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Students' responses to gender stereotypes: implications & recommendations

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Abstract

In the Colombian context, it is still quite easy to find non-resistance to traditional gender stereotypes. Even though students are already finding their ways to challenge these traditional stereotypes, it is still evident these are still deeply rooted into their conceptions and representations of the world. The research question that guided this study was: what are students' responses to gender stereotypes? Findings suggest that even though there are some students who still agree with traditional gender stereotypes, there are some others who have already started not only challenging them but also to stop considering them in their imaginaries. Finally, this study has implications for teaching since it shows the urgent need to implement teaching approaches that help students challenge these stereotypes definitely.

Key words: Gender, gender stereotype, challenge, critical literacy.

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Degree Requirement

This research project was developed in a public school in Medellín Colombia during my teaching practicum in 2021 as a requirement to obtain my B. Ed. Degree in Foreign Language Teaching at Universidad de Antioquia.

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Preface

This paper is the report of a research study which was carried out from late January to late October in 2021. It was developed in a public school named INEM José Félix de Restrepo. As a pre-service teacher I was assigned to observe a class in the seventh grade and do a research project in that context.

This paper starts with the context description of the English class. Then, it explains the problem found in the context and finally it presents students' responses to this project and recommendations.

Context

INEM Jose Félix Restrepo is a public school located in El Poblado, Medellín. It provides formal education services at the pre-school, elementary, secondary, and technical level. It works on a proposal that promotes the integral formation of its students. This proposal is based on values, environmental conservation, learning to be, to know, and to do. It aims at preparing its students to live together within a context of democratic participation and collaborative work. Founded on research, academical and humanistic instruction, and technological appropriation, the school seeks to form “autonomous, critical, creative, democratic and environmentally committed citizens who value scientific, social and cultural knowledge” (INEM José Félix de Restrepo webpage)

Concerning the participants of this study, they belong to seventh grade section three. There are 36 students who come from different socio-economical backgrounds and live in different places around the city. Since the reopening proposed by the national government, they are taking face-to-face lessons according to their schedule. They attend three English classes per week and each class lasts 45 minutes.

In regard to their performance, they are beginners who show certain interest and motivation towards their English classes. They participate as requested by the teacher and tend to take part in the proposed activities. However, most of the time they seem to be compelled by their teacher.

As for the cooperative teacher (CT) is a young and enthusiastic woman who was born in Sahagún, Córdoba. She holds a bachelor degree in elementary teaching with a focus on English from Universidad de Córdoba and she is currently developing her master studies in Digital Media. She has been teaching for four years both in private and public institutions and she shows

great commitment towards her labor and her praxis by using several resources such as: PowerPoint Presentations, websites, boards, games, different kind of activities and all of the affordances that are available at the institution.

Problem Statement

Throughout history and over the last years there have been different efforts to challenge gender stereotypes in different contexts and situations (Vasquéz-Guarnizo, Chía-Ríos, & Tobar-Gómez, 2020). For example, our country, Colombia, is still a country dominated by a patriarchal discourse in which men are portrayed as the prestigious breadwinners whereas women are subject to household chores (Fiske, 1993; Stangor & Lange, 1994). As a result, children grow up within a one-sided gender culture which refuses everything that does not fit the traditional stereotype (Luke & Woods, 2009).

During certain class activities, the different stereotypes teens have about gender blossom by means of a simple task in which they were exposed to a set of images (toys, clothes, and occupations) that are traditionally related to one or other gender. These images elicited opinions from students which included that being a preschool teacher, wearing pink clothes and a doll are women's things whereas being a doctor, blue and a ball are men's things. (Journal 27/08).

Such stereotypes shape certain limitations to equality as far as they may lead to expectations about one social category over another or restrict opportunities as such (Grau & Zotos, 2016). These shaped limitations bear on expectations, behaviors and judgements of self and others (Ridgeway, 2009) and they are a fundamental contribution to placing males and females in segregated occupations and roles (Markowitz & Puchner, 2015).

It is important to explore students' responses to these stereotypes in order to propose pedagogical actions that help them challenge them by showing them other perspectives that allow them to go beyond their own beliefs. It is also important because when they realize these stereotypes are restrictive to themselves, they may quit normalizing them among their peers.

For this purpose, this study will explore the responses students have to gender stereotypes and their implications. The question that will guide this study is, what are students' responses to gender stereotypes?

The next paragraphs will provide a definition of the main concepts for this study and also the research methodology to be implemented.

Theoretical Framework

This section aims at conceptualizing the terms that support this study. It outlines the concepts of stereotype, gender, and gender stereotype. Finally, it provides a definition of a teaching approach that may be used to challenge these stereotypes.

Stereotype

As defined by Matsumoto (2000) a stereotype is a generalized viewpoint, attitude or opinion on people who belong to a particular culture that is different from ours. Stereotypes could lie on facts but are usually combinations of facts and fictions about particular cultural groups. Stereotypes can be useful in giving people some basis for judging, evaluating, and interacting with people from other cultures - a sort of frame of reference – however they can be very dangerous and destructive when people adhere to them inflexibly and apply them to all people in that cultural context, without recognizing the false basis for the stereotype or the individual differences within that culture.

Correspondingly, González Gabaldón (1999) points out that stereotype is one of the most controversial concepts due to its link to prejudice and discrimination. It corresponds to those popular beliefs about the attributes that characterize a social group and on which there is a basic agreement. (Mackie, 1973).

Gender

As reported by Butler (1988) gender is performative. It is compelled by social constructions including sanction and taboo. She argues that gender is an identity constructed through time and it always involves the body. This means that you do not have gender first and then choose to perform it; rather, gender is created by the act of your performance. This performance is influenced by what is historically constituted as gender and is performed by the individual by means of the body.

Gender Stereotype

Gender stereotypes refer to attributing specific characteristics to people according to their belonging to the social group men and women (United Nations, 2014). By the same token, gender stereotypes generalize views of how men and women should perform in society. Besides, gender stereotypes gather a number of complexities and nuances that structure and configurate the expectations male and female are supposed to fulfill in societies (United Nations, 2014).

Critical Literacy

According to Behrman (2006) Critical Literacy (CL) presents education as a tool to cultivate social justice by means of acknowledging how language is affected by and affects social relations. It allows learners to read both the word and the world and to relate those reading to power, identity, access to knowledge among others (Janks, 2013. p, 227)

In the same sense, McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) suggest that CL understands readers as active participants in the reading process who are able to go above merely accepting texts' messages by questioning and analyzing power relations among writers and readers. Besides, Gutiérrez and Gómez (2019) argue that the critical literacy emphasizes assisting learners to become aware of the linkages between language and political, cultural and social phenomena.

Research Methodology

A case study allows the researcher to examine phenomena in their natural contexts. It draws on different data sources in order to learn about the particularities of a case (Yin, 2011). Similarly, this study allowed me to examine a phenomenon: students' responses to gender stereotypes. Besides, it explored it in its natural context: a seventh grade of a public school. Moreover, it described the particularities of the case: the responses students had in terms of resistance through different data sources such as: a questionnaire, journals, and a focus group.

Data Collection

To explore students' responses to gender stereotypes, this study used different data sources such as,

Questionnaire

This instrument was used almost at the end of the semester and intended to expose students to traditional gender stereotypes.

Journal

This instrument was used to confirm or disconfirm what was observed both in the focus group and the questionnaire.

Focus Group

This instrument was used to go deeper into the answers students provided to the questionnaire.

Action Development & Data Analysis

This study intended to explore students' responses to traditional gender stereotypes. Even though the initial plan was to give them class activities related to this topic, it was not possible to do it that way due to administrative issues such as: class lost and extracurricular activities. That is

why, it was decided to implement a questionnaire and then a focus groups to obtain these responses.

The questionnaire was applied to students during the last weeks of the second semester of the year. After obtaining their responses, a focus group was carried out in order to go deeper into students' responses that were not completely clear.

In order to analyze data, an inductive approach was used (Richards, 2003). This means that all the data was read and analyzed while allowing categories to emerge from it (resistant student, non-resistant student, somewhat resistant student) in order to triangulate.

Findings

Data analysis suggests that students still have strong representations of gender stereotypes in their life conceptions and therefore agree with tradition definition of gender. However, they also show freedom from these stereotypes by giving them untraditional tasks. This section describes how they perceive men and women in society by categorizing learners as resistant, non-resistant and somewhat resistant as well as showing evidence supporting this.

Resistant Student

This finding refers to the fact that students did not agree with the stereotypes portrayed or supported them. At least 6 of the students showed awareness toward the different stereotypes society holds in regard to gender. Yet, they displayed not only awareness towards these stereotypes but also a great recognition of the impact they have in individuals' lives. All of the students who were categorized here are able to challenge gender stereotypes and to go beyond them. One example of these students is Lina. As part of this study, students were asked to fulfill a questionnaire to gather their insights about gender roles. This was one of Lina's answers when asked about her opinion on the following image,



Los roles de género son algo impuesto en la sociedad y considero que son de mente cerrada y no deberían existir

Gender roles are something imposed in society and they are a proof of closed minds. They shouldn't exist.

As can be seen, Lina realizes that “gender roles are something imposed in society” on what men and women should be and do. She also states that “they are a proof of closed minds and they shouldn't exist”. That shows her awareness on the limitations a stereotype pose. Later on, Lina reinforces her position when she was asked to answer to a specific question about the origin of such preconceptions, she states,

Las ideas sobre lo que hacen un hombre y una mujer vienen de la sociedad que nos enseña esos estereotipos y nos encierra en ellos.

The ideas about what a man and a woman do come from the society that teaches us those stereotypes and encloses us in them.

Such answer expands on her idea of how society shapes “what a man and a woman do” as well as the roles men and women should assume in society. Besides, Lina acknowledges that such ideas encompass limitations depending on the gender you are assigned in society.

Somewhat Resistant Student

This finding refers to the fact that students showed they are in an ongoing process of challenging their gender stereotypes while still having them in their own imaginaries. At least 13 of the students showed certain resistance to the stereotypes One of these students was Juan.

During the implementation of the afore mentioned questionnaire, he recognized that both men and women can perform any activity they like with no gender boundaries. This was his response when he was showed the following image,



Yo opino que esta imagen está bien ya que los hombres y mujeres pueden hacer lo que quieran y trabajar en lo que quieran.

I think that this image is ok because men and women are able to do anything they want and to work in anything they want.

Such response shows his belief towards what men and women are supposed to do in society. He questions gender stereotypes by means of granting that “*men and women are able to do anything they want*”. However, when he was asked to classify certain professions in professions for women and professions for men, these were his answers,

PROFESIÓN	MUJER	HOMBRE
Enfermería	X	
Peluquería	X	
Cocina	X	X
Conducción de taxi		X
Militar		X
Aviación	X	X
Construcción		X
Docencia	X	X
Medicina	X	X
Derecho	X	X
Arquitectura	X	X

Even though he previously stated that men and women are able to perform any engagement, in this chart he distinguishes that some jobs are for women while other jobs are for men. Juan reinforces this distinction by providing the following explanation when he was asked to justify his answers to the chart,

Yo puse en cada una un género porque yo considero que está hecho para ese género como en temas de fuerza, inteligencia, etc.

I chose one job for each gender because I consider that each job is made for one gender or the other because of aspects such as strength, intelligence, etc.

This answer disagrees with what he had previously said. Such disagreement testifies that Juan is still disputing the ideas he holds about gender by starting to cultivate his awareness towards different conceptions on men and women.

Non-Resistant Student

This finding suggests that students agreed with the gender stereotypes portrayed and supported them. At least there are 4 students who are still resistant to gender stereotypes. All of them display responses and behaviors that demonstrate a strong influence of gender stereotypes on their conceptions of the world. One example of these students was José, when he was required to share his perceptions about the image, he answered the following,



Está al revés.

It is upside down.

Despite this is a very short and concise answer in which he did not expand, it shows a whole understanding on the matter. By saying that “*it is upside down*”, he barely recognizes the possibilities that may come if we go beyond gender stereotypes and he illustrates what his conception on the matter is. Later, José provided the following answer,

PROFESIÓN	MUJER	HOMBRE
Enfermería	X	
Peluquería	X	
Cocina	X	
Conducción de taxi		X
Militar		X
Aviación	X	
Construcción		X
Docencia	X	
Medicina	X	
Derecho		X
Arquitectura		X

These responses mark a clear distinction he makes between professions for men and professions for women. José associates these professions as we have seen that society commonly does. By the same token, when he was asked about the roles of mothers and fathers in families these were his answers,

El rol del papa es proteger la familia. El rol de la mamá es cuidar la familia.

Father's role is to protect the family. Mother's role is to take care of the family.

José reinforces the associations that are usually made about what the roles of fathers and mothers in families are. He mentions that “*father's role is to take care of the family*” while “*mother's role is to take care of the family*”. This demonstrates that he still has a one-sided conception of gender roles.

Conclusions and Reflections

This study explored students' responses to traditional gender stereotypes. Specifically, this study explored the resistance students showed to these kind of stereotypes after being exposed to them through a questionnaire.

Findings suggest that even though students are somewhat resistant to these stereotypes, they still need proper guidance and training on how to challenge them in order to stop unconsciously repeating them. However, this study also suggests that teachers wanting to discuss these topics with their students in their classrooms should be careful and respectful since there are still a good portion of students who adhere to them. Finally, these findings show the great need that the Colombian public education system has to implement teaching and learning approaches that help students challenge these representations.

Now, I am going to speak from my experience. On an ever-changing world like ours it is always a challenge to be a teacher. You are forced to leave your comfort zone and to move out from everything that results familiar for you. At least, that was my experience being a pre-service teacher at an institution such as INEM: a school that gathers all kinds of students coming from all kinds of backgrounds, a school that confronts you with a merge of realities and situations that put who you are at risk. However, I do not want to discourage all the teachers out there looking for a better way to perform the chiaroscuro that being a teacher is. That is why, I have to say this has been one of the most beautiful experiences of my life, I finish my practicum being a different woman, a different teacher and at the end a different human being. Having the opportunity to run into other teachers and students who question you every single day is for sure a gift, a singular and exceptional experience. At the end of the day, the most important conclusion of this

experience and a fundamental truth for my life is that I feel a great passion for being a teacher and that this is the profession I want to perform and enjoy for the rest of my life.

Concerning the research process, I have to say that it was not easy, specially carrying it out at the final part of the year when schools and students are preparing to close the academic year. Most of the time it was very frustrating to realize that I was not going to be able to teach a class or to collect data since there were other activities not exactly related to academic purposes. Anyways, it was also the opportunity to discover that the school is not only a place to learn academic content but also to socialize, to learn how to live and behave in society and to enjoy oneself.

Even though I do not see myself as a researcher, I have to acknowledge that it is an essential activity for teachers and pre-service teachers since it compels a constant reflection on who we are and what we do. In addition to that, this research process allowed me to start connecting the dots about a topic that has shaped into a personal questioning and search and it is gender. From my point of view performing the gender that has been assigned to us becomes a personal, political and historical fight in a world that is run by patriarchy and that is horrified with what disrupts into its guidelines.

If I had the opportunity to implement a project similar to this one, I would like to voice even more the students, I would like to explore their backgrounds and the reasons why they believe what they believe. Also, I would like to approach to the topic in a more sensitive way that allow me not only to gather and analyze data but to make an impact beyond that.

If there is any teacher who is trying to teach in a context like this one I would suggest being quite aware of the situations that the Colombian educational system has and the impact his or her actions may have in the students and colleagues around. I would also suggest to make the most of every single action and interaction with learners and to always teach with love. When it

comes to research, my suggestions would be related with being able to adapt both the research plan and the self to the different nuances the context may propose.

Now, if there is someone interested in exploring issues related to gender and stereotypes, I would suggest to always listen carefully to the implied parts, to avoid judging and to try to raise awareness on the importance and relevance these issues may have in our everyday lives. I also would like to suggest critical literacy as a way to provoke learners and because I still believe in the possibility of a fairer society. Finally, I hope this project that contains my tears as well as my joy is useful for someone out there.

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

ESTEREOTIPOS DE GÉNERO

El objetivo de este cuestionario es conocer algunas de tus percepciones frente a diferentes asuntos relacionados con el género, para ello, responderás algunas preguntas sobre estos dos aspectos: profesiones y familia.

1. Profesiones.

Hay algunas profesiones y trabajos que la sociedad ha asociado con las mujeres o con los hombres dependiendo de las tareas que se desarrollen en cada una de ellas, con estas preguntas, la intención es conocer tu opinión sobre esas profesiones y trabajos, no hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas, solo quiero saber qué piensas tú.

¿Qué opinas de esta imagen?



- Tú, como chica o chico ¿estarías dispuesta(o) a hacer lo que muestra la imagen? ¿Por qué sí o por qué no?
- A continuación, verás una lista de profesiones en una tabla, te pido que por favor marques si la profesión que ves es una profesión para hombres o para mujeres.

PROFESIÓN	MUJER	HOMBRE
Enfermería		
Peluquería		
Cocina		
Conducción de taxi		
Militar		
Aviación		

Construcción		
Docencia		
Medicina		
Derecho		
Arquitectura		

2. Roles en la familia.

Los roles son las posiciones que tomamos en diferentes situaciones. Por ejemplo, el rol de un estudiante es participar activamente en clase, preguntar y cumplir con las tareas, mientras que el rol de un profesor es el de guiar el proceso, explicar y ayudar a desarrollar las actividades de clase .

- ¿Cuál crees tú que es el rol del papá en la familia? ¿Por qué?
- ¿Cuál crees tú que es el rol de la mamá en la familia? ¿Por qué?
- Mira la siguiente imagen:



- ¿Qué opinas de un papá que hace lo que usualmente hacen las mamás? (cocinar, cuidar a los niños, planchar) Explica tu respuesta.
- ¿Qué opinas de una mamá que hace lo que usualmente hacen los papás? (ir al trabajo, hacer o ver algún deporte, dar las órdenes...) Explica tu respuesta.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Explica, por favor, la razón por la que consideras que las profesiones que marcaste son para un género o el otro o para ninguno
2. Explica, por favor la razón por la que consideras que los roles del papá son diferentes a los de la mamá en la familia
3. ¿De dónde crees que vienen esas ideas sobre lo que debe ser o hacer un género o el otro?
4. ¿Cuáles crees que son las consecuencias negativas de los estereotipos de género que hemos aprendido?