

**The Hidden Curriculum:
Influences on the Gender Role Development of
North American Children and Teens**

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Introduction

In *Feminist Issues: Race, Class and Sexuality*, 5th Edition, Michelle Webber (2010) references the work of Davies and Guppy, 2006, in her explanation of the differential treatment received by boys and girls in early 1800s schooling: “Historically, Canadian educational institutions were organized to prepare boys and girls for particular societal roles” (p. 249). She tells us that “citizens were encouraged to commit new tax monies for compulsory schooling for girls and boys. Education leaders lobbied the public on a platform of needing a common moral education” (Webber, 2010, p.249). Webber makes clear that Davies and Guppy felt “common” education was not to be confused with the “same” education (2010, p. 249).

Research by Gaskell, McLaren, and Novogrodsky showed that segregation within the same school was common and included separate entrances, seating, playgrounds and lessons. The educational goals set out for boys and girls were different: girls would learn to be housewives, nurses or teachers; boys would train for vocational trades or enrol in further studies, with separation by gender in place until the 1950s (Webber, 2010, p. 249).

Although current schools attempt to educate girls and boys in the same curriculum, studies show that “often unintentional differential treatment is afforded to girls and boys by their classroom teachers” (Webber, 2010, p. 249).

After learning about the barriers and challenges to education that Canadian women have faced throughout history, I thought, as a parent, and now also a student, it would be interesting to investigate what pitfalls remain for young girls currently enrolled in the school system. The idea

of a “hidden curriculum” in our public school system intrigued me. How do little girls and boys learn to become stereotypical young women and men? What, or who, influences children the most? Do they learn about gender roles from teachers, parents, society, media, or from a combination of these?

This essay will look at research on the effects of a “hidden curriculum” on school children as well as potential influences from outside the school system in an attempt to discover if any one influence is more powerful than the other on helping to shape a child’s gender role. The majority of the research was conducted over the past twenty years, mostly on white, western, English-speaking children from low, middle and high income homes. The issues of race and sexuality are not included in this essay, except as they may pertain to the studies. Although these are very important issues, there was simply too much information on gender stereotyping to include them.

Preschool and Kindergarten Children (ages 3-6)

Although many of the research materials I looked at focused on older children in the mainstream school society, five of the studies focused on younger children in pre-school and kindergarten (ages 3-6). These children had not yet been in school and so presumably would have learned all they knew of about gender roles from their parents or caregivers with possible influences from community and media. The studies were conducted over a wide time span, with three of them in the 1990s (1994/1994/1998) and the final study in 2012. Together, the studies included approximately 320 children, mostly all from white, middle to upper-middle class homes.

The first article, “Breaking Gender Stereotypes With an Anti-Bias Curriculum”, offered a short report of an informal study conducted by the authors in their Child Care Centre at the University of Buffalo (Christy and Meyer, 1994, p.224F). The Centre had adopted an anti-bias curriculum, but the Center’s teachers, as women, questioned how they might relate to construction types of activities, including “block play”. Without verbal direction, the staff successfully encouraged girls to play in the “block area” by playing there themselves and posting pictures of girls not portrayed in stereotypical roles as they found them (Christy and Meyer, 1994, p.224F).

The second study, more structured in its methods, involved interviewing sixteen, five and six year old children from two kindergarten schools in Colorado. The object of the study, “Sixteen Kindergartners’ Gender-related Views of Careers”, (Kochenberger Stroehrer, 1994), was to gauge the development of gender bias stereotyping by the time a child enters kindergarten. The first group of students were from middle to upper-middle class, dual-career families, with most of the parents highly educated. All of the children had previously attended pre-school. By contrast, children from the second school were mainly from lower to lower-middle class families, with the majority from single parent homes. Few of the parents had higher education levels and most were blue-collar workers. Kochenberger Stroehrer (1994) chose the two socio-economic groups to determine if their responses would be similar. The study consisted of three parts: an interview of open-ended questions about the children’s home and school experiences designed to draw out information about the respondents gender beliefs; the second part included showing the children an occupation chart (with faceless drawing of different jobs) to ascertain whether the children identified certain careers as gender-specific; in the third part of the interview the children were asked to draw a picture of what they wanted to be when they grew

up. In both groups of children, the females chose traditional career choices, with one exception (doctor), even though it was clear from the other tests that they realized that non-traditional career choices were okay for girls. Although the study was admittedly small, the author found that the responses of the lower socio-economic group were more traditional than the others, and reflected their experiences, which were less broad than those from the higher socio-economic group i.e. if the child only knew female nurses, then he/she believed all nurses should be female (Kochenberger Stroeher, 1994).

The third study was an examination of gender differences in art, conducted in the Pennsylvania and published in 1999. The authors tested 20 preschool and 29 kindergarten aged children (white and middle-class) to determine what, if any, “gender stereo-typicality in their drawings and preferences for pictures” (Boyatzis and Eades, 1999, p. 627). The study included asking the children to complete three tasks: 1) to draw whatever they wanted on a plain sheet of paper; 2) three at a time, children were given six sets of colouring sheets and asked to choose which they would prefer to colour. One was rated feminine, one masculine and one neutral; 3) Similar to the second task, each child was shown 6 sets of three completed colouring pages, coloured by the authors in stereotypical colours. Children were asked to select the one that appealed to them most from each set (Boyatzis and Eades, 1999).

This study’s most striking finding is that although most preschoolers produced only scribbles that lacked any identifiable representational content, such drawings were nevertheless judged to have gender-stereotypical qualities.... This fascinating finding that boys and girls draw in distinct ways as early as 4.5 years, even before they draw discernible pictures with thematic content, must be replicated. (Boyatzis and Eades, 1999, p. 634).

The author further found that “preschoolers were as stereotypical as kindergartners in all tasks, and therefore any causes of gender differences in art seem to be similarly operational by the preschool years as later during kindergarten” (Boyatzis and Eades, 1999). Although not in the scope of this study, suggested possible influences to these gender differences included environmental contributions such as the home environment (Boyatzis and Eades, 1999).

The final study involving preschoolers was entitled “Differing Levels of Salience in Preschool Classrooms: Effects on Children’s Gender Attitudes and Intergroup Bias” by Lacey J. Hilliard and Lynn S. Liben. This study involved the youngest set of participants, with ages ranging from 3-5 years. Children were from middle-class families of European-American descent. The study consisted of two classrooms in each of two similar preschools in the same city. One classroom in each preschool was kept the same; teachers were asked to keep teaching their students as they always had and to maintain the policy of not using gendered language or organization. The second classroom was set as the “high-salience condition” (Hilliard and Liben, 2010, p. 1787). Teachers were asked to use gendered language often, separate the children according to gender for work, play and tasks, but to not use gender-based language as a reward or competition for the two-week duration of the study. Groups were to be treated equally. The children were interviewed and also observed at play before and after the study.

Although the results of the study were quite detailed, in broad strokes the researchers discovered two things: In theory, the data supported for a core prediction of “development intergroup theory”, created by Bigler and Liben in 2006, which hypothesized that noticeable social-groups play an important role in the formation of stereotypes and biases: “At the practical level, data demonstrate that there is a pervasive, powerful and remarkably quick effect of making

gender salient in the classroom” (Hilliard and Liben, 2010, p. 1797). They surmised that this theory would also follow suit at home and in social settings.

Although the goals and methods of the studies varied, the conclusions were strikingly similar in that the majority of the participants showed strong tendencies towards stereotypical gender roles even at a young age, causing one to wonder what results might show if similar testing was done using babies and toddlers.

Yet another study of 70 preschoolers analyzed the gender significance of children’s emotional responses “to same- and different-sex characters in stories containing ambiguous and unambiguous emotional contexts” (Parmley and Cunningham, 2008, p. 358). Parmley refers to The Parallel-Constraint-Satisfaction Theory developed by Kunda and Thagard, which suggests stereotypes are more likely to be utilized in ambiguous contexts. For the purposes of this study, Parmley and Cunningham read “vignettes describing boys or girls in ambiguous or unambiguous emotion-inducing events” (2008, p. 358) and the “children reported how the vignette characters were feeling” (2008, p. 358). The authors concluded that the “perceptions of participants were more likely to reflect gender-emotion stereotypes (e.g. perceiving males as angry and females as sad) in ambiguous contexts than in unambiguous contexts” (Parmley and Cunningham, 2008, p. 358). Background to the study showed that gender stereotyping of emotions can easily create a cycle of misunderstanding when one child interprets the emotional response of another child in a stereotypical way. If a girl interprets another girl’s emotional response as sadness or fear and a similar response from a boy as anger, the girl may identify the female response as the correct one for her and copy that behavior in future reactions.

Elementary School Children (ages 7-12)

The majority of the research studies I found that focused on elementary school students involved gender role influences from media, community and school. Many of the books and studies concerning the hidden curriculum in the school system were written from the perspective of the teachers or school administration and are covered under the section “Teachers” in this essay.

One study focused on girls aged six to nine and was titled “Sexy Dolls, Sexy Grade-Schoolers? Media & Maternal Influences on Young Girls’ Self-Sexualization” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). The study looked at the early sexualisation of young girls and identified two main influences. “Media and maternal modeling are two of the earliest sexualization influences that most young girls have, and this learning precedes other influences such as peers and the development of their own intrapsychic attitudes” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p. 2). The study also offered insightful background provided by into gender development for young girls. “The social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation helps to explain how young girls learn gender-related behaviors, attitudes, and preferences from the outside world” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p. 2).

Girls learn from same-gender role models (their mothers in many cases) and often copy their actions. The article refers to a study by researchers Perry & Bussey: “For example, in a classic study of 84 eight year-old girls and boys, children who were shown a film with a same-gender and other-gender model were significantly more likely to imitate the stated food preferences of the same-gender model” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p. 2). More recent studies back this up. The authors discovered that in a study of 7 to 12 year-olds “most boys and approximately half of the girls reported a same-gender character as their favorite TV character, and girls were

more likely to express the desire to emulate the behaviors of female than male characters” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p. 2).

The role of a parent in a young child’s gender development is important and is often the “first same-gender models young children have (a British study found that babies as young as 10 months pay significantly more attention to models of the same gender” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p.2). “Young children are especially likely to adopt gender-linked behaviors when their role models’ behaviors are rewarded or go unpunished” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p.2). “This supports the idea that girls learn gender roles, attitudes towards their body, and possibly sexualized attitudes and behaviors primarily from their mothers. Maternal influences on sexualization may be particularly strong for young girls because their developmental stage requires high levels of direct mother-daughter involvement, which allows daughters more social learning opportunities. For this reason, the current study investigates several maternal influences as moderators of the likelihood of early sexualization” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p. 3).

In the study, a choice of paper dolls was used to determine the level of self-sexualization among the girls; “specifically self-identification, preference, and attributions regarding sexualized dress” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p. 1).

The study showed that the majority of girls chose the sexualized doll, thus demonstrating “a sexualized view of their desired selves and equating sexiness with popularity” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p. 11). The authors concluded that, although the amount of media a girl watches can be a risk factor, the most important resource in creating or avoiding the sexualisation of a young girl is the influence of her mother. “High media consumption in the presence of high maternal self-objectification or low maternal religiosity puts girls at greater risk for early sexualization (double jeopardy); however, so does low media consumption in the presence of

high maternal religiosity (forbidden fruit). On the other hand, maternal instruction about TV shows and the importance placed on teaching daughters religious values buffers girls from early self-sexualization” (Starr & Ferguson, 2012, p. 11).

A 2011 study on the gender messages in Boy and Girl Scout handbooks offered an interesting look at the portrayal of gender roles by the Boy and Girl Scouts, a “single-sex youth organization” (Denny, 2011, p. 28) enjoyed by “nearly 5 million American children” (Denny, 2011, p. 28) according to the Boy Scouts of America and Girl Scouts of America in 2008. Kathleen Denny looked at “how gender is infused in the context and content of Scout activities as well as in instructions about how the Scouts are to approach these activities” (Denny, 2011, p. 27).

A look at the two handbooks offers a variety of differences: the boy’s book is shaped like a novel with a plain layout (white pages with black font and colour pictures). Girls are offered two books, a handbook and a badgebook. Both are thinner and larger in size than the boys, with colourful pages and text and a “diversity of images, graphics and illustrations” (Denny, 2011, p. 33).

In a comparison of the context of the books, the author found that gender messages were very strong. Both Girl and Boy “Scouts are exposed to a central tenet of stereotypical femininity and masculinity: assumptions about girls’ orientation toward others and boys’ orientation toward self” (Denny, 2011, p. 35). This is confirmed in the community oriented or “others-oriented” activities suggested for girls and the “self-oriented” activities listed for boys. The content of the activities parallels the findings of the context. Girls are offered more art projects; boys more science projects. Badge titles also represent “stereotypical messages about embellished femininity and stoic masculinity.... For example, the boys’ badge dealing with rocks and

geology is called the Geologist badge, while the comparable girls' badge is called the Rocks Rock badge" (Denny, 2011, p. 35). Denny sums up the gender approach with her conclusion that girls are encouraged to adopt an "I'll try" attitude, while the boys are concurrently encouraged to take an "I am" attitude.

There is much evidence to support the fact that young women are vastly underrepresented in the fields of science, engineering, math and technology. In their 2012 study, "Gender Differences in Gifted Students' Advice on Solving the World's Problems", Malin and Makel contend that "gender differences in interests and preferences" (2012, p.175) account for some women's decisions not to enter these fields. Their study assessed the gender differences in writing in over 275 grade 5 and 6 gifted students who entered an essay writing contest. The results offered significant evidence that the development of gender roles is a process already in motion by the end of elementary school (Malin and Makel, 2012).

"A recent meta-analysis by Su, Rounds, and Armstrong (2009) found that 82.4% of adult males reported stronger interest than adult females in working with *things* whereas 74.9% of females reported stronger preferences than males toward working with *people*. This pattern of gender differences in preferences closely mirrors gender differences in vocational pursuits" (Malin and Makel, 2012, p. 176).

Participants in the study entered a writing contest in which they were asked to give advice to the newly elected President of the United States. The resulting essays were assessed for the type of problem suggested by girls (environment and animal welfare) vs boys (terrorism and safety), which cabinet post they selected (reflected current vocational gender differences), and the child's proposed solution to the problem. "Males were more likely to use "restore" phrases (e.g., "... is critical not just for our survival but also continues to threaten our leadership in the

world”) and females were more likely to use “improve” phrases (e.g., “. . . but if you act now, the world will be a better place”) (Malin and Makel, 2012, p. 184). The authors concluded that gender role development, although likely begun by the end of elementary school is a process that may be shaped by early introduction of career opportunities to young girls. Ceci and Williams (2011) suggest this tactic may help to avoid misinformation and negative stereotypes of potential careers (Malin and Makel, 2012).

Following the activities and gender differences of children from two public elementary schools (mainly middle- and upper-middle class children from a large, mostly white university community) over a period of three years, the final paper I looked at in relation to elementary school children and their gender role development offered complex research on the implications of popularity and gender role.

The researchers, Adler, Kless and Adler (1992), observed that “Within their gendered subcultures, boys and girls constructed idealized images of masculinity and femininity on which they modeled their behaviour” (1992, p. 169). Traits among boys included athletic ability, coolness, toughness, savoir-faire, cross-gender relations and academic performance, while girls were deemed popular (or not) based on their family background, physical appearance, social development and academic performance (Adler, Kless and Adler, 1992, p.169)

“The research illustrates subtle changes in children’s, especially girls’, gender roles, resulting from historical changes in society” (Adler, Kless & Adler, 1992, p. 169). They surmise one reason for this change is the expansion and androgenization of the women’s gender role, resulting from the influence of the women’s movement and the huge gains women have made in the workforce. They examine whether these changes have “filtered down to children, narrowing

the differences in boys' and girls' child-rearing experiences within the home" (Adler, et al, 1992, p. 185).

Although it is difficult to adequately expand on this research in the confines of this essay, it is interesting to note how children very quickly learn to equate popularity with status, and then shift their gender roles as necessary to achieve that status (Adler et al, 1992, p. 185).

Teenagers

A 1994 study of 448 American senior high students and their parents considered parent-child gender relationships with a focus on several key areas: allowances, gifts, use of the car, curfew and indoor and outdoor chores. Researcher John F. Peters found that "gender differences normally peak in the adolescent years. They develop ideas of what is right or proper for them as boys or girls to do, to believe, to aspire to and ways to relate to others" (Peters, 1994 p. 913).

Generalized results of a 1994 study by J. F. Peters showed that teen's perceptions of their parents behavior was general neutral in parental gift giving and allowance amounts with 85% giving gifts of equal value to both sexes. 59% of parents offered use of the family car equally to both sexes; of those who did not, sons were favoured over daughters. Weekend curfews seemed more lenient toward sons. Indoor and outdoor chores were also divided along traditional lines, with sons performing outdoor chores and girls doing indoor chores (Peters, 1994, p. 921).

The second study surveyed teens and their teachers to determine their views of current adolescent attitudes towards female gender roles vs. those of days-gone-by. Teachers were polled

first to see if they “believed adolescents in general have a more flexible attitude towards female gender roles than do older generations” (Mills and Mills, 1996, p. 741).

Mills and Mills were interested in the work of Shamai (1994), who believed that the education system is rife with stereotyping (p. 665) and that such bias would undoubtedly limit students’ future choices, including career development. Results of the teachers’ surveys indicated 90% believed that those under 21 would be less stereotypical in their beliefs than those over 21.

The researchers then surveyed 100 middle school (gr 6-8) students and 100 students from a local college (ages 21-62) to gauge their “visual recognition of famous contemporary figures” (Mills & Mills, 1994, p. 743) in the areas of political leadership, athletics, science and entertainment. Pictures of two men and two women in each category were chosen randomly from yearbooks, although students were told each group included a famous person. The goal for both groups of students was to choose the “famous” person, and to use their first impulse if guessing.

Results were disappointing in that the choices by the younger student set were similar to those chosen by those over 21, leading Mills and Mills to determine that “stereotypical attitudes toward gender roles have not changed greatly” (1994, p. 743).

Conclusion

When I began to research the topic of “hidden curriculum” for this essay, I was looking for information on that which teachers in the public school system unintentionally teach our children about gender roles and gender differences. Two things surprised me as I dug deeper into the books, journal articles and studies on the topic.

The first was the number of meanings of the term “hidden curriculum”. In addition to the topic I chose, I also found information on racism and homophobia as well as the quiet attempt to foster school spirit and enthusiasm. Hidden agendas of politics and economy were also a theme of some materials.

The second surprise was the amount and diversity of the information available on the “hidden curriculum.” I was sure I would find a few studies on how teachers are unwittingly model their own beliefs on gender roles to their students, and that they would prove to be a large influence on both male and female students. What I discovered is that researchers have studied this topic for years, and that studies have been conducted on babies, preschoolers, elementary school children, teens, teachers and parents!

The first entry in *The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education*, edited by Eric Margolis, puts the research I studied into perspective. In chapter 1, “Peekaboo, Hiding and Outing the Curriculum”, Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, and Gair confirm that Philip Jackson and Robert Dreeban drew heavily from the work of Emile Durkheim, when conducting their early research into a hidden curriculum. Jackson, who is credited with coining the phrase “hidden curriculum” (Margolis et al., 2001, p. 4) identified that “there were values, dispositions, and social and behavioral expectations that brought rewards in school for students and that learning what was expected along these lines was a feature of the hidden curriculum” (Margolis, et al. 2001, p.5).

Margolis offers credit to the early research of Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Jackson and Dreeben for providing a ‘consensus theory’, “the foundation for the general definition of the hidden curriculum as the elements of socialization that take place in school, but are not part of the formal curricular content” (Margolis et al., 2001, p. 6). Although several theorists have critiqued this theory over the past fifty years, my interest lies in feminist writers from Canada,

Britain and the United States, who have “built on *and extended* ideas from these theorists, in particular noting... it is the work of mothers that is crucial to the culturally reproductive processes of schooling” (Margolis et al. 2001, p. 9).

As the “hidden curriculum” evolved, it became a term useful for several topics, including race, sexuality and gender differences. E. Margolis, M. Soldatenko, S. Acker and M. Gair refer to a 1978 study titled *Dinosaurs in the Classroom* that focused on ways teachers tried to engage “...boys by shaping the early grades’ curriculum around the boys’ interests” (Margolis et al. 2001, p. 11). Teachers counted on the girls’ putting up with topics that interested the boys, but failed to challenge the boys’ disdain for anything perceived to be a girls’ topic.” (Margolis et al. 2001, p. 11).

Further studies, like *Gender and the Politics of Curriculum* from 1992, “examined ways in which the process of subject choice in secondary schools confirmed class and gender divisions” (Margolis et al. 2001, p. 11). Study of the topic continues today, as researchers attempt to better understand the current and future implications of gender role development.

As a parent, it was an article by Susan D. Witt that struck me the most. Witt contends that the greatest and first influences for children are the parents, with the same-sex parent often the most influential. The messages learned in the home are reinforced once the child goes to school, joins organizations, becomes involved in his or her community and is introduced to different forms of media (Witt, 1997, p.254).

What can we do? The results of the studies I researched seem to suggest that gender role development is easily and strongly influenced by gender stereotypes and that it will take a concerted and long term effort by parents, society, school and media to effect change. Awareness and a strong sense of self will play a big part in raising a child, girl or boy, who is truly comfortable in being exactly who they want to be.

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