosey seldom talked about that because discussing the workings of media industry was not their goal. I heard them say several times in class that media creators put ideologies in media texts subconsciously, without understanding their harmful nature. But the teachers did not go any further in the discussion about the constructed nature of media texts. Demystifying media industries might have helped Michael and Rosey to further deepen students' understanding of the media. In addition, it would have allowed the teachers to better explain to young people how ideologies are embedded in media texts.

Half-Changed Minds

As I was talking to students and observing them in class, I noticed a curious contradiction. The majority of young people said that men and women are equal, or should be equal. Yet the same some young people did and said things that revealed their ignorance about gender equality, or at least their misunderstanding of what it entails and how it can be achieved. Using the term suggested by an Australian scholar Cordelia Fine

in her book *Delusions of Gender* (2010), I call this contradictory attitude *half-changed minds*.

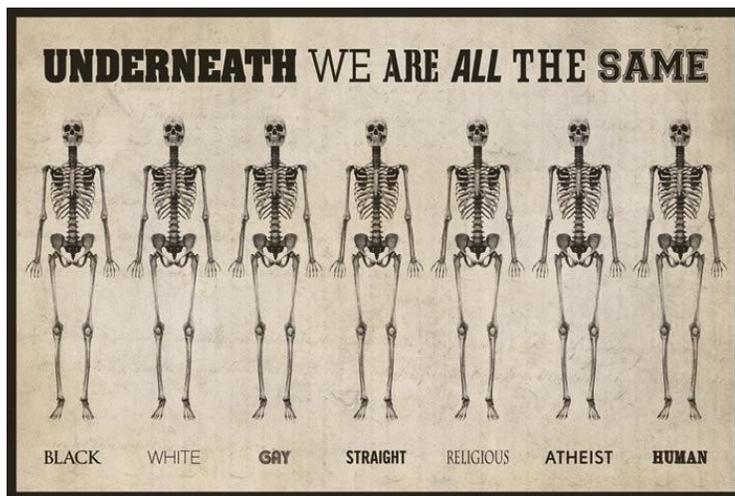
The term “gender equality” was part of all the students’ lexicon. They had clearly learned that it signals something good. For example, Robin told me: “I just think that people are all equal and that... I guess, we all have skeletons. We are all the same.” Further discussion showed that he was inspired to use this metaphor by an internet meme (see Pic. 10). Later the boy clarified that gender equality is an ideal that has not been achieved yet. Men and women “should be equal because the only difference is the body parts, and I just don’t think it’s fair that if a man and a woman work the same exact job the man will get paid more than the woman would.” Dan opined: “There are certain differences, but that only goes to like a certain extent. Besides that, you know, we are pretty equal... I notice that a lot. We are not that different, it’s just we *think* we are different.” Even Alex, who was not particularly outspoken and did not show much excitement about the critical theory classes, said: “If I see a woman walking down the street, I don’t see she’s weaker, just think she is, like, a strong person. If I look at my dad and look at my mom, they are, like, the same person.”

Students outside of the case study expressed similar views. Miguel said: “[Media producers] kind of make it... normal for, like, female to be the not dominant gender. But, like... we [are] all equal, the same. So [we] really shouldn’t, like, judge people based on what [they are] born as.” Joan criticized people who think that “men can do so much more than women, and they are so much stronger than women, when actually women are trying to be able to do just about everything that men can do.” And Tom said:

People think that women should be at home, cooking, cleaning and taking care of the kids, when in today’s modern age most women work and do just

as much... and make the money just like the guys... Women shouldn't, like, stop going to get work or something, or they shouldn't just be home and cooking. It should be their opinion on what they can do.

The fact that students both within and outside of the case study talked about equal opportunities for men and women shows that gender equality is a part of modern discourse in the United States. Students do not need to take special classes to be convinced that equality is important. However, they might need further clarification on what it entails or how it can be achieved.



Pic. 10 – Skeleton equality meme.

During the interview, Andrea used a popular trope that men and women are different but equal: “In certain things, they are equal... cause, I mean, there are things that a man can do that a woman probably can't do, like... how they do it. But there's also things that women can do that men can't.” When I asked her to give me some examples, Andrea replied: “Women give birth to children, men can't do that. And then men may be able to lift something that's like really [heavy] that a woman can't. Because, we are built

to be smaller and not as like... how men are..." The girl used the biological argument, arguing that men and women are good at different things because of "how we are made." However, when I asked her whether that means that men and women are different, Andrea came back to her initial position, arguing that "everyone's different... but at the same time we are all the same, because we are all humans." I found intriguing that, on one hand, Andrea rejected gender binary, preferring a safe argument that "everyone's different," but, on the other hand, reaffirmed the binary by describing men and women as two distinct social groups whose differences are rooted in biology.

Bill was another student who expressed contradicting points of view. This boy first went on a rant saying that "some women, they try to act like they are God... and they sometimes get, well, yeah, get self-centered and think that they don't need a guy, they just need themselves and they can live without... with no support." However, within this very monologue Bill started discussing gender equality: "I know that some people might think that [women] can't do stuff that men can do, like play football, act tough... but someone can... I think that women can do some stuff, most stuff men can do." Notably, this boy pointed out that men and women cannot be completely equal. Bill's position is similar to an opinion expressed by Pedro. This student lamented the lack of gender equality, but later added: "So now they see that women can do just as much as a man can do... in most fields... most of the time..."

Kelly outside of the case study talked at length about gender stereotypes in the media, but then said that these stereotypes have no connection to sexism: "I mean, there aren't a lot of people that are sexist in the world... There's not a lot of them that people should be worried and stuff." Christi also described how gender stereotypes in the media

misrepresent women. However, later she pointed out that gender stereotypes “aren’t as big,” and that “everything’s kind of mixed now.” I asked the girl what she meant, and she replied: “Both girls and guys can do sports. Both boys and girls can do art. The girl can rescue the guy and stuff. We are like even kind of.” When I asked Christi about women who are fighting to get more rights, she replied: “I guess everything can always be more equal, but we are, like, OK now, [better] than, like, it was before. Before they had no rights, and now we have a lot more rights.”

Talking about gender, students displayed various gaps in their knowledge. Rodrigo talked about the importance of gender equality, arguing that “no one should be above anybody else.” However, when another student said that an example of a gender stereotype is that women are considered worse drivers than men, Rodrigo replied: “That’s statistically true, though.” When I asked him why he thought it might be so, he replied that he did not know. Joseph outside of the case study said: “Some people don’t... I don’t think, believe... yeah, they don’t believe in women’s rights, they don’t want women to have the same rights as men do.” But when I asked him what kind of rights he meant, the boy replied: “I am not sure.”

I suspect that some students used the trope of gender equality in the critical theory classes because for them his term signified something teachers valued. Kevin and Juan explained the collage they produced during the Hacked Ad assignment through allusions to gender equality (see the previous section). Melissa and her boyfriend Anthony chose a similar tactic. I observed the couple since they started working on this assignment, and saw that it did not interest them too much. These students were mostly chatting and flirting with each other, although the cover they had to work with—featuring Bradley

Cooper—did get some of their attention. Finally, when Melissa and Anthony got to the collage, they decided to cut out the head of the actor and put it on a female body in a fashionable black dress, which they found in a woman’s magazine. As they were gluing their collage together I stopped by and asked them about the logic of their project: “So why did you decide to do that?” – “I don’t even know!” Melissa replied, laughing. But Anthony was quick to make a connection to the theme of the class: “Because we want to show that men and women are equal.” Gender equality seemed to be something that they added as an afterthought because they knew that Rosey would like that, not because of some genuine concerns.

This example can give an impression that students used the term gender equality to fake their interest in issues discussed in class. However, my observations and interviews showed, that even students who were passionate about Michael’s and Rosey’s classes had gaps in their understanding of gender issues. For example, Anna told me:

We are basically all the same... The only reason why guys are more capable... like, they are stronger, they run faster – that’s because of the past generations. Cause women used to work in the kitchen and guys – go out hunting, and it built up as generations...

On one hand, the girl talked about men and women being equal, capable of doing the same things with the same efficiency. On the other hand, she made an allusion to biological differences between them. Fine (2010) and Fausto-Sterling (2000) note that biological differences are still largely used in popular discourse to explain why men and women cannot not be entirely equal, and to prop the very idea of gender binary. Anna was simply reproducing this popular trope, not aware of how it makes her statement contradictory.

When Robin was telling me about his perception of gender stereotypes, he said: “My grandmother... is always in the kitchen and she cooks for my grandfather... sets up the table for my grandfather, cleans after him... And I don’t think that’s fair. I feel like... men should, I don’t know... like, help.” Notably, the boy was not talking about sharing household responsibilities but about the importance of *helping* the wife. This small remark hid another big debate concerning gender equality. Scholars note that housework is still largely seen as women’s responsibility, even if they work outside of the house same as their husbands (Fine, 2010). When men do things around the house, women often feel the need to thank them for help because they still see housework as their primary responsibility (Coltrane, 2011).

The contradiction in Tilda’s position was revealed during the conversation about the lack of homosexual romance in Disney films. Tilda was one of the gender non-conforming students who had androgynous looks. She also wore a rainbow button on her backpack, and made many insightful comments about gender during the focus group. To my surprise, she did not agree with Michael’s suggestion to include different kinds of romance in media texts targeted at children. Her reaction might be explained by the widespread belief that children are too young to learn about alternative kinds of sexuality, because this knowledge can negatively affect them.

Having half-changed minds does not mean that students are faking their interest and excitement. It simply means that they have hidden biases they are not aware of. Scholarship on implicit attitudes shows that these attitudes might be shaped by non-verbal experiences and cultural environment (Rudman, 2004). The U.S. culture is filled with contradictions about gender and sexuality. To use Fine’s words (2010), we live in a

half-changed world. These contradictions manifest themselves, among other things, through mixed media messages. Thus, it is not surprising that contradictory attitudes circulating in popular culture influence the way young people see themselves and the world around them.

Conclusion

My findings show several trends in students' opinions about media and gender. Here I summarize these trends and connect them to the discussion about educational strategies in media and gender classrooms.

Many students believe that the media have a problematic influence on audiences, especially young children. The belief in negative media effects is part of a popular media discourse, reproduced by parents, teachers and some scholars (Douglas, 1995; Durham, 2008; Kilbourne, 1999; Smith, 2008). It is not surprising that the teachers used this discourse in the classroom, and that students were receptive to it. Although some young people saw the relationship between media texts and audiences in a more nuanced way, and a few talked about active audiences, my findings indicated that students' understanding of the media role in their lives needs to be further complicated. Media studies should be used to inform high school discussions about media and gender. The concept of hegemony is crucial for helping students understand how audiences can be active and at the same time implicated in the reproduction of inequalities.

The classes I observed left students with questions on how media texts are produced, and why they are produced in a certain way. I argue, that in order to help students understand how media representations of gender function, more emphasis must be put on conversations about the workings of media industries. According to the

AACRA model of media literacy, using media production activities can help students better deconstruct media messages they encounter in their everyday lives. Although it might be difficult to introduce media production exercises into high school classrooms, teachers should at least spend more time discussing the constructedness of media texts that contain media representations of gender.

Discussing negative media effects, young people in my sample seldom mentioned how they themselves were influenced by gender representations. A few even argued that they were not affected because of their open-mindedness. The AACRA model of media literacy suggests that teachers should help students reflect on the role of the media in their lives. If we want young people to consider how they themselves might be implicated in the reproduction of gender norms, it is important that they be taught to systematically examine their own attitudes and actions.

Reflection becomes especially important in the light of my findings concerning students' half-changed minds. The culture surrounding students sends them contradictory messages about gender and sexuality. In order to help students examine how these contradictions shape their implicit attitudes, it is important to help them reflect on their hidden biases. I argue that uncovering half-changed minds necessitates a subtle approach. It is not about telling students that they are duped by the media—people usually do not like being positioned as a victim. Nobody likes admitting that they are biased—although we all are, in one way or another. At the same time, we do need to help young people understand how culture shapes their biases. The question then becomes: what kind of activities can we use to help young people reflect on their implicit attitudes in a way that would not be offensive or threatening for them?

Finally, my findings show that when discussing media representations of gender most students used gender binary. Although some said that every person is different, others contrasted men and women. According to Butler, we reproduce gender scripts through discursive practices. Even when we are trying to talk about the complexity of gender, we might not be able to do so simply because of the restrictions of the language. It is possible that some young people I observed and talked to did want to go beyond gender binary but did not know how. However, others might have been reproducing the binary because they were not aware of their half-changed minds. I argue that explicitly talking with students about gender binary and gender continuum is crucial for helping young people understand inequalities created by gender norms.

CHAPTER 9

DISCUSSION

In this final chapter I outline key themes that emerged in my findings, and draw connections between them. I address students' implicit biases, describe agenda-setting effect of media and gender classes, and discuss the potential that these classes have for inspiring students to engage in social action. I provide recommendations for using principles of media literacy education, and scholarship on media and gender to teach students about issues of gender in a way that will address young people's resistance and allow them to express their voices. I highlight the need of using communication theory in media literacy classes dedicated to gender issues, and discuss contribution of my dissertation study to the field of communication. Finally, I describe my experience of applying what I argue to be best practices of teaching about media and gender, and suggest some directions for future research.

Discussing students' attitudes toward gender equality and gender stereotypes in the media I use the term *half-changed minds* (Fine, 2010). Having a half-changed mind means accepting ideals of gender equality and at the same time keeping biases that prevent one from understanding the complexity of the concept. It means being implicated into the hegemonic system that one unconsciously supports even when one wants to be against it. I argue that taking into consideration students' half-changed minds will help teachers find the best approach to furthering their understanding of gender inequalities, in the media and otherwise.

Media and gender classes can play an important role in modifying students' half-changed minds. Analyzing the data, I came to the conclusion that these classes have an agenda-setting function in a sense that they bring issues of gender and the media to young people's attention. Most students I worked with in West Cityville High School became more aware of gender stereotypes in the media and outside of it thanks to the classes taught by Michael and Rosey. Discussions with the additional teachers revealed that they saw a similar transformation in their students. My findings indicate that using media literacy education to help young people think about gender issues is a useful strategy because young people are excited to discuss popular media texts.

Furthermore, the agenda-setting effect of media and gender classes is potentially long-lasting. Students in my sample remembered learning about gender and feminist lenses one or two years after they took the critical theory classes with Michael and Rosey. Some of them were still using skills and knowledge acquired in these classes. This evidence shows that media and gender classes can help young people become life-long learners who critically analyze media texts without teachers' prompting. These classes do not only transform students, but also help them become agents of social change. It was not uncommon for the case study students to share what they learned about gender inequalities and gender stereotypes with people outside of the school. Remarkably, they did that without the educators' prompting. Loren, Julie, Bradley and Peter told me that their students also use knowledge about media and gender to educate their friends and families.

The problem with half-changed minds is that they are filled with implicit biases. In order to expose these biases, teachers need to use subtle methods. They should be

ready not only to share their knowledge with students, but also to listen very attentively to what students think and know. Media literacy education offers inquiry-based strategies to help teachers be attentive listeners and notice inconsistencies that reveal students' half-changed minds. Teachers should be ready to let students voice their opinions and tell about their experience for two reasons. First, students' stories can help educators understand young people's biases and gaps in their knowledge. Second, when students articulate their opinions, they might themselves start noticing inconsistencies in their beliefs and attitudes. Once students become aware of gaps in their knowledge, and once they acquire skills that will allow them to be life-long learners, they will be able to continue exploring issues of media and gender outside of the classroom.

Teachers who are passionate about liberating students from ideologies of patriarchy and heteronormativity want young people to get their messages about gender stereotypes and gender equality. Understandably, they are frustrated when students argue with them, and seem to disagree. After all, usually teachers choose to discuss media representations of gender because they have a special connection to this topic. They have to work against the constraints of the educational system to bring their important message to students. Sometimes teachers in the media and gender classroom can become defensive when students disagree with them. Paradoxically, teachers' passion for the subject can prevent them from having a balanced debate, where different opinions are voiced and discussed. My evidence suggests that teachers do not need to worry about students who argue with them, because their resistance is an inseparable part of the learning process. Moreover, by arguing, students expose their half-changed minds, which gives teachers an opportunity to better understand young people's biases. In addition,

teachers can use ideas that students bring up during debates to enrich the conversation, and take it to a variety of directions.

What teachers in media and gender classrooms should be first of all concerned with is young people's indifference, or apathy. As I learned in West Cityville High School, indifference can be combined with resistance, and it can be mistaken for it. When students do not care about teachers' messages—which might happen because of their privileged position within the hegemonic system—it is much worse than when they argue because they want to learn. If young people do not disagree, that might please the teacher, but hide the fact that these young people simply do not find issues discussed in class important or relevant for them.

My findings indicate that analysis is the primary educational strategy in media and gender classes. Media literacy scholars (Hobbs, 2011) argue, however, that it is crucial to find a balance between all the elements of the AACRA model. Classroom activities should involve reflection on students' personal experiences with gender stereotypes and gender inequalities. Apart from helping young people better connect to these issues, reflection can expose young people's hidden biases. By creating media texts and discussing their constructed nature, students will better understand how media representations function. Young people can also use media production as a form of social action. By teaching students to access information via a variety of media tools and sources, educators will help students develop skills necessary for being independent life-long learners. Finally, it is important to not only equip young people with knowledge about the media, but also to help them use this knowledge to make our world a better place. Combining five media literacy competencies with insights about the complexity of

media texts and their role in reproducing gender inequalities, we can empower students to trouble the hegemonic system.

Teachers who choose to discuss media representations of gender with their students should draw not only on media literacy education, gender studies and feminist theory, but also on the field of communication. In particular, in order to explain to young people how different readings of media texts are formed, instructors can refer to the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980). This model, combined with the concepts of half-changed minds and hegemony, can explain students' negotiated readings by referring to their implicit biases. Using this framework, I argue that half-changed minds are not necessarily a bad thing, but rather an unavoidable intermediate stage between dominant and oppositional readings. In other words, half-changed minds signal that young people are moving towards oppositional readings that will allow them to understand and trouble hegemony.

They say that the best way to see if your advice makes sense is to try following it yourself. Teaching *Gender and the American Mass Media* class to undergraduate students in the spring of 2015, I had an opportunity to test some of my own recommendations. My students participated in a variety of activities that were meant to develop different media literacy competencies. I used inquiry-based approach, and had students discuss gender binary, intersectionality, and the complexity of media representations. I introduced the concepts of hegemony and co-option. I allowed students to voice a variety of opinions, and was careful with my reactions to what seemed like resistance. This experience allowed me to further reflect on possibilities of incorporating my suggestions into media and gender classes, and on directions that my research can take in the future.

Half-Changed World, Half-Changed Minds

As I was collecting data in West Cityville High School, I started noticing contradictions in students' understanding of gender issues. Young people would eloquently describe negative effects of gender inequalities – and then say something that revealed their misunderstanding of what equality entails and how it can be achieved. They could state that everybody is unique, and then argue that gender differences are real. Even students who were clearly excited about the classes seemed to have significant gaps in their knowledge. These misperceptions are not at all surprising. First, if these students have just started discussing media and gender in a systematic way, they still have a lot to learn. Second, young people live in a culture filled with contradictions. In this section I focus on the impact of this contradictory environment—which I call the *half-changed world* (Fine, 2010)—on students' minds.

Half-changed world is a place where women are supposed to be equal to men, yet they still cannot get equal wage, and do not have same chances climbing the career ladder. It is a place where sexuality is not a taboo topic anymore, but sex is seen as something problematic and shameful. Here, members of the LGBT community continue to struggle against invisibility and discrimination despite the dramatic changes in social attitudes. Media texts contain mixed messages that reflect these inconsistencies. More and more strong female characters are created, yet these women are allowed to use their power only when they conform to the standards of White emphasized femininity. Men are increasingly portrayed as vulnerable, emotionally complex and family-oriented, yet White heterosexual men still occupy dominant roles and outnumber all other characters.

In addition, media texts still construct gender binary as an ideal even when they portray non-heterosexual identities.

Although Fine (2010) used the term to discuss attitudes towards gender, I believe that it describes a much bigger problem. Half-changed world is a place where not only feminism but also any social rights movement become commodified, where diversity and equality are well-established values – but also buzz words that people use without acting upon them. Half-changed world is a hegemonic system that adjusts to subversive movements by adopting their terminology but dismissing the impetus for change. People who live in this world have half-changed minds because many of them genuinely want the system to transform, yet do not understand how they themselves help it maintain the status quo.

The concept of half-changed minds seems to perfectly explain what I saw in West Cityville High School. Students I met there advocated for equality, and in the same breath said things that reinforced gender binary and gender difference. “Everybody should be equal,” “we are all different” – almost each student said something along these lines during our conversations, or in class. Hearing these statements, one might argue that these young people do not need media and gender classes anymore. However, taking into consideration the context—the half-changed world—it is not surprising that students share these ideas. Quite understandably, they want to embrace values that society deems positive. At the same time, these young people are not at fault for confusing teachers or having contradictory points of view. They are themselves confused, and it is not their individual problem but a social issue that needs to be addressed on the systemic level. I

argue that one way to deal with it is through education, by helping students become aware of their biases and filling in gaps in their knowledge.

Teachers should remember that half-changed minds are based on implicit attitudes which students are not aware of (Rudman, 2004). Because these biases are hidden, the approach to addressing them must be subtle. Teachers should not simply tell students that they are victims of ideologies. It is important to acknowledge students' agency and knowledge that they bring to the classroom. Taking into consideration the way a hegemonic system works, and the complex relationship between audiences and media texts, educators should guide young people in their exploration of the media instead of simply trying to protect them.

Students who express contradictory ideas are not duped by propaganda. Young people I met in West Cityville High School were smart, curious learners. Evidence shows that these students have bits and pieces of information about gender issues that they do not necessarily know how to combine in order to see the big picture. Media and gender classes should help students connect the dots, and address gender inequalities as systemic and not simply individual problems. For example, when students share their opinions or tell about their experiences, teachers can contextualize those connecting them to larger social issues. Discussing how hegemony is maintained through co-option, teachers can help students see themselves as part of a flawed system that does not want to change.

Are educators aware of students' half-changed minds? The teachers I talked with were content when young people agreed with their messages. Some instructors said that they can easily recognize the change in students' attitudes towards issues discussed in class. I argue that raising young people's awareness about gender inequalities is not the

same as helping them notice contradictions in their own opinions. The change that teachers were able to observe is an essential first step in dealing with young people's half-changed minds. However, much more work is necessary for helping students understand how they are implicated in hegemony. Teachers might not know that students consciously agree with them but keep their biases on a deeper level, without even realizing that.

Media and Gender Classes as Agenda-Setting

Observing the critical theory classes in West Cityville High School, I was torn by an inner conflict. I admired teachers for challenging students to think about issues of media and gender. At the same time I was not happy to see how the teachers were imposing their interpretations. I was skeptical whether these classes would really make a change in students' perceptions. When I started to talk with these young people about their experiences in these classes, I became more hopeful. I discovered an interesting effect that I describe below as agenda-setting.

Many students described the classes as a revelation, and named things that they noticed by critically analyzing media texts. Those who had been aware of gender stereotypes in the media before were able to discuss them in a more systematic way, and benefitted from new vocabulary provided by the teachers. When Michael and Rosey pointed out the prevalence of gender stereotypes in children's movies, all students were amazed and incredulous to find out that media texts they considered so innocent contain problematic messages.

Michael and Rosey were hoping that as soon as young people noticed gender stereotypes in media texts, they would not be able to unsee them. In most cases, this is

exactly what happened. Students jokingly complained that the teachers were ruining their fun of watching entertainment media. Some shared with Michael and Rosey their experiences of using the critical lenses outside of the class. A number of students felt sad because they saw their favorite media texts with new eyes. Others were annoyed as they felt forced to see the hidden ideologies – but even they said that they now saw “gender stuff” everywhere. Although different students experienced the classes differently and not everybody agreed with the teachers’ interpretations, most young people were in one way or another transformed by this experience.

My interviews with teachers outside of the case study showed that this kind of reaction is not exceptional. Julie, Loren, Bradley and Peter all said that every time they teach the classes on gender stereotypes in the media, they have students who are blown away by what they learn. Students’ reactions are not uniform. Some are excited by this revelation, others are angered, yet others do not want to believe in it. However, all the teachers said that students start to think more about gender stereotypes and notice more of them in popular media texts. This revelation also helps students to become more aware of gender issues outside of the media.

Talking to students both within and outside of the case study, I discovered that some of them were predisposed to be receptive to the teachers’ messages because of their backgrounds or personalities. A number of young people had experienced the pressure of gender norms. Others had heard about gender issues from friends and parents, or read about them online. The fact that many students were exposed to such information should not come as a surprise. After all, in the half-changed world it circulates far and wide. One can easily find communities where issues of gender are discussed, and sources that

provide information about gender inequalities. The benefit of media and gender classes is that they expose more students to these discussions, and help those who are already aware of them to deepen their knowledge and share their thoughts with each other.

I argue that this agenda setting is a first step in dealing with students' half-changed minds. How can they learn more about gender inequalities if they do not think about them, do not talk about them? Media and gender classes are instrumental in raising young people's awareness because they encourage students to discuss media representations that surround them.

Changing and Becoming Agents of Social Change

When I started working on this project, I was not sure that I would find any evidence of students' learning. I reminded myself that I am not doing evaluation of these classes, because I do not know how to assess their impact. However, as I was talking to students within the case study and outside of it I noticed two trends. I saw students' perception of media texts changing, and I heard stories about students sharing what they had learned with their friends and families.

In the previous section I talked about the agenda-setting impact of media and gender classes. One might say that this effect is only temporary. Young people might be initially excited about their discovery, but they will move on to other things. My conversations with students outside of the case study showed that it is not always the case. I was fortunate enough to talk to several students who had taken Michael's and Rosey's classes one or two years ago. My sample was not very big – only 11 people. However, the majority—7 out of 11—remembered many details of the classes, and told me that they were still using the critical lenses to deconstruct media texts. Students said

that the effect was the strongest for about a year after the course was over. It seemed that our conversation, and the opportunity to discuss the media and gender classes with other students in the focus group, have successfully brought the memories back. This evidence shows that students should have an opportunity to participate in media and gender classes on different levels of the educational program. Media and gender classes set the agenda, but we should make sure that this agenda remains fresh in students' minds.

My discussions with students showed that many of them are so excited about what they learn in media and gender classes that they are ready to engage in social action without teachers' prompting. The stories that I heard from students who had shared what they learned in class with their parents, siblings and friends showed that students want to talk about these issues, because they find them important. Some of the other teachers I talked to quoted students telling them similar stories, which means that this impact is not unique to West Cityville High School classes.

Students' potential for social action is remarkable. Michael and Rosey did not talk with them about civic responsibility. Although the teachers discussed how ideologies embedded in media texts promote gender inequalities, the main solution they offered was to pick media messages apart and expose harmful propaganda. Considering that, I was impressed that so many students used their knowledge in a socially responsible way. They might not have seen themselves as agents of social change. By the way students described their actions I could see that most of them simply wanted to share their discoveries and revelations with people close to them. Students' eagerness shows that they are potential agents of social change who just need to understand their power and

their possibilities. If teachers directly address different ways of engaging in activism, this can help young people become agents of social change.

Honoring Student's Interpretations

This case study suggests that media and gender classes might suffer from a lack of emphasis on students' interpretations and their background knowledge. This was demonstrated both in the teachers' style and in the analyzed educational materials. Honoring students' positions, however, could add an important dimension to the exploration of media stereotypes. Although students still have a lot to learn about the media—otherwise, why would they need media literacy education?—teachers should remember that young people come to classes with important knowledge about media texts and tools. The empowerment model of media literacy education suggests that instructors should treat young people as experts in their own right. Teachers can learn a lot from students—about the latest music trends, social network tools, and youth culture in general. They can then use this knowledge to better connect to students and their world.

Although most teachers balance between protectionist and empowerment approach, many may be tempted to shield students from problematic media messages. This protectionist stance is not unique. Public discourse about media tools and texts emphasizes the harmful effects they can have on children. In order to understand where teachers' attitudes are coming from, one can think about debates on sex education, the vast scholarship dedicated to media violence, or parent groups that advocate for more responsible media practices. Even students themselves—both within and outside of the

case study—reproduced this discourse. The belief in harmful ideologies embedded in media texts often fuels teachers to discuss gender stereotypes in the first place.

This leaning towards the protectionist approach is often combined with the lack of knowledge about the complexity of the relationship between media texts and audiences, and the sophistication of media representations. Unless educators who teach about media and gender took a course in media studies, they are most probably not aware of the knowledge accumulated by this discipline. Thus, it is not at all surprising that discussions in media and gender classes might lack some nuance. Teachers might be tempted to focus on their own interpretations of media texts and dismiss students' ideas, especially if they appear to reflect ideologies deemed harmful by teachers.

By focusing on their own interpretations the teachers might miss an opportunity to have more meaningful discussions with students and to use their experiences as teachable moments in the classroom. Applying the inquiry-based approach advocated by media literacy educators, teachers can start media and gender classes by asking students about their ideas and experiences, and then built classroom activities around gaps in students' knowledge that they will discover. During my discussions with students I heard ideas and stories that they did not tell in the classroom. There are multiple possible explanations for that, e.g., students' insecurity, fear of public speaking, peer pressure. Encouraging students to share their ideas about the media, teachers should take these obstacles into consideration. More importantly, they should learn to negotiate their own discomfort and defensiveness when faced with what they experience as resistance.

Considering the time constraints it would be unrealistic to assume that each one of twenty-something students in class would be able to share all their stories. In addition,

letting students express their opinions can lead to heated debates that teachers might want to avoid. However, the experiences of different teachers I talked to show that this kind of debates can be managed. Instead of arguing *with* students, teachers can serve as facilitators in debates *between* them, thus allowing young people to exchange their opinions in a respectful and polite manner.

Letting students express their ideas is challenging as young people can voice opinions that go against things teachers believe in. However, my discussions with students reveal that the majority of them share values of gender equality. Teachers should start from these basic values, and then move into nuances of students' opinions about gender. Many students already know something about gender stereotypes and inequalities – in this sense, they possess important pieces of a puzzle. In order to help students put these pieces together, teachers should first find out what they are. What do students know about media stereotypes? Where do they know it from? What do they think about gender inequalities? Why do they think it? These are important questions that teachers should not be afraid to ask. When they hear answers that expose students' biases, a conversation about implicit attitudes behind these biases can begin.

My discussions with students showed that most of them, even those who were resistant, agreed with the teachers. For teachers this kind of acceptance is the marker of success. I argue that if teachers do not find out their students' opinions, they might end up preaching to the choir. By trying to persuade students that media texts are harmful and that equality is important teachers will reinforce young people's assumptions without complicating them. Instead, teachers should focus on exposing contradictions of students'

half-changed minds, which can happen only if students are allowed to share their ideas, opinions, and interpretations openly in the classroom.

Resistance vs. Apathy

Teachers might not want students to express ideas that go against teachers' beliefs because they perceive them as resistance. However, students argue with teachers for a variety of reasons. Young people might point out things in teachers' interpretations that seem inconsistent to them because this is their way to learn. They might enjoy arguing, or feel the need to be oppositional because of their personal problems. Whatever the reason for students' resistance, their comments can reveal biases and gaps in their knowledge that teachers can use to deal with young people's half-changed minds. Students who disagree with the teacher should be allowed to voice their opinions because that will enrich the discussion. Moreover, teachers can use clashes in students' opinions in order to show them the value of having polite conversations about things young people disagree on.

My findings indicate that students who argue with teachers often agree with them on many key points. They enjoy learning, and see the value of discussing media and gender. Students' resistance can be frustrating for teachers, especially because of how passionate they are about issues discussed in class. My evidence suggests that resistance does not signal teachers' failure to reach students. When young people disagree with teachers and offer their own interpretation, teachers should see it as an inseparable part of the learning process, and not as annoying exception. It takes years to learn the theory behind the workings of media industry, and getting rid of one's implicit biases is a life-long enterprise. It is unlikely that teachers will be able to change students' half-changed

minds by working with them for a month, or even a year. I argue that teachers should expect resistance and think of strategies of using it to enhance the learning process.

It is important to remember that conflict can be a productive educational practice. When students who disagree with teachers' messages openly express their opinions, those who do agree receive a valuable opportunity to practice their communication and argumentation skills. Teachers should use students' resistance as an opportunity to enrich class discussions, and to teach students about the importance of having discussions about controversial issues. Allowing students to have heated debates in the classroom might be challenging. Considering constraints of the high school educational context, it might be unfair to encourage teachers to have heated debates with their students. However, debates can be turned into a valuable lesson about the importance of being civically engaged citizens in a democratic society. For example, teachers can start a school year by creating, together with students, rules for having a productive debate. This activity can be used as a teaching opportunity to emphasize the significance of valuing each other's voices and discussing all issues calmly and respectfully.

Although the teachers I worked with in West Cityville High school were mostly worried about students' resistance, I believe that the biggest problem in classes where issues of media and gender are discussed is apathy. When students do not want to learn about gender issues because they think that gender difference cannot cause any problems, they might disagree with teachers' criticism of media messages and disregard their call for change. Apathy can be combined with resistance of mistaken for it. By using students' opinions as a basis for respectful and organized debates teachers might be able to switch the apathy into active resistance. Once apathetic students get engaged in a

debate, they will have to grapple with gender issues, and in the process they might learn valuable lessons about themselves and the world around them.

Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect, Act

The premise of my study was to look at how students react to discussions about issues of gender in media literacy education classes. I argued that media literacy education offers an effective model that combines five elements: Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect and Act. Collecting data in West Cityville High School, talking with additional teachers, and analyzing educational materials available online, I was looking for these five elements.

The teachers that I observed in West Cityville High School emphasized one element of the model – media analysis. As Michael and Rosey’s main goal was to help students see problematic ideologies in texts that surround them, their primary approach was to pick these texts apart looking for hidden meanings. In their classes I noticed certain elements of access in the form of reading comprehension, elements of reflection in the form of journal entries, and elements of production in Hacked Ads exercise. Discussions about social action were practically absent. However, some students engaged in social action on their own initiative by sharing with their families and friends what they had learned in the classroom.

Data that I collected to contextualize the case study showed that such an emphasis on analysis is not uncommon. Loren, Julien, Bradley and Peter – all talked about helping students deconstruct media texts. All educational materials from my sample included media analysis in one way or the other. At the same time, the data outside of the case study showed ways of including other elements of the AACRA model in media and

gender classes. I argue that by balancing all the five elements teachers will be able to enrich students' learning, and deal with resistance and apathy.

The simplest way to have students exercise Access is by having them do reading and viewing comprehension activities. Lesson plans provided by Commonsense Media and Canada's Center for Media Literacy offer a number of those. However, Access is broader than that. Access competencies include using technology tools to find information, and being able to compare different media sources. This happens, for example, when teachers ask students to find and bring into class their own examples, or when they ask students how they found information that they are using in the classroom. Teachers who ask students to bring examples of media texts to the classroom find it to be an effective tool to create a space for deeper discussions, to connect to students, and to show them that their expertise with media texts and tools is valued.

Engaging students in media production can be tricky because it creates what Hobbs and Moore (2013) call "messy engagement" – a chaotic environment that might not be perceived as learning. Behavioral problems, noise, multiple opportunities to be distracted – all of these can challenge teachers' ability to have a sense of control over their class. My findings show that media production competencies can be developed in many ways. For example, contributing to a wiki page created for the class, or producing one's own blog can help students think about how media messages are created and disseminated. In order to effectively incorporate media production in their classrooms, teachers need a clear policy that allows them to include the messy engagement in their learning process without turning the class into chaos.

There are multiple ways of incorporating reflection into media and gender classes. For example, teachers can ask students to describe their experiences with certain types of media texts, think about the impact that gender stereotypes have on their lives, or about the way they might reproduce stereotypes with their own actions. Each classroom assignment can end with a small reflection activity that will allow young people to share their experiences and give the teacher their feedback about the assignment. This practice will not only help students to better understand their own practices, but also to feel that their opinions are valued in the classroom. Teaching students to reflect on how they use and interpret media texts is an important part of developing young people's media literacy. Reflection can help students connect their personal experiences with teachers' message. It can also a way to make students aware of their biases, which is essential if teachers want to deal with students' half-changed minds.

The final, fifth media literacy competency that crowns the other four is the ability to use one's knowledge and skills to make the world a better place. Although incorporating activities that help students develop this ability might be challenging, it is recommendable to at least discuss with young people the importance of social action. My findings suggest that, after media and gender classes, students are eager to share their revelations with friends and families. Some may be so fired up by learning about gender inequalities that they will want to learn what they can do to fight against them. Teachers should use students' excitement and enthusiasm to teach them about the importance of activism.

Media production and media analysis activities should incorporate discussions about the constructed nature of media texts. Some students I met in West Cityville High

School were left with questions and misperceptions about the way media texts are produced. My conversations with the teachers outside of the case study suggest that these reactions are not uncommon. Students might question the need to analyze media texts if they believe that media industries simply meet audiences' demands, and that all people who participate in media production have equal opportunities to shape media texts. Only when students understand sufficiently well the power dynamics that stands behind each media text, they will be able to better understand how media representations of gender reproduce the status quo of hegemony.

Half-Changed Minds and Negotiated Readings

In the beginning of my study, I set out to explore whether students are developing oppositional readings of media texts, or whether they are simply reproducing the dominant reading (Hall, 1980). Having discovered how a hegemonic system works through students' half-changed minds, I saw that these young people are able to move beyond dominant readings, but they are still unable to produce oppositional ones. This should not necessarily be seen as a problem. Although teachers would like students to pick apart problematic media texts right away, learning to be critical thinkers and responsible media producers takes time.

Half-changed minds can be deceptive because they might create an illusion that the teacher's work is done. Educators need to keep that in mind, and work on devising strategies of detecting students' implicit biases. At the same time, negotiated readings that students produce by partially buying into dominant ideologies and partially rejecting them signal that young people are at least trying to challenge hegemony, albeit in an incomplete manner. In this sense, students' negotiated readings reveal a positive change.

Although it is undoubtedly a problem that young people might advocate for gender equality without fully understanding what it means, it is certainly better than rejecting gender equality altogether.

The contribution of this dissertation study to communication theory lies in building upon the encoding/decoding model to describe the process of challenging hegemony as it manifests itself in people's worldview. All the students that I encountered in West Cityville High School can be described as producing negotiated readings. Media literacy educators aim to help people develop critical autonomy (Masterman, 1985), which, using communication theory, we can describe as the ability to produce oppositional readings. The question then is, how can teachers in media and gender classrooms help students understand their own negotiated readings and move beyond them?

One possible strategy that teachers might use would involve drawing more on theories of the communication field, such as the encoding/decoding model. More broadly, using reception and audience theories to discuss how media texts might influence one's gender identity would usefully complicate the discussion about media representations of gender. This would help teachers to move away from viewing students as mere victims of ideologies embedded in media texts. At the same time, reception and audience theories would allow students who think that the media have no influence on them to question their seemingly subversive readings and uses of media texts.

Applying Best Practices

It is one thing to give advice to somebody else, and a different thing – to try following your own recommendations. In this dissertation I use my findings to describe

best practices for educators who teach media and gender classes. These practices might sound good in theory, but do they really work? I had an opportunity to reflect on this question as I was teaching *Gender and the American Mass Media* course to undergraduate students during the spring of 2015.

It is important to note that I was teaching a university level course, while my recommendations are for high school instructors. Challenges that I encountered in my class are different from challenges of public schools. Nevertheless, these educational contexts also have things in common. For example, undergraduate students, especially freshmen, usually are recent high school graduates. While a more substantial analysis is necessary to determine effectiveness of these practices, at this point I can use my experiences to reflect on my own suggestions.

Using the AACRA model, I made sure to include a variety of activities that would help my students develop different media literacy competencies. I argue above that media analysis is often prioritized in media education classrooms. Indeed, I spent a substantial amount of time picking apart media texts with my students. I was also able to incorporate Access, Create, Reflect and Act activities. For example, in terms of Access, students did research in class looking for information on particular topics online, and then discussed how they had chosen and used media sources that they had found. On a different occasion they learned how to use a media tool called Mozilla Popcorn Maker to analyze music videos. In yet another class students produced simple videos using a program called Screencast-o-Matic. In terms of Create, students worked on multimedia projects in the computer lab, producing podcasts and videos on topics connected to class discussions. Almost every class had elements of reflection. I allowed students to draw on their

experiences as they were discussing the role of the media in people's lives. I also asked students to reflect on all assignments, and on the class as a whole. Students' feedback gave me an opportunity to further deconstruct on my own teaching practices. Finally, I incorporated into the course a discussion about types of social action, and had students look for campaigns that either raise awareness about problematic media representations or use media tools to combat gender inequalities.

In my dissertation I argue that conversations about media representations of gender may inadvertently reinforce gender binary. During the semester, I had in-depth discussions with students about gender dualism and intersectionality; I also made sure to stress the limitations of talking about media representations of "men" and "women." Using my findings I claim that it is necessary to help students go beyond dividing representations into "bad" and "good" ones, and beyond trying to make media portrayals "realistic." I had students discuss the nature of stereotypes and the complexity of realities that people inhabit. I pointed out that by emphasizing the dichotomy of "accurate" vs. "inaccurate" representations we considerably simplify the role of media texts in people's lives. Students read and discussed texts that highlighted the possibility of multiple interpretations of media texts, and the complexity of the relationship between audiences and the media.

I spent one entire class explaining to students the concepts of hegemony and co-option. Later on, we referred to this discussion on many occasions. Although not all students used these concepts during our discussions, in their final reflections several mentioned that learning about hegemony was a valuable experience.

I tried to do my best to make the class a safe space where students could express a variety of opinions without a fear of being reprimanded. When students' opinions revealed their biases or gaps in their knowledge, I never directly criticized them. Rather, I allowed other students to point out problematic ideas, and asked questions that allowed everybody to look at different aspects of the argument. I gave students an opportunity to explore different topics, debate with me and each other, and criticize class readings. In their final reflections for the course many pointed out that they enjoyed open-ended discussions, and appreciated the safe environment that I created.

It might seem that all the best practices that I describe in my dissertation worked well in my classroom. I have to admit that I also had a number of important challenges.

Although I did incorporate activities that allowed students to discuss social action, I was not able to have them engage in actual social action as part of the course. Increasing students' civic engagement is not easy; to do community outreach, an educator must have competencies that might go beyond her training as media educator or communication scholar. Community outreach is time-consuming and difficult to coordinate. I argued above that social action should be the culmination of developing media literacy competencies as only through activism we can trouble hegemony. However, activities that involve social action are also the most difficult to incorporate into the classroom.

Hearing students' discussions and reading their reflections I could see that I was not able to fully explain the complexity of media representations, audience's reactions, stereotypes, realities reflected in media texts, and ideologies. Some students, even by the end of the course, still discussed media representations in terms of simple dichotomies, and talked about negative media effects without complicating their statements. When

students used such concepts as hegemony and co-option, I sometimes suspected that they did not entirely understand these terms. I argue above that it is imperative to help students understand the complexity of the role that the media play in people's lives. However, this complexity is not easy to communicate. If I struggled doing it on the university level, it will probably be even more challenging for teachers who work in high schools.

During my media and gender course, I strived to create an environment free from judgement, where everybody would feel comfortable sharing their opinions, and where debates would be amicable and productive. However, I soon realized that this environment is not easy to maintain. I wanted students to challenge each other and myself, but I realized that I did not enjoy teaching through conflict. I started the course by emphasizing the importance of respecting each other's opinions, being polite and patient. Yet a number of students had strong opinions about issues discussed in class, and were not willing to accept that somebody with a different point of view might not necessarily be stupid or mean. In their reflections several students noted that I allowed some of their peers to voice what they called "unacceptable opinions." Clearly, my modelling of empathic dialogue did not convince them.

The challenges that I had experienced allowed me not only to further reflect on the practices that I am proposing, but also to formulate some directions for the future research. It is necessary to further explore how we can teach students about complex theories and notions; how we can foster a productive discussion in a classroom where controversial gender issues are discussed; and how we can help students engage in social action. Future research should continue investigating how classes where educators combine gender studies, feminism theory, communication theory and media literacy

education can effectively help students challenge the hegemonic system that allows gender inequalities to exist.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation demonstrates that media literacy education is an effective way of dealing with students' half-changed minds. Classes where young people analyze media, create media texts and reflect on their media use are popular among students because the media play such an important part in young people's lives. Talking about media representations is a great way to discuss gender inequalities. However, to fully use the potential of media and gender classes, teachers need to go beyond the protectionist approach. Educators should acknowledge the importance of students' experiences with the media, and allow young people to have agency as they are exploring media texts and their own attitudes toward them. At the same time, it is important to take into consideration constraints that teachers face when they choose to have media and gender classes. Although their approach may display certain limitations, the latter can be explained by the public education system that these teachers are a part of.

Taking into consideration all the findings, I finish my dissertation with a number of recommendations that might help schools and individual teachers make media and gender classes more effective:

- 1) Media and gender classes are not part of a standard educational program; thus, educators who teach them choose to do so because they are passionate about the subject. This passion might lead them to lean towards a protectionist approach, which means that educators might simplify the relationship between media texts and audiences in order to get across the message that media texts are harmful. In order to have instructors with a variety of opinions about the media teach media

and gender classes, it is necessary to make these classes a part of public school programs.

- 2) Teachers should also have an opportunity to learn about the complex relationship between media texts and audiences. That will further help them to find a balance between protectionism and empowerment. The knowledge about active audiences will help teachers make classroom conversations more nuanced.
- 3) My findings demonstrate that these classes have an important agenda-setting effect, but that it can fade over time. Ideally, students should have an opportunity to learn about media and gender starting from the elementary school. They should have such discussion at least for one unit every year, and educational materials need to get more and more complex over time. Then by high school students will be ready to talk about the sophistication of media texts and the hegemonic system that the media reinforce.
- 4) Educators who teach media and gender classes should take into consideration half-changed minds – both students’ and their own. Classes should involve activities that expose students’ implicit attitudes and hidden biases. Teachers should also acknowledge how they themselves are implicated in the hegemonic system. They should use inquiry-based conversations in order to reveal inconsistencies in students’ beliefs, and then built classes around gaps in young people’s knowledge.
- 5) Media and gender classes should develop the five elements of the AACRA model in a balanced way. Even if media analysis still remains prioritized, it is important that teachers also help students reflect on their relationship with the media, use

media tools to access information, and create media texts. It is crucial that students know how to use skills and knowledge that they acquire in media literacy classes for meaningful social action. Teachers should explain that social action does not necessitate going to demonstrations or becoming a politician. Young people can engage in social action by creating a blog or a vlog, starting an online campaign, stopping a bully, talking with their friends and parents, or starting a Gay and Straight Alliance in their school.

- 6) Teachers should have more opportunities to get professional development (PD) where they would learn about media literacy education, and scholarship on media representations. It is necessary that teachers get an opportunity to learn about a balanced media education approach, and about the complexity of media representations of gender. Such PD courses should help educators to go beyond the simple dichotomy of “bad” vs. “good” media representations, and to consider the multitude of “realities” that the media represent or hide. Ideally, teachers would be also able to learn how to explain to students the role of stereotypes in our culture.
- 7) Classes about media and gender should include a discussion about the hegemonic nature of media representations of gender. Students should have an opportunity to learn how the system of hegemony works, what co-option is, and how hegemony can be reinforced or troubled by their everyday actions.
- 8) Finally, media and gender classes should involve conversations about gender binary, gender as a continuum, and intersectionality. These concepts are crucial for understanding how we construct and perceive our gender identities. Therefore,

teachers should not simply mention them in one class, but use them as a running theme throughout the whole unit. Teachers should also have an opportunity to discuss with students the variety of feminist movement(s) and the complexity of feminist theory, in order to dispel problematic stereotypes about feminism that young people might have.

This dissertation shows that media and gender classes are an effective way of helping students learn about gender issues. Even when these classes have certain limitations, the importance of drawing young people's attention to the way media texts influence their gender identities cannot be underestimated. Future research should further explore how we can help high school students understand the workings of hegemony, the complexity of media representations, and the performative nature of gender.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CASE STUDY STUDENTS (SET I)

- 1) Who is your favorite media character (in a film, book, TV show, or video game)?
What do you like about this character?
- 2) What is a stereotype? Can you give examples?
- 3) What is a gender stereotype?
- 4) Is there anything stereotypical about your favorite character?
- 5) Is your favorite character based on any gender stereotypes?
- 6) Are there a lot of gender stereotypes in media texts (films, books, TV shows, video games) that you know? Can you give examples?
- 7) Can you think of any ways stereotypes about men and women can make your life easier or create problems? If so, can you give some examples?
- 8) Do you think that the media should contain less gender stereotypes? Explain your opinion.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CASE STUDY STUDENTS (SET II)

- 1) How would you summarize what you learned in this class so far?
- 2) What new things you have noticed about the way the media portray men and women?
- 3) What have you learned about gender stereotypes in the media?
- 4) Did you noticed any gender stereotypes before this class?
- 5) Do you ever disagree with any of the teachers' ideas and interpretations? If so, could you give examples?
- 6) How do you like analyzing media texts through the critical lenses?
- 7) How did you like watching *Toy Story* in class?
- 8) How did you like watching *Pocahontas*?
- 9) What did you think about the Hacked Ads exercise? What do you think the teacher wanted you to learn?
- 10) Have you used the critical lenses outside of the class? If so, could you give examples?
- 11) Have you talked with your friends or family about the critical lenses?
- 12) In general, how are you liking the class?
- 13) Some people say that men and women should be equal, but there will inevitably be some differences between them. What is your opinion on that?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR CASE STUDY TEACHERS

- 1) How long have you been teaching?
- 2) How did you get into teaching?
- 3) What brought you to N school?
- 4) How would you describe your teaching philosophy?
- 5) Are you familiar with media literacy education?
- 6) Are you familiar with critical pedagogy?
- 7) Do you use principles of media literacy education and critical pedagogy in your classes? If so, can you give examples?
- 8) Why is talking with students about gender stereotypes in the media important for you?
- 9) How do you usually structure your classes on media and gender?
- 10) How do students usually react when you talk to them about gender representations in the media?
- 11) Have you noticed any difference in reactions of boys and girls?
- 12) Have you noticed any difference in reactions of students of different races?
- 13) Have you experienced any resistance from students? If so, describe instances of resistance.
- 14) What are your strategies for overcoming this resistance?
- 15) How do you know that students get your message, or that they disagree with you?
- 16) What materials/resources do you use in class?