

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 17 Number 37

December 30, 2016

The Image of the Female Body in Contemporary Society: An Approach from the Arts Classroom

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Citation: Gillanders, C., & Franco-Vázquez, C. (2016). The image of the female body in contemporary society: An approach from the arts classroom. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 17(37). Retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/v17n37/>.

Abstract

Project-based learning and artistic creation provide future secondary teachers with an opportunity to experience and to reflect on the importance of including a gender perspective in education. This article describes a case study where students of the Postgraduate course in Secondary Teacher Training explore the image of the female body in comics, publicity, beauty contests and the world of fashion with the aim of planning and designing a project that can be undertaken by school-age children and promoting the discussion of issues such as equity and equality of rights and opportunities for women and men in subjects they will later on have to teach in a secondary school classroom.

Introduction

According to the *World Health Organization* violence against women is still prevailing in the 21st Century, offering us overwhelming data that confirms this fact. How can we address teenagers' beliefs and attitudes in relation to male behaviour perceived as natural? How can we contribute from our Arts classroom to a turning point in society's perception of the female body?

The project we describe below narrates a research experience that took place during the second semester of the academic year 2014-15 as part of the subject *Innovation in Teaching and Introduction to Educational Research in Arts*. This module is part of the Postgraduate course in Secondary Teacher Training, a degree which is compulsory in Spain for teaching at secondary schools. The starting point of the project was to investigate the different aspects related to the perception secondary students have about women. In this way, our future secondary teachers would have an opportunity of experiencing for themselves how to undertake a gender perspective artistic project in the school classroom.

This module is taken by students that come from different backgrounds. Some students have studied Architecture while others come from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Music Conservatoires, Audiovisual Communication, or Art History. The result is a group of students with different interests allowing diversity in the composition of the working groups. Thus, three groups were organized. During the first days these groups studied the possibilities the Arts classroom offers in relation to the contribution of the formation of youngsters' perception about gender issues. Different themes were chosen, such as women in publicity, the stereotype concept of women, and social networks and their influence in adolescent behaviour. In particular, students were interested in proposals related to the knowledge contents of the subjects they would later on have to teach, thinking of ways to carry out the proposal in a school classroom. Students made a previous search on topics that might interest them, especially those that best fit their interest and were linked to image and art related to the field of gender with possible implications in education. Finally, from the wide range of possibilities, the themes selected were: gender perspective in comics, hyper-sexualization of early childhood: unit of study: my body, my decision, and gender and publicity.

First Steps: The Theoretical Background

Taking into account the definition of a case study offered by Creswell (1998) "a case study is an exploration of a "bounded system" or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (p. 61) and in an attempt to answer our study question, *How can we as teachers contribute to the inclusion of gender issues in our classrooms?*, we decided to conduct a case study research.

Yin (2003) states very clearly that the research design must be developed bearing in mind five components

1. a study's questions;
2. its propositions, if any;
3. its unit(s) of analysis;
4. the logic linking the data to the propositions; and
5. the criteria for interpreting the finding. (p. 21)

The importance of experience has long been proclaimed. From Dewey's seminal work *Art as Experience* (1934) to Gardner's, *The Disciplined Mind* (2000), we find enough reasons that justify the need to provide our students with projects that engage them and involve them actively. Regarding this issue, Gardner (2000) mentions

the importance of action and activity. The brain learns best and retains most when the organism is actively involved in exploring physical sites and materials and asking questions to which it actually craves answers. Merely passive experiences tend to attenuate and have little lasting impact. (p.82)

The exploration of gender issues linked to a critical interest-critical theory would undoubtedly encourage our students to re-think their role as future teachers. Or in the words of Morrow and Brown (1994, cit. in Creswell, 1998, p. 81) "the desire to comprehend and, in some case, transform (through praxis) the underlying orders of social life—those social and systemic relations that constitute society" could contribute to a slight change in society's perception of the female body. Thus, we had now our proposition: to explore the impact of conducting a research project related to gender perspective in future secondary school teachers. For this reason, we decided to undertake with our students the research project we explain below during the second semester. All the eighteen students registered in the course, *Innovation in Teaching and Introduction to Educational Research in Arts*, took part in the project. Following Yin (2003), measures for validity and reliability were taken into account. Both of us as teachers would be present during the design and development of the project, taking notes, asking for feedback from our key informants, and exchanging points of view.

Literature Review: Gender Issues in the Galician Secondary Curriculum

Unconscious socialization is an obstacle to gender equality. Mass media has a great responsibility in the socialization process and in the roles that youngsters adopt in society. The simple interaction with others can be considered a way of socialization (Revuelta, 2012). According to the study *Youngsters and Gender* undertaken by the Reina Sofía Centre (2014), although new generations show more flexible attitudes, the inequality in the labour market, the distribution of domestic chores or the looking after of older people and/or children as well

as the persistence of sexist stereotypes, proves that society is not so equal in everyday life as it seems on paper. Unfortunately, news reaches us about gender violence nearly every day. Thus, the core issue, as Alberdi (2004) points out, is the socialization dimension. Social culture does not change easily from one moment to another. We live in an unequal society with ideas deeply rooted in our minds and very difficult to change. The Spanish culture is patriarchal and assumes that women's roles are different to those attributed to men. Many messages that the mass media sends out reproduces this scheme. Whilst we do not change this, we will never find full equality. What can be done by the education system? What can we do as teachers? As Olesen (2000, p. 215) states in an encouraging way "at the beginning of the new millennium, the qualitative feminist research is highly diversified, dynamic, and absolutely strict with its practitioners, its followers, and its critics."

It is obvious, as Díaz Moledo (2005) points out, "the training of teachers is a key element to overcome social constructs that turn sexual difference into a source of inequality and discrimination when certain behaviour and ideologies are legitimized and some social and cultural activities are considered more important than others" (p. 3). In the same sense, the OECD's report states "education plays an important role in ensuring that women and men have the same opportunities in their personal and professional lives, through formal schooling, shaping attitudes and transforming behaviour." The Postgraduate course in Secondary Teacher Training, where the experience we will describe took place, does include in its blueprint competencies related to gender perspectives (See Table 1):

Table 1

Professional competencies of future secondary teachers included in the Postgraduate course in Secondary Teacher Training

GENERAL COMPETENCIES
To design and to develop learning environments, paying special attention to equity, to equality of rights and opportunities for men and women, to citizenship training and to the respect of human rights that enable living in society, decision-making and the construction of a sustainable future.
SPECIFIC COMPETENCIES
To relate education with environment to comprehend the educational role of family and community, both in the acquisition of competencies and learning as well as in education in relation to rights and liberties, equal rights and opportunities for men and women and in equal treatment and non-discrimination of disabled people.
SPECIFIC COMPETENCIES RELATED TO THE ARTS MODULE
To know and to apply innovative teaching proposals.
To critically analyse teaching practices, good practices and guidance using quality

indicators.

To identify problems relating to teaching and learning of the Arts subjects and to propose alternatives and solutions.

To know and to apply methodologies, basic research techniques and educational evaluation and to be able to design and to develop research, innovation and evaluation projects.

The Secondary Compulsory Education curriculum of the Galician autonomous community also includes references to gender perspective. The Decree 86/2015, of June 25th, in its article 4.2 states

The ministry with competencies in education will promote the development of effective equality between men and women.... In the same way, it will promote the learning of prevention and peaceful conflict resolution in all spheres of personal, family and social life..., the equal respect of men and women...the teaching programme should include the prevention of gender violence [and in the classroom] behaviour and sexist contents and stereotypes that mean discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity [should be avoided]. (p. 25442)

In relation to the different subjects that comprise the secondary compulsory education we can verify the intention of the local Educational Administration to introduce the gender perspective in school classrooms. For example, in the subjects related to Music the study of women as composers is included. This is an important step because, although music is considered a feminine subject, paradoxically, there exists a dominance of men in the music professions with outstanding reputation (Gaunt & Hallam, 2009, p. 274). In this sense, both Dibben (2002) and Green (1997) express that women are not well represented in the professional music world. As MacDonald, Hargreaves and Miell (2009) state, “a number of researchers have highlighted how cultural expectations and hegemonic influences affect the developing music identities of males and females differently, both in terms of musical tastes and participation” (p. 464). And, in the subjects related to Art (both visual and plastic), women artists should have greater visibility because for a long time they have been forgotten by art historians, creating stereotypes about women in relation to art and ignoring their own perception (Alario, 2002, p. 88).

The Inclusion of Gender Perspective: An Approach from the Arts Classroom

The aims of this project can be summarized as follows:

1. To make visible the possibilities Arts Education offers us to tackle educational problems.
2. To sensitize a group of students (future secondary teachers) with possibilities of influencing generations of youngsters about gender issues.

3. To provide a cooperative learning experience.

The different groups had to undertake a research project related to the theme, framed in an artistic research methodology. The artistic creation, where image and music was present, was regarded as important as the literature review. During three weeks, each group had the opportunity of organizing the distribution of the workload in an autonomous way, adopting different roles according to their background.

All the groups decided to start with a search in different databases and write an essay where images would be as important as the text itself. They decided also to create a *Whatsapp* group to be in constant communication with each other so as to be able to answer doubts when working alone at home. The project became their life for three weeks; it occupied all their attention during that time.

We often even got to recognize sexist behaviour that we did not recognize as such before and it helps us not only to understand better some of the problems that feminism tries to fight, but also allows us to assess our own ideas and actions as future artists and educators.... To have both an artistic reference as well as images to support our work is a much more effective way to approach and illustrate the problem to the public and to ourselves. Both artists we chose, helped to provide a new perspective thanks to the message they convey. (T.S., student).

In the last session presentations were made, both students and teachers taking part in the final assessment. We include below the three projects undertaken.

Gender Perspective in Comics

In this study, the unequal presence of women in relation to men is reviewed in comics. Issues such as the late onset of feminine characters, the different roles that are adopted, the techniques used for their design, the postures usually adopted, and the uniforms which characterize them are studied. After a detailed analysis, students presented their final comments which, in the case of adolescent consumption, can be regarded as disturbing:

- In superhero comics a patriarchal conception of society's way of organizing roles according to gender prevails.
- The physical connotation of women is manipulated, portraying them as sexual objects and advertising purposes for a masculine public. Nevertheless, the incorporation of the feminine public as readers of comic strips is slowly changing these roles.
- In relation to human behaviour, the girlfriend of the hero aspires to marry and start a family; on the contrary, the evil girl wants to drag the hero to sexual and legal

corruption. The women stereotypes include women that do not have initiative or, if they do, it is with a wicked purpose.

Hyper-sexualization of Early Childhood: Unit of Study: My Body, My Decision

In this case, the group decided to design a unit of study with the aim of reviewing the conceptions of the female body and the early erotization of girls in relation to beauty contests, music idols, journals, and the world of fashion. The report reveals the hyper-sexualization, i.e. the process in which girls and boys mature earlier forced by their parents, moving into adulthood before time. The main victims are usually girls having to adopt stereotype roles and behaviour. This issue has disturbing connotations, too, due to the use youngsters have of their personal image in social networks: postures, clothes, imitations of famous idols. The main problem concerns also adults, publicists, and businessmen/businesswomen that sell products and images of girls with a high sexual content.

This unit of study pretends to include these contents in the school classroom to provide students with the necessary tools to discern manipulation in media and to recognize the danger that some attitudes in social networks can promote.

Gender and Publicity

In this project, the group reviewed the corporal image of women throughout Art History and publicity. Visual culture is very important nowadays and teenagers are exposed to the control mechanisms of mass media. Students are not aware of this power. In this case, the group highlighted the influence that mass media has in the forming of unreal archetypes in teenagers, marketing, and multinationals.

After a brief introduction related to the concept of publicity and the relationship between gender and Art—with examples from Masaccio, Tiziano and Manet—the group included references of the different models of women in television publicity. Another interesting topic that was mentioned was related to publicity and eating disorders including three examples of the campaigns of a fast food restaurant, a soap company, and children's toys. Many clichés were debated such as “*sometimes a nice face is better than a good CV*” (Group reflection).

Therefore, it is important to realize that advertisements are shaping the image of women at will, treating it as an object. If advertising expands the range of proposed models to favour the identification of different people, self-esteem would rise. Still, whilst there are models of ideal beauty, people will remain outside the system. (group reflection).

Implications for Practice

Students were asked to answer some questions to assess all the experiences undertaken. This feedback, added to the notes taken during the project development, made it possible to underline the following results.

In Relation to Students' Experience

As future teachers, therefore with the capacity of influencing the thoughts of a great number of adolescents, our students state that they must make visible some issues that are still not treated in an equal manner in today's society and expressed their need to contribute to the change of mind that would allow women to occupy the place they deserve.

It is a controversial issue in certain situations, but I think we can do a lot through the Arts classroom, where we should get more involved with all the social injustices. I think it has been very interesting. (U.A., student)

The fact of including this project in the Master's degree brought as a consequence that many students felt the need to include this theme not only in their daily lives but in their future school classrooms as well. Participants, future secondary school teachers, saw themselves capable of undergoing similar projects with their students, pointing out that they would be capable of encouraging teenagers to tackle their beliefs.

From my point of view, taking part in this project made me aware of the existence of a child and youth problem that is transmitted alarmingly by the media, promoting sexist and chauvinistic attitudes in youth that can have an impact on gender violence, as different sectors linked to the socio-educational field have diagnosed.

I think these projects are of great interest because they open a social debate and encourage critical thinking about realities and attitudes present in the daily lives of young people, promoting gender equality among this sector of the population. I also believe that we are a society completely linked to the image, so proposals such as these make students connect more with this type of content and can make them feel more motivated. (M.V.M., student).

As stated above, the experience had a positive impact in students' daily life. The group that investigated hyper-sexualization of early childhood and designed the unit of study: "My Body, My Decision," took part—by their own initiative—in the conference "Blended Arts: Women's Thread" in Santiago de Compostela. Their presentation "*was very interesting and led to a dialogue with the audience which was very, very enriching*" (J.F., student).

Our students were pleasantly surprised to see that different issues could be addressed from an identical initial approach. Once the papers were presented in the classroom, we offered a time for dialogue and exchange of views. During the dialogue, they appreciated the opportunity to delve into some issues that are known by all, but had never been discussed during their school years. Students were aware that advertising handles the figure of woman inappropriately, that in comics male protagonists prevail and that the behaviour in social networks has a touch of exhibitionism that worries them, but they had never become aware of the aggressive use of the image of women's body. The different presentations made by the three groups helped them to see clearly all the dimensions of the media manipulation.

With this incursion they analysed this worrying issue and concluded that education should address gender to stop, or at least, to provide young people with resources and measures that serve them as protection against harmful behaviour.

In Relation with Teachers' Expectations

The experience was also gratifying for the teachers in that it addressed the proposals of methodology renewal required in this 21st Century. Coordination and joint collaboration allows complementary views that enrich the debates that take place in relation to the contents of the subject. Project-based learning together with artistic creation promoted the motivation of the students as well as a cooperative attitude, helping them to experience the teacher they would like to be. After each session, the teachers met to discuss impressions and notes taken throughout the afternoon. The fact that one of them has more than 25 years of teaching experience, made it possible to talk about the internal conflicts that arise with this kind of approach. Statements such as the one we include below, allow a kind of mentoring system for the personal and professional development of the younger teacher.

I feel uncomfortable when students are working in groups. I don't know what do, where to be during all that time. What am I suppose to do? Walk around? Ask questions? Just leave them to work by themselves? (C.G., teacher).

Both teachers walked around the room and stopped to exchange comments on the relaxed atmosphere of the classroom. Similar experiences can be undertaken in other subjects thanks to the confidence gained throughout the course.

For both teachers it was the first time they introduced gender perspective in this course, although one had spent years working on some aspects of gender, especially on the invisibility of women artists.

The results pleased me because once we proposed the topic students began to work with full independence, highly motivated. Our task was to guide and help them when they got lost, as they thought it was very interesting and they wanted to cover everything. Some students were already sensitized towards this subject and felt very comfortable from the beginning; others were surprised by the proposal and how to approach it from Arts Education. Everyone engaged in the work with great dedication, distributing tasks according to their strengths. Having carried out this project helps me to reaffirm the importance of the inclusion of gender with secondary students and since then there is always a proposal related to women and art in my groups. (C.F., teacher).

In Relation to the Research Undertaken

The treatment of the image of women in publicity is still not adequate in spite of the existence of policies on gender equality. Making this visible would help counteract the harmful effects of the treatment of the women's body as an object in audiovisual media. Many adolescents imitate the behaviour promoted by social networks of videos or photographs that do not respect the image of women.

The projects undertaken by our students have the advantage of being able to be dealt with in an interdisciplinary way, allowing teachers from other subjects to take part (Literature, Social Sciences, Philosophy, etc.).

The competencies which the curriculum for secondary school teachers are very open and projects like the one we describe can very well fit into the development of the "social and civic competence." The freedom secondary school teachers have to design activities that they will propose to their students during the school year, makes it possible to introduce projects related to gender. Rather than changing the curriculum, it would be important to sensitize future secondary teachers about the need to work on gender issues with teenagers in order to form more sensitive, critical, and empathetic citizens.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the participating students in this experience for their willingness and commitment. This experience was worthy of a second prize in the teaching category of the VI Edition of the prizes for the introduction of gender perspective in teaching and research granted by the University of Santiago de Compostela.

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Carol Gillanders, Ph.D., obtained her degree as flutist in Argentina in 1987. She completed her training in music theory, piano, and singing in Spain. She was awarded an extraordinary doctorate prize by the USC for her doctoral thesis, “Resources in Music Education in Teacher Practices in Galicia.” Since 2000, she teaches music education at the Faculty of Education of the University of Santiago de Compostela. She is member of the Educational Technology Research Group directed by Beatriz Cebreiro and has worked on various European projects such as ICT-Go-Girls!, Cloud Computing for School Networking and Create Your Future: Career Counseling for Cancer Survivors. Her research interests include service-learning, interdisciplinary arts projects, and ICT. She is co-author of a guide for teachers for accompanying songs as well as several articles related to music education.

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