

Developing Media and Gender Literacy in the High School Classroom

Elizaveta Friesem, Ph.D.
Media Education Lab
lisa.friesem@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the ability of media literacy classes to help students learn about issues of gender by having them critically engage with media texts. It is based on the premise that principles of media literacy education and pedagogy of multiliteracies are essential for helping people engage, in a reflective and transformative way, in communication practices mediated through technology. I used ethnographic methods (observations, as well as individual and group interviews) and the case study approach to answer the following questions: How do media and gender classes help students reflect on their relationship with the media? What changes do media and gender programs produce in students' perceptions and actions? How do students use what they have learned in class for their lives outside of the classroom? I discovered that media and gender classes have a long-lasting agenda-setting effect, and are potentially able to encourage students to engage in social action (broadly understood).

Keywords: media literacy education, multiliteracies, gender, media representations, social action

This study explores the ability of media literacy classes to help students learn about issues of gender by having them critically engage with media texts. It is based on the idea that new literacy pedagogy should develop multiple modes of meaning-making (New London Group, 1996). Our identities, which exist on the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, class, physical ability, and religion, are shaped through interactions with a variety of social institutions. These institutions include family (Early Gender Socialization, n. d.; Fine, 2010), school (Pascoe, 2007), religion (Rubin, 1993[1984])—and the media, which enter the life of children from an early age (Zero to eight, 2011). Developing life-long skills in school should go beyond traditional literacy pedagogy of reading and writing, and help students understand the role that mediated communication plays in shaping their gender identities.

Scholars argue that the media reproduce gender binary (Gill, 2007), which limits our opportunities and reinforces inequalities (Butler, 1990). New literacy necessary for deconstructing problematic ideologies of gender embedded in media texts (Lemish, 2008) can be developed through media literacy education (MLE) and pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996). While MLE aims to help people better understand power imbalances that exist in society (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs and Moore, 2013), pedagogy of multiliteracies focuses on developing students' ability to use technology for ethical and effective communication. MLE efforts can help young people reflect on the importance of becoming agents of social change and make a first step towards civic engagement (Hobbs, 2011). This is similar to the "Applying" component of multiliteracies pedagogy (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009), also known as Transformed Practice.

Classes that touch upon issues of media and gender can be found in a number of colleges and universities, and in some K-12 schools—although they are not necessarily

labeled as MLE, or explicitly informed by pedagogy of multiliteracies. 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 classes, we do not know yet how to answer such questions, as: What elements of these programs are the most effective in making young people think about the way the media shape their gendered identities? Do these programs have a long-lasting impact on students' perceptions? Do they help students engage in social action?

Although media and gender classes can be found on different stages of the educational system, in this paper I chose to explore how they function in high school. School programs—especially, in public schools—have the potential of reaching more people than college/university courses. Not all people go to college, so if they do not learn about issues of media and gender at school, they might never have a chance to learn about them later in life. In addition, because many young people live in the media-saturated environment from an early age, the earlier they start reflecting on its role in shaping their identities, the better.

Teaching about Media and Gender

Using Butler's conceptualization of gender (1990), I argue that the media shape our gendered identities through performance and through discursive practices. In her theory of performativity, Butler (1990) describes gender identities as formed through our own performances and performances of others towards us within the context of various social institutions. The media are one such institution, and it structures our gender performances in a way that constantly reinforces gender binary by creating an illusion that “female” and “male” natures are distinct and do not overlap. The media also participate in shaping our gender identities through discursive practices. Media texts 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” (Butler, 1993)—they are unachievable, yet they guide our actions as we are constructing our identities.

Scholarship on audience reception argues that audiences are agentic—they are actively using media texts for their own purposes and interpreting them in a variety of ways (see Gill, 2007 for a literature overview; Rand, 1995). The media are seen as offering us *possibility spaces* (DeVane and Squire, 2008) where we can play with meanings that we consume and produce. At the same time, dominant ideologies embedded in media texts are hard to escape (Lemish, 2008), and they play a crucial role in reinforcing the status quo. 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 (Bird, 2003; Milestone and Meyer, 2012), unless it is done in a systematic way supported by educational practices. The process of learning about issues of media and gender can be informed by strategies of MLE and multiliteracies pedagogy.

MLE has a long history of exposing power relationships in media texts and media industries (Masterman, 1985). Incorporating critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and the philosophy of progressive education (Dewey, 2008[1916]), MLE emphasizes praxis-oriented learning that can help K-12 and college students across the curriculum to recognize problematic ideologies, and use knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom to trouble the status quo. One of the strategies offered by MLE is the AACRA model developed by Hobbs (2011). According to this model, media literacy classes should help students develop five key

competencies: Access, Analyze, Create, Reflect and Act. This means that students should learn not only to critically engage with media texts, but also to create their own messages using media tools, to reflect on their relationship with the media, and, most importantly, to connect their knowledge with the impetus for social change.

Pedagogy of multiliteracies aims to develop skills that will help students navigate communities and texts that have come to exist due to new technologies (New London Group, 1996). Developed by New London Group (1996), this pedagogy includes four key components: Situated Practice (connecting learning with students' out-of-school communities and discourses), Critical Framing (helping students question meaning-making that happens through mediated communication), Overt Instruction (building on students' prior experiences with meaning-making to deconstruct it), and Transformed Practice (applying knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom to new contexts).

There exist important parallels between these elements and the AACRA model. In particular, both educational paradigms emphasize critical engagement with media texts and their contexts, as well as applying knowledge gained in the classroom for transformative practices within students' communities (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009).

A number of scholars explore ways of helping audiences critically engage with media representations that reflect prevalent gender norms (e.g., Berman and White, 2013; Bullen, 2009; Durham, 1999; Graydon, 1997; Kamler, 1994; Merskin, 2004; Pozner, 2010; Reichert, LaTour, Lambiase and Adkins, 2007; Robillard, 2012). These authors discuss the importance of analyzing media messages in the classroom in order to help students understand how media representations can reinforce gender inequalities in society. Quantitative studies that aim to explore such educational practices usually focus on students' perceptions of gender ideals

(e.g., Coughlin and Kalodner, 2006; Engeln-Maddox and Miller, 2008; Silver, 1999; Wilksch, Tiggemann, and Wade, 2006; Yamamiya et al., 2006). These studies often aim to answer simple questions: Was the intervention effective? Should we use media literacy in schools to counter problematic influence of media ideals? Both questions are usually answered affirmatively. At the same time, few studies use qualitative methods to examine how media and gender programs (as opposed to short interventions) work (Keown, 2013; Maharajh, 2014; Ryden, 2001). These studies provide a more nuanced picture of teaching and learning that take place in media and gender classes. Notably, both qualitative and quantitative studies that explore media and gender classes seldom use MLE or pedagogy of multiliteracies as their theoretical framework.

Due to the dearth of qualitative studies in this area, we still know little about the learning that happens in media and gender classes. Existing quantitative studies measure learning outcomes of short interventions, and do not provide insights about more complex dynamics that takes place within media and gender literacy programs. The project described on the following pages contributes to bridging this gap. I used ethnographic methods and the case study approach to answer the following broad question: *What do high school students learn in media and gender classes?* More specifically, I used frameworks of MLE and multiliteracies pedagogy to ask the following questions: How do these classes help students reflect on their relationship with the media? What changes do media and gender programs produce in students' perceptions and actions? How do students use what they have learned in class for their lives outside of the classroom? Using the intersection between the frameworks of MLE and pedagogy of multiliteracies, I focused on students' critical engagement with media texts and their ability to apply knowledge gained in the classroom for action.

Methods

I used the case study approach and collected data over a period of two months in the fall of 2014 focusing on three units (parts of three separate classes) taught by two teachers in a suburban school located in an East Coast state of the United States. Each of the three units involved analysis of media texts and discussions about media representations of gender. To ensure validity, I used triangulation of participant observation in the classroom, interviews (group and individual) with students taking the units, and interviews with the teachers. I also interviewed 25 students from the same school who were not taking the classes that I observed, as I wanted to make sure that the opinions about media and gender that I heard from young people within the case study were not exceptional. By chance, it turned out that 11 of those 25 had already taken the classes I was observing, which allowed me to find out how much these young people remembered one or two years after taking them.

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, on the following pages I use pseudonyms and call the school where I conducted my study *West Cityville High School*.

Location

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. 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.

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.

Participants

My key informants for this study were two teachers from West Cityville High School and students from the three classes I was observing. The teachers spent a significant part of the units that I focused on helping students deconstruct media representations; they called their approach critical pedagogy, but when I discussed with them the principles of MLE they confirmed that their strategy can be described as MLE as well. On the following pages I call the teachers Michael and Rosey.

I observed and interviewed students from three English 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). 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—12 male and 9 female. Of these students I interviewed 10—5 female and 5 male. Out of the 25 students outside of the case study that I interviewed, 16 were female and 9 were

male. The ratio of different races in the classes I observed was representative of the ratio of races in the school: the majority was White, with several Hispanic and Black students.

Data Collection

Throughout September and October of 2014 I visited West Cityville High School 17 times, and each time stayed for 4 to 7 hours. In order to observe as much as I could and to see the progress of the classes, I visited the school three times a week.

I interviewed most of the students in groups of three, which allowed them to interact, and at the same time let everybody participate in the conversation. 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. The purpose of the first set was to find out what students thought about media representations of gender (see Appendix A). The second set of questions was intended to reveal what students learned in class (see Appendix B). Each of the interviews lasted for 20-25 minutes. I also used the first set to interview students outside of the case study who never took Michael's and Rosey's classes, and the second set for those who did take them.

I interviewed Rosey and Michael separately using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview with Michael lasted 2.5 hours and the interview with Rosey – 40 minutes, due to the differences in the teachers' availability, personalities and style of talking. I asked them to describe their teaching philosophy, instructional approaches, and motivations for teaching about media and gender (see Appendix C).

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used elements of the grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Describing coding techniques, Strauss (1987) recommended rereading data and

analyzing it into emerging conceptual categories. Having read the notes and transcripts for the first time, I formulated themes that I then used for coding in the process of subsequent readings. During the data analysis stage, I reread my notes and transcripts several times in order to make sense of the thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) I was accumulating.

I used the AACRA model of MLE and the principles of pedagogy of multiliteracies as a framework that guided my analysis. I focused on the intersections of these two paradigms: the emphasis on critical engagement with media texts and the application of knowledge gained in the classroom for transformative practices (social action). While the overall research question was intentionally broad (*What do high school students learn in media and gender classes?*), I paid special attention to interpretations and practices that would indicate changes in students' perceptions and actions as a result of participating in media and gender literacy classes.

On the following pages I use quotes that I recorded while observing the teachers and students in the classroom, and talking to them during interviews and focus groups. The quotes allow me to illustrate the main themes that my findings revealed. Most of the quotes in this article have emerged from interview transcripts.

Teacher's Practices

Teaching students about media texts, Michael and Rosey used critical pedagogy—more specifically an approach formulated by Appleman (2000), who suggested analyzing texts through so-called critical lenses. In the beginning of the quarter, the teachers gave students a handout from Appleman's book that provided definitions for the following six lenses: archetypal, feminist, Marxist, historical, psychological, and reader-response (pp. 155-157). The purpose of the feminist lens 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). The teachers felt that the feminist lens focused primarily on how women are oppressed, and did not allow students to discuss how men are affected by rigid gender roles. Therefore, they added one more lens—gender lens—to the list. It was based not on the Appleman’s book but on Rosey and Michael’s understanding of gender as constructed. The feminist and gender lenses were of special importance to the teachers, who often talked about gender stereotypes and inequalities during the class.

Michael and Rosey did not call their classroom practices MLE or pedagogy of multiliteracies. Both of them defined their approach as critical pedagogy. However, their teaching strategies had much in common with the above mentioned educational strategies. The teachers wanted to help young people become reflective consumers of media messages, and their end goal was a positive social change. Their emphasis on the need to “read” media texts revealed the aim to develop students’ new literacy and train young people to use it effectively.

The units I was observing featured three main activities: analyzing animated films *Toy Story* and *Pocahontas*, and creating a collage out of magazine covers and ads (Hacked Ads exercise). The objective of all three activities was to practice “reading” media texts through the critical lenses. Michael and Rosey used *Toy Story* to model analyzing a media text, while 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.

Media literacy strategies are often described according to the place they occupy on the protectionism-empowerment continuum (Buckingham, 1998; Hobbs and Tuzel, 2017).

Educators who lean towards protectionism are inspired by the media effects paradigm (Bryant and Oliver, 2009), while the empowerment approach is based on the belief that audiences are agentic (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; DeVane and Squire, 2008; Rand, 1995). While during our conversations Rosey and Michael talked about the balance of protecting students and empowering them to explore mediated communication, in the classroom I often saw them leaning more towards the protectionist approach. For example, Michael on several occasions emphasized during classroom discussions that the media are spreading a false feeling of normalcy that kids are buying into because when they are young they do not have real defense mechanisms in order to shield themselves against problematic ideologies. On one occasion, he said: “You can say, it does not affect me, but you were exposed to that since you were born, and by the time you were four these stereotypes had shaped your thinking.” Rosey made fewer strong statements in the classroom about negative media effects. On one occasion, however, she told a student whom I shall call Melissa: “You don’t notice that because you have been brainwashed.”

During the units that I observed, Rosey and Michael talked very little about the importance of social action. 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 (“propaganda” was the actual word used by Rosey during her interview). While media scholars point out that the relationship between audiences and media texts they “read” or create is complex (Carter, Steiner, and McLaughlin, 2015; DeVane and Squire, 2008; Smith, 2007), Rosey and Michael portrayed the media’s role as mostly negative. It is possible that, if these teachers had been familiar with principles of multiliteracies pedagogy and MLE (in particular, the AACRA model), their approach to

developing young people's new literacy could have been more nuanced, and they would have put more explicit emphasis on the importance of social action.

Students' Learning

How did these educational practices translate into students' learning? In this section I want to focus on three main findings. My evidence showed that the classes I observed had what I call *agenda-setting effect* on students (which is different from agenda-setting as it is understood by media effects scholars (McCombs and Reynolds, 2009)). By this I mean that actively looking for and deconstructing gender stereotypes became part of young people's agenda inside and outside of the classroom. Having interviewed students who had been taught by Rosey or Michael one or two years before my observations, I discovered that these classes had a potentially long-lasting effect. The most surprising finding, however, was that young people were able to apply knowledge and skills that they had gained to spread the message of gender equality in their communities; thus, they engaged in social action without being directly prompted by the teachers.

Media and Gender Classes as Agenda-Setting

I interviewed most students in groups of three. As the young people were talking not only with me but also with their peers, our conversations were lively. Many students described the classes as a revelation, and named things that they noticed by critically analyzing media texts. For instance, 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], did not notice any of that." Kathy described her experience: "Like, I noticed it before a little bit, but 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.'"

Based on students' reactions I argue that the effect of media and gender classes can be described as agenda-setting. Discussions and activities in Michael and Rosey's classes created a new agenda for the young people: to question media representations of gender, and think deeper about issues of gender in general. The classes encouraged young people to look for hidden meanings in media texts that seemed simple and innocent before, and to make connections between media representations of gender and inequalities they knew of or had experienced.

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...

Importantly, the agenda-setting effect differed according to students' personalities and their backgrounds. Some young people had already been exposed to information about media and gender—through family, friends, and other teachers—or because they liked exploring these issues on their own. 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.’”

For these students issues addressed in class were not entirely new. I interviewed Anna when Rosey was still screening *Toy Story*, and the girl 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.” Class discussions provided to these students an opportunity to better see things they had always suspected, or articulate ideas that had crossed their minds before. Dan said: “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!’”

The classes allowed these young people to notice new things around them and make important connections. For instance, Anna told me:

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.

Other young people claimed that, even though they had noticed problematic media representations 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 some students the class provided vocabulary and theoretical base to better understand media representations. In words of 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...” Thus, 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 the new vocabulary provided by the teachers.

An important factor that made some students open to learning about media and gender was their experience with gender inequalities. Female students told me stories of how they discovered that being a woman can put one in a disadvantageous position. Two girls shared that they were not able to join their school’s sports team 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.’” 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: “[In] every movie boys are always playing football, all the time.” Both girls had firsthand experience with the negative effects of gender stereotypes. That is probably why, when the critical theory classes started, they were all ears.

Some enjoyed media and gender classes because the teachers’ message made sense to them. Robin was among those who particularly enjoyed the critical lenses. He told me: “I never really thought about that stuff before [Rosey] handed us [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 Robin, it was his open-mindedness—which seemed to run in the family—that made him so excited.

Resistant Students

Students’ backgrounds explained not only their receptiveness but also resistance. I was intrigued by it and wanted to learn more about these young people’s lives. Probing students’ backgrounds helped me understand causes of their resistance and see the agenda-setting effect behind it.

One of Michael’s students named Steve talked back to all teachers, was aggressive with other students, and often visited the principal’s office. Later I found out Steve’s story. The boy 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 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. When I asked Steve 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... Kids grow up looking at that. Once they see that, they think that that's the way to act.

It was particularly interesting to see that Steve shared Michael's protectionist position regarding negative media effects on children. Steve expressed his concern about young viewers, saying that "it's mentally kind of destroying them already." The boy also explicitly 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 he wanted to, I saw these remarks as an evidence of him assimilating Michael's message.

One student who often challenged Rosey's preoccupation with feminist causes was Kevin. His background and the reasons for this resistance also turned out to be complicated. 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. Later Kevin told me that his mother was probably a feminist: "She actually wants to talk about [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.

Kevin was one of a few students who said that he did not enjoy using the critical lenses. However, even he started perceiving media texts differently. During the interview, Kevin told me: "I always notice, like, when there's the [feminist criticism]... cause she [Rosey] is always like: 'That's the gender stuff!'" Although Rosey was often frustrated by

Kevin's remarks, I discovered that she was successful in making him question media representations of gender, something that his mother was apparently not able to do.

Finally, I would like to talk about Melissa, a girl from Rosey's class. I did not learn much about her out-of-school background. However, observing this student in class I could guess about some reasons for her resistance. Melissa occupied an advantageous position thanks to her popularity and her good-looking boyfriend. The girl 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 student, the benefits of fitting within hegemonic standards of femininity outweighed the drawbacks of sexism.

It appeared that Melissa 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. The girl 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 student 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.

(Emphasis in the original.)

Her main argument against challenging media messages was: "That's 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 Rosey and 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!" Melissa's position can be explained through Gill's (2016) analysis of postfeminism. Using Gill's terminology we can say that this student displayed "a patterned yet contradictory sensibility" (p. 621). On the one hand she saw the merits of feminism, but on the other hand she did not perceive it as fully applicable to her life.

Advantages and Limitations of Agenda-Setting

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. Many students were excited about their revelations and the new vocabulary that they could now use to talk about media texts. Others were annoyed as they felt forced to notice 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.

Using the intersection between the frameworks of MLE and pedagogy of multiliteracies, I discovered that the media and gender classes I was observing enhanced most students' critical engagement with media representations of gender. Thanks to Rosey and Michael's efforts, students were able to reflect on the role that mediated communication played in shaping their gender identities. New literacy that the teachers worked hard to develop in their students indeed allowed these young people to engage in deconstructing problematic ideologies of gender embedded in media texts.

Notably, the students on whom media and gender classes had the agenda-setting effect were not talking about nuances of their relationship with the media. While young people noticed more problematic representations of gender, their conversations during classes and our focus groups did not go beyond the discourse of media blame offered by the teachers. Michael and Rosey helped students to start "reading" media portrayals of gender through the critical lenses, but the full potential of such discussions as described by MLE and multiliteracies pedagogy was not realized. In particular, none of the students talked about how audiences can be agentic but at the same time influenced by gender scripts provided by media texts. I believe that is this one of the main limitations of the agenda-setting effect of media and gender classes, although their importance as the first step in developing students' media and gender literacy is undeniable.

Negative Cases

My observations in the classroom showed that at least for some students the critical lenses were confusing. When the teachers started screening *Pocahontas* during the second half of the quarter, I heard several young people asking them to explain again what different lenses

stood for. During interviews, several 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 11—who had already taken Michael and Rosey's classes still remembered many details about the critical lenses (more about that below), 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... 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.

The negative examples show that the agenda-setting effect is not uniform. As I noted earlier, everybody is affected differently by media and gender classes, and while many students are primed to think deeper about media representations of gender, a few others are not.

Changing and Engaging in Social Action

One might say that the agenda-setting effect is only temporary. Young people are initially excited about their discovery, but they will move on to other things. My conversations with students outside of the case studies 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—seven out of 11—remembered many details of the classes, and told me that they were still using the

critical lenses to deconstruct media texts. These young people remembered such specific 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”) that they had learned back then.

Some of these students noted that the effect the classes had had on them 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...” This finding has an important implication for media educators who want to teach their students about issues of gender. To be more effective, media and gender classes should take place on different stages of the educational program. These classes set an important agenda, and we should make sure that this agenda remains fresh in students’ minds.

My discussions with the young people showed that many of them were so excited about what they learned in media and gender classes that, even without the teachers’ prompting, they made an important step towards engaging in social action. The stories that I heard during interviews showed that some students shared what they had learned in class about media representations of gender with their parents, siblings and friends. These students wanted to talk about issues of media and gender outside of school because they found their revelations fascinating and important.

I already mentioned Robin who was so excited about the critical lenses that he told his parents about them. Other students had similar experiences. 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!'"

When I asked Stella and Kathy whether they shared with friends or family what they had learned in class, the girls replied:

Kathy: Yeah. Like sometimes we watch TV, and I say to my mom... how they are portraying...

Stella: I was watching a movie with my sister... I forgot what movies it was, but it was last week. Something was going on, and I started, like, ranting... And she was like: "What are you talking about?" and I was, like: "Critical lenses! [Michael]!" and she was, like: "What?" and I explained it all to her, and she was just, like, mind-blown. She came to me yesterday or the day before and she was, like: "You know, that critical lens thing?.." And now it's just like running in our heads.

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, another student outside of the case study, described how the knowledge about gender stereotypes that he had gained in the critical theory class empowered him to advocate for gender equality in his own family:

...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.

My evidence shows that students’ potential for social action is remarkable. Michael and Rosey talked little about civic responsibility in class. Considering that, I was impressed that a number of students used their knowledge in a socially responsible way. At the same time, not all students shared their knowledge with others, even if they felt that change was necessary. For example, when Steve was describing 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.

It is possible that if teachers explicitly talk about the need for civic engagement and discuss different types of social action with students, the latter will better understand how they can use their knowledge and skills to fight against gender inequalities. In her study on cultivating postfeminist sensibility in the media studies classroom, Maharajh (2014) suggests that for some students to fight for gender equality means to “go out and... protest and try and

get everyone to be equal” (p. 690), which they are not ready to do. It is important to explain to students that civic engagement comes in many shapes and forms, and that it starts with simple actions that each of us is capable of doing.

While the classes taught by Michael and Rosey produced important changes in students’ perceptions and actions, I argue that this impact could be strengthened if the teachers rely more explicitly on the principles of MLE and multiliteracies pedagogy. In particular, more emphasis should be put on social action using the AACRA model of MLE, or such elements of multiliteracies pedagogy as Situated Practice and Transformed Practice. This would allow students to better realize their potential as engaged citizens in their communities.

Conclusion

The main limitation of the research project described above is that it was a single case study, which means that it cannot be truly representative. However, it allows us to see what happens in at least some media and gender classes. This study suggests directions for future research, as well as implications for practice.

Overall, students that I observed were positively affected by classroom discussions and activities. For many, what they heard from the teachers was a revelation, and it helped them to engage in a deeper reflection about their relationship with the media. Even though some young people had critically engaged with media representations of gender before, Michael and Rosey helped them “read” media texts in a more systematic way. I call this effect agenda-setting, as the media and gender classes I observed set for the young people an agenda to pick apart media representations of gender and connect them to gender inequalities outside of the media. In other words, the classes encouraged students to be on the lookout for problematic media representations, and to question them. I consider this effect to be an essential first step

in developing students' new literacy and their sensitivity to gender inequalities. At the same time, a few students were not impacted by the classes in the same way: they did not understand the critical lenses well enough, and did not try using them outside of the class. This finding suggests that we need to further investigate how the agenda-setting effect of media and gender classes works, and how it can be strengthened.

The current study shows that the agenda-setting effect is potentially long-lasting, even though it gets weaker over time. Therefore, discussions about media representations and gender inequalities should take place on different stages of the educational program (starting from K-12 and including college) and across the curriculum. My evidence also suggests that media educators who want to help students critically engage with issues of media and gender might need to take into consideration students' backgrounds, and use this knowledge to make their classes relevant for as many young people as possible.

In addition to the changes in students' perceptions, I found that media and gender classes have a potential to make students engage in social action (broadly understood). It is remarkable that students were eager to use what they have learned in class for their lives outside of the classroom even without explicit prompting from the teachers. Students' eagerness to share with others what they have learned about issues of media and gender shows that they are future agents of social change who need to better understand their possibilities. If teachers directly address different kinds of activism, they can help young people engage in it more consciously.

Educators will be better equipped to teach media and gender classes to their full potential if they have more opportunities to learn about strategies of MLE and pedagogy of multiliteracies. In particular, Situated Practice and Transformed Practice elements of the latter,

combined with the AACRA model of MLE will allow teachers to put more emphasis on civic engagement, helping students use knowledge and skills gained in the classroom to transform their communities. In addition, if teachers use scholarship on active audiences to inform their practices, they will be able to avoid simplifying the complex relationship between audiences and media texts. This will allow students to use the agenda-setting effect of media and gender classes to further develop their new literacy, and to trouble the status quo that supports inequalities.

Future research should investigate practices in media and gender classes taught by teachers who are versed in MLE and multiliteracies pedagogy. Some questions that future studies can focus on are: How are students' perceptions and actions transformed when teachers explicitly talk about civic engagement in class and have young people participate in social action as part of class assignments? Will students be more eager to learn and will they retain new information better if it is connected with practices aimed to positively impact their communities (service learning)? How can teachers introduce discussions about the complexity of people's relationship with media texts without reinforcing the discourse of media blame? Answering these questions will help educators develop students' new literacy, and encourage young people to trouble dominant ideologies that reinforce gender inequalities through mediated communication.

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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 MLE?
- 6) Are you familiar with critical pedagogy?
- 7) Do you use principles of MLE 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?