

Using Fantasy Literature to Explore Gender Issues

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The last decade has generated considerable interest in the issues confronting adolescent girls in American society today. Some of the earliest research which attempted to explore the issues was conducted by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues. Gilligan, Lyons, Hammer and others describe the anguish experienced by adolescent girls in *Making Connections* (1990). This and other work by Gilligan explore the loss of a sense of self and of connection to others reported by girls as they moved through the teenage years.

The urgency of the problem was catapulted to public attention with the publication of Mary Pipher's book, *Reviving Ophelia* (1994). Pipher, writing from her firsthand experience as a counselor, describes what she perceives as a pervasive malaise of today's adolescent girls. According to Pipher, girls entering adolescence experience a diminishing sense of who they are and what they can do. This is largely the result of messages that they receive from adults, from the media, and from their peers. Many girls react to this diminished sense of self by withdrawing and effacing their passions, at great expense. Others rebel by engaging in risk-taking behaviors such as drugs, alcohol, and sexual experimentation. Some, desperately seeking to conform to unrealistic expectations, become anorexic or bulimic. These findings echoed the earlier work of Gilligan.

The organization the American Association of University Women (AAUW) has been in the forefront of documenting the issues that Pipher describes, particularly as they relate to schools. In 1992 AAUW commissioned a report which synthesized research on adolescent girls in schools. The report, "How Schools Shortchange Girls," summarizes the devastating findings on the loss of self-esteem and decline of academic achievement experienced by adolescent females. This report was followed by a second, "Hostile Hallways" (1994) which detailed the sexual harassment endured by adolescent girls in schools. A third report, "Girls in the Middle: Working to Succeed in School" (Research for Action, 1996) examined the roles that middle school girls assume in order to cope with the difficult challenges adolescence, and gave specific suggestions of ways that schools could assist girls in overcoming these challenges. The list follows:

1. Expand the range of acceptable behaviors for girls, particularly behaviors such as argumentative and assertive actions.
2. Create a mentor program for girls and support the mentors.
3. Build identity development into the school curriculum. Have opportunities for girls and boys to explore and

discuss gender issues.

4. Foster opportunities for girls to assume leadership positions, within the school and the classroom setting.
5. Examine and share among schools the current practices of handling gender issues.
6. Make gender equity a school priority.
7. Create public forums to address the issue of gender equity.
8. Conduct research on gender issues.

Despite the clear call for action, the response of schools has been surprisingly slow. A review of the literature reveals that very few programs have been specifically designed to address the above recommendations. Of the programs that are reported, most are temporary research projects that lack sustainability (Sprague, 2000).

Of most interest to teachers is the recommendation to build identity development into the school curriculum, to have opportunities for girls and boys to explore and discuss gender issues.

Offering a course in gender identity was an intervention initiated by Heilman and Goodman (1995) of Indiana University. Heilman and Goodman targeted a K-12 school in a Midwestern city which had exploratory course offerings available to students on a monthly rotation. The course in gender identity (one of seven offered that month) was open to upper elementary, middle and high school students. Students enrolling in the course discussed the role of women in media and film. Based on student response, they also extended the exploration to children's literature. Finally, the students created personal narratives about their own experiences in gender identity, and these were studied. The instructors reported that the students who enrolled responded positively to the course content. However, there was definite resistance in the school, particularly on the part of male students, to having the course offered. The authors concluded that the study of gender identity was a crucial part of an effective high school curriculum.

Because elective courses such as those described above are rare, and only reach students who choose to enroll in them, another idea is to introduce the topic of gender identity within the regular curriculum. One way is through the reading of literature which introduces girls to strong female characters, ones who are able to maintain their true voices, despite challenges. These challenges include the efforts of adults, female and male peers to suppress or co-opt the voice of the young woman.

A number of books have been identified as having strong female characters. Odean's *Great Books for Girls* is an ex-

ample of a resource that is helpful in locating novels and biographies with compelling heroines. A recent article by Sprague and Keeling (2000) targets 20 young adult books which are especially effective in generating discussion of gender issues, and gives ways that they might be incorporated into the school curriculum.

Because so many early adolescents (boys and girls) are fascinated by fantasy literature, we decided to use this genre as a vehicle of generating discussion about gender issues in a seventh grade classroom. From the books recommended by Sprague and Keeling (2000), we selected four as fitting the genre of fantasy:

McCaffre, Anne. *Dragonsong*. Bantam, 1976. 176 pp.

Musically gifted Menolly lives in a remote fishing village on the world of Pern. Her dream is to become a musician, but only men are allowed to become "harpers." Her father beats her when she disobeys and even allows an accidental wound to heal badly so that she will no longer be able to play instruments. Lonely, frustrated, and miserable, Menolly runs away from the village to live on her own in a cave on the coast. There she finds and adopts nine "fire lizards," a semi-intelligent form of miniature dragons who enjoy her music and even accompany her. Caught outside during Threadfall (a fiery rain that plagues Pern), Menolly is rescued by a dragonrider and taken to safety. The people there appreciate her talents, including the Masterharper of Pern, who invites her to come study at Harper Hall as an apprentice Harper.

McCaffrey, Anne. *Dragonsinger*. Bantam, 1976. 176 pp.

In this sequel to *Dragonsong*, Menolly goes to Harper Hall to study her music. While there, she meets with antagonism on the part of teachers and other students, both male and female. She gradually learns to have confidence in her talent and to seek out friends and mentors who will support her.

Levine, Gail Carson. *Ella Enchanted*. HarperCollins, 1997. 232 pp.

When Ella is born, a fairy gives her a "gift" that turns out to be a curse: the gift of obedience. How can Ella ever be her true self when the "curse" compels her to do whatever anyone orders her to do, no matter how careless or unintentional the command? Rather than becoming truly obedient, she turns into a rebel, always resisting the orders she is given by finding ways around them, obeying the letter but not the spirit of the command. Feisty and intelligent, Ella finds within herself the means of solving her problem. In the end, she saves not only herself but her prince as well in this adaptation of the Cinderella story.

Wrede, Patricia. *Dealing with Dragons*. Scholastic, 1990. 212 pp.

In this light-hearted fantasy, the princess Cimorene rejects her expected role as wife of a prince and instead takes the job of housekeeper for a dragon. She rebuffs suitors who try and rescue her from this task, and instead uncovers a plot to undermine her dragon's authority. She becomes more and more needed by the dragon society. The plot lends itself to questions about the expected role of girls and how unconventional choices are viewed by others.

Teaching the Books: A Ten-Day Plan

Co-author Lori Risher is a teacher who committed to teaching these novels as part of her seventh grade language arts

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Risher placed her students in groups of five to six. These groups were formed mainly by reading levels, since there was a range of reading difficulty within the books. Each group was tasked with reading the book over a two week period. Students developed their own time lines for reading the book. Risher arranged for small-group and whole group discussions, and led mini-lessons. She also assigned a "daily diary" assignment to guide the reading response of the students. This "diary" consisted of a journal entry at the end of each chapter. Students had to respond from a first person point of view, writing as if they were a character from the novel. They had to develop a question to share with their group, and also find one interesting vocabulary word in the chapter. This would form the basis for their small group discussion.

The ten class days were organized in this fashion:

Day one: Risher introduced the books and explained the fantasy genre. Students met in their groups, were given the books, and completed a prediction chart based on a cursory inspection of the book's title, cover, and book jacket. Students set their timeline for reading the book. She then explained the "daily diary" assignment.

Day two: Risher conducted a mini-lesson on setting. Particular attention was paid to the idea of non-realistic setting. Students were given a project assignment to recreate the setting in a three-dimensional mode (they had a week to do this project). Students were put in their book groups and asked to discuss the setting of their novels, as well as to share their "daily diaries."

Day three: Risher conducted a mini-lesson on conflict. Students were told to consider the internal conflict of the main character (which in every case is a female). They were asked to consider the conflict of who the character wanted to be versus who others expected or wanted the character to be. The terms "expression" and "suppression" of voice were introduced. Students were shown a schematic (figure 1) to guide their consideration of the conflicts experienced by the main character. Students completed a worksheet on conflict in their groups and continued to share their "daily diaries."

Day four: Risher reviewed plot sequence: exposition and rising action. In groups, students were asked to begin a plot diagram of their book and to continue discussion of the diaries.

Day five: Students met to discuss their reading to date, and to share diaries.

Day six: Risher reviewed plot sequence: climax, falling action, and resolution. In groups, students were asked to complete the plot diagram of their book and to continue discussion of the diaries.

Day seven: Small group discussion.

Day eight: By this time, students had mostly completed the book. Risher introduced the idea of theme as the intended message of the author, and conducted a short mini-lesson on theme. Students were told that all four books had similar themes. Students were asked to decide in groups what they thought the theme was. They were urged to consider the conflict schematic in their discussions.

Day nine: Risher conducted a whole-group discussion on the theme of the books, which was generally agreed upon as this: Girls can do anything, but sometimes people or things

try to stop them from doing them. Risher asked students whether they agreed with the theme of the books. Lively discussion followed. The students were given the assignment of writing a theme essay, which clearly stated the theme and gave support from the individual book they had read.

They were given five days to do this assignment.

Day ten: Students revisited the prediction chart they had made on day one. They compared their original predictions to their reading

Student reaction to the books

During the first days of the unit, students read the books for plot details. They were sometimes confused with the unusual names introduced. Students who read *Dragonsinger* in particular had a difficult time following the plot since they had not read the preceding book, *Dragonsong*. When students were introduced to the conflict chart, they had some difficulty finding examples of the various factors. They appeared to be unsure as to the terms “suppression” versus “expression.” However, by the time they examined the theme, they clearly understood that the books were about the roles of women in society. Risher asked them to discuss the theme, which they agreed had to do with females fighting to take their places in a male society. In two of the classes, the conversation was quite restrained. Students politely stated their positions that girls had many opportunities now and that only in the past had there been barriers. Girls appeared reluctant to admit any current barriers. Boys appeared unaware of any barriers. Both boys and girls failed to see any relationship of the intended theme of the books to issues in their own lives. However, in the other two of the classes the conversation became very heated. Boys began teasing the girls, questioning the ability of girls to do everything that males could do. In one class, the argument ended with the girls challenging the boys to a basketball game after school at the end of the week. The teacher assisted in facilitating the game.

Co-author Sprague, who observed one of these discussions, noted that throughout the heated argument, the girls continued to raise their hands to be called upon to speak. Boys shouted out their comments without being recognized. Risher noted that in the most acrimonious class, the boys appeared to be entertained by the arguments, while the girls appeared to be truly angry.

Assessing the impact of the unit

To assess the impact of the unit on the students’ thinking about gender issues, two different analyses were done. First, Sprague interviewed a random number of students regarding their reactions to the unit. Second, the theme papers were analyzed to determine what students finally extracted from the books regarding gender issues. Based on these two reviews, themes that reflected students’ reactions to the unit were identified:

1. There are societal expectations for women that are different (and often more restrictive) than for men. Students recognized that the girls in the stories had to try to fit into a rules-oriented society. Kody wrote, “The princess wants to be different and she is very tired of people trying to tell her that being different is bad, and that she should try to become a regular princess.” Students also recognize that today’s girls have struggles as well, although there was some reluctance to admit this. In an interview, Scott (age 12) echoed most of

the students when he said, “I would hope and believe, that girls can do what they want, but they probably wouldn’t be able to... I think that we are the same.” Emily, age 12, reflected a number of the girls, who said, “...you need to rebel, because they don’t hear you, but when you speak up, they hear you.”

2. The women in the book are strong because they are, or become, determined, and this is what allows them to survive. Tiffany wrote about *Ella Enchanted*, “Ella’s best strength was determination. Ella never gave up. She struggled daily against her curse, even though she never won.” CJ wrote of the heroine in *Dealing With Dragons*, “One of Cimorene’s strengths is that she never takes no for an answer.”

3. There is a fantasy literature schema which holds certain expectations the princess is beautiful, the prince is charming, the prince gets the princess after overcoming obstacles, they live happily ever after. The students’ schema was sometimes modified by the books but other times it persisted. One student summarized the ending of *Ella Enchanted*: “In the end the curse was broken, Ella and Prince Charmont lived happily ever after.”

4. Sometimes women are not supportive of one another, and in fact contribute to obstacles. In *Dealing with Dragons*, some of the other princesses condemn Cimorene’s choice to refuse to marry the prince. In *Dragonsinger*, as Landon realized, “The most critical of Menolly’s presence were actually the other girls in the hall. Since Menolly was receiving all the attention, the girls were jealous. The girls decided from the very start to hold grudges against Menolly and to try to make her time at Harper hall miserable.”

5. In order to conform, girls sometimes pretend to be less capable than they are. This is one way of “fitting in.” This is especially obvious in *Dragonsinger*. Lauren wrote of the main character, Menolly, “Should she play the instruments badly and make the girls happy so that they would become her friends, or should she play the instruments well and be happy with herself?”

6. Sometimes girls have to run away from the world they are in to fulfill their promise. Candi, who read *Dealing With Dragons*, wrote, “When Cimorene ran away she changed. She became more free-willed. She was able to do things her parents thought were improper. Cimorene became stronger and more jubilant than she was before.” Mike commented on the character of Menolly: “She becomes very happy when she runs away. She’s free to hum and sing, and she realizes she could never get herself to return.” This is a message that concerns us. Running away is a dangerous idea to entertain as a solution to gender discrimination. We regret not having recognized this early enough to hold discussions on the topic.

One of the most interesting set of responses was to the question, “Would you read more stories like this, or recommend them to your friends?” Some students said yes, but gave only reasons about the plot of the books being interesting. Others said, no, they really did not like to read very much. But some students clearly resonated to the purpose of the study. Here are their replies:

“Yes! It’s different from most books, like, where the leading man saves women. We should see different ways.” (Sam, age 12)

“Yes! Because I’m tired of happily ever after, especially since men end up the big heroes.” (Charell, age 11)

"Yes — I would recommend that my brother read this." (Sara, age 12)

In her theme paper, Carolyn sums up what we think is the major insight of the discussions:

This story goes to show that women have come a long way when it comes to equality. In this story Cimorene didn't need the help of princes to save her, Alianora and her (sic) did it together. She wouldn't let anyone tell her that what she was doing was just not done and with that attitude she went a long way. Although women have come a long way in equality we still have a long way to go.

Jayna summarized her thoughts in this way:

So basically who are we trying to fool? Do we always have to be saved by someone else to really be saved? Or can we do it ourselves and through many years overcome our image as a stereotype of a damsel in distress?

In this study, girls more often appreciated the role reversal of the main characters. Yet occasionally we saw wonderful insights from boys as well. This confirmed our belief that both boys and girls benefited from reading and discussing these novels.

Summary

There is no doubt that adolescent girls experience a sense of bewilderment as they encounter a societal agenda which often differs from their preferences. Sadly, they have no forum to discuss what the society expects and how it can be negotiated. It is clear that the school is the natural forum for these discussions. The use of literature to spark thinking about gender roles, as is demonstrated by this study, is one promising way that girls and boys can confront these issues. We are aware that just one encounter in a seventh grade classroom is not enough to impact students meaningfully, but a series of such discussions around good literature, spanning grades six through ten, could greatly help both boys and girls grapple with gender issues. Fantasy as a genre is a natural entree to these discussions, because most adolescent students respond well to it, and it frequently offers hyperspecific sexual stereotypes.

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