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EXPLORING THE PERCEPTION OF THE STUDENTS ABOUT THE ROLE OF WOMEN



» Abstract

This article presents the results of a small scale project focused on exploring student perceptions related to the role of women. The project was developed in a public school with a population of 30 students from 11th grade. Findings revealed that when facing real life, a woman is in the same condition as a man, it does not matter the gender. Despite the belief that men and women have the same opportunities to get a job, it is clear that there are some activities which are conceived only for men, although there is the perception that women are influenced by gender and limitations in capacities. Thus, the perception of women is still linked to local circumstances and social conditions that allow function in any setting.

Key words: Gender, role of the woman, family and sexism.

» Resumen

Este artículo muestra los resultados de un proyecto a pequeña escala basado en las percepciones sobre el rol de la mujer. El proyecto se desarrolló en un colegio público con una población de 30 estudiantes de grado 11. Las conclusiones revelaron que cuando las mujeres se enfrentan a la vida real, están en las mismas condiciones que los hombres, el género hoy no es tan relevante. A pesar de la creencia de que hombres y mujeres tienen las mismas oportunidades laborales, es un hecho que existen ciertos trabajos adecuados solo para hombres, aunque también existe la percepción de que la mujer está condicionada por los limitantes en género y no en capacidades, por lo cual, la percepción de mujer seguirá ligada a las circunstancias y condiciones sociales que le permitan desenvolverse en cualquier ámbito.

Palabras clave: Género, rol de la mujer, familia y sexismo.

Introduction

Defining sociolinguistics as the relation between language and the society, we consider that this is a concept which is necessary to take into account. I think that this is a very important aspect to observe in our classrooms, to analyze to what extent these features affect us indirectly when teaching or learning English or even more, to demonstrate that these characteristics are present and influence the environment in an English class. According to Hudson (2001), sociolinguistics plays other important role, which let the researchers identify that there is no connection between the culture of the community and the meaning which its language allows it to express. That condition becomes problematic when students use different attitudes and play different roles in the classes. They project in the classroom what they would possible be in the future.

As sociolinguistics seeks the relationship between the diverse society and the language, I begin my discussion referring to what I understand as society. It is generally a group of people who share a common culture, occupy a particular territorial area, and feel themselves to constitute a unified and distinct entity. But we need each other, it means we must be aware of the fact that each human being has its own role in the society and has its own responsibilities as well; however roles have to be seen as behaviors of an individual to construct its own society. Nevertheless, both men and women historically have developed certain roles. For example, women used to assume the role of “teachers” to their children and housekeepers. They were supposed to receive instructions about how to be housewives instead of going out and working or studying.

Talking about women’s roles is to talk about women getting into the work place and sometimes how motherhood and raising children have been devalued in modern life. Flórez, (2009) mentions that demographic, social and cultural transformations of the second half of the 20th century have added big changes in the composition, size and functions of the family. Teachers are working with the main element of the family, which are children and teenagers, and they are influenced by the changed society. It proves that students’ behaviors depend on the presence of their mothers at home. Thus, considering the previous issues I decided to develop a small scale study based on a written survey with questions about students’ perceptions related to the role of women.

Research Setting and Participants

The Context

This small scale project was carried out at Institución Educativa Nuestra Señora del Carmen in Susacón- Boyacá. This is a public school which offers an education program based on the public education policies. According to PEI (2007:9), its study plan is articulated with Educative Revolution established by MEN. In its objectives, it proposes to get the community to develop an integral and inclusive process in order to allow progress to the region, so students can carry out their project of life.

The Students

The participants of this project were 30 students, 12 women and 18 men, they are attending 11th grade at the school and

the group is coeducational, they all have different opinions, expectations and they belong to very dissimilar social contexts. The students who participated in this project ranged in age from 15 to 20 years old and they are scheduled 3 hours of English each week.

Theoretical Framework

Since this study was focused on the conception of the role of the women and how a group of 30 students belonging to different social contexts, perceive women in their lives, the following concepts are considered below: sex, gender, role of women, family, society, sexism.

Gender and sex

Human daily life, laws, policies and everything today has to do with gender. Sex and gender are not identical, although often have been used as synonyms, we find, for example, "policies or laws of gender" exclusively aimed at improving the conditions of women.

Talking about gender implies that one thing is to recognize sexual difference, and others are attributions, ideas, representations and social requirements that are built from that sexual difference. Lamas (2008) points out all societies structure their lives and build their culture around the sexual difference. In the same sense, Nanda (1970) argues that sex refers to biological differences between men and women, particularly the visible differences in the external genitals and the difference related to sex role each plays in the reproductive process.

Referring to what gender means, it is used to group beings that have common characteristics. Facio (2005), mentions that gender in the sense of sexual gender, refers to the sexual dichotomy that is socially imposed through gender roles and stereotypes that make the sexes appear to be diametrically opposed. From the biological differences are built characteristics, attitudes, expectations and roles for each sex.

The problem lies not in the characteristics and roles attributed to each sex, but that the value placed on these characteristics and different roles, legitimizing the domination of one sex against the subordination of another. For example, in our context the value of male makes a reference of all human beings.

Gender is constructed in accordance with social, familiar and cultural expectations; gender varies from one culture to another and within a culture varies with the time. Attorneys General Office (2008, p.18) states that for example, in the past men headed out to work and provided what was necessary for maintenance of the house, while women were in charge of home care, the housework and parenting. Today we find these roles are still under way; however, we also see both, men and women work outside the home and be responsible for housework and parenting.

It is important to recognize that there are inevitable differences, but these differences have become disadvantages, which are evident in relationships, families, society and in culture.

Family

Article 42 in the “Constitución Política de Colombia” defines a family as the fundamental unit in the organization of the society. It consists of a man and a woman who wish to share their lives together in a long-term committed relationship with one another. They have the responsibility of bringing up the children that they have. This is the concept of family that the Colombian law established, but there are some variations in the constitution of a family as follows:

- The extended family. It refers to the relatives who do not belong to the nuclear family but they live with them. It includes uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins, etc.
- The monoparental family. It refers to the family which is constituted by either, the mother or the father and the children.
- The family of a single mother. It refers to the family which is constituted by the mother and the children. She is the only one who assumes the responsibilities.
- The family whose parents are divorced. It refers to the family whose parents are divorced because of different circumstances.

The concepts of human roles begin to be developed into the family. This situation affects also how students perceive their roles into the society and in the future. Kerka (1991) in her article *Balancing Work and Family Life* argues that recognition of the developmental stages of careers, families, and individuals provides a better

understanding of the stresses and conflicts arising from various roles, especially when high-demand stages of two roles occur simultaneously (Miller 1986). Systems theory emphasizes the interrelatedness of individual, career, and family and identifies how satisfaction or dissatisfaction in one area affects the others (Schneider 1990). Some choices that could affect the perceptions of students in the classroom are: selecting a work with adequate salary potential, deciding to have a family, deciding whether and when to have children and how to provide child care and to have a good professional development. Taking into account the number of program examples and curriculum guides that Kerka (1991) poses in her work ("Adult and Family Living" 1990; "Family and Career Transitions Resource Guide" 1989; "Family Life and Worker Productivity" 1986; "Individual and Family Life" 1989; Kaser and Frazier 1989; Miller and Weeks 1985; "Vocational Education Journal" 1989) it is important that teachers include issues that worry students in order to plan their classes such as: values, expectations and priorities, career and life style choice, multiple roles, sex roles and sex stereotypes, parenthood/family life education.

Role of women

Attitudes toward women have changed radically. A growing number of women are choosing different options like being single professionals or being single parenting professionals, different from the traditional view of women's role. Despite the ideal of women at home, our female students will have to work outside their home because of the economic needs, often in badly-paying jobs. In spite of the existence of

the importance of the role of the women in Colombia, it is important to review how the Colombian Government has seen this role through our history. Colombia has examples on how strong, since the law, the disadvantages of the women have been legitimized, the legislature has devoted decades of discrimination and unequal treatment between men and women. Let us remember within the 20th century, women in Colombia were restricted, among other things, they were incapable matched to the administration of their property, they could not exercise parental authority over their children, and married women had to add her husband's surname preceded by the preposition "de".

As we can see, during the past and this century lots of changes have driven to turn the vision we have in regards to what the role of a woman is and how it could truly be developed in our changing society.

Sexism

Although human beings belong to a community and play diverse roles, there are some differences, and sometimes discrimination, among men and women. Through history we have heard that society is sexist, that there are some behaviors, situations or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on genre especially against women. According to Swim and Cohen (1997), sexism is defined as individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative assessments of individuals based upon their gender or support unequal status of women and men.

Kerka (1993) in her work: "Women, Human Development, and Learning" argues that the big differences among men and women are expressed by authors in terms of leadership. Tisdell (1993) notes that men are generally socialized for leadership roles and an authoritative style, women to support and to take care of people. Social conventions define and approve what is "normal" and "natural" for each gender and then consistently devalue what is associated with the feminine (Collard and Stalker 1991). However, the new models she reviews (such as Gilligan's relationship model and Belenky et al. "ways of knowing") can also be used to reinforce gender stereotypes, and they focus on changing the individual rather than the sociocultural context in which identity develops. Blundell (1993) also cautions that the idea of sex role expectations exaggerates the importance of individual attitudes and minimizes the economic and social forces to which individuals respond. Bar-Yam (1991) argues strongly for the influence of social/cultural factors on psychological differences. This study reveals that there is no difference in terms of identity. Both men and women need to be autonomous and interdependent.

Methodology

The type of Research

This small scale research project could be classified as a case study. According to Nisbet and Watt (1980), this type of study is mainly concerned with the interaction of factors and events observed in a practical instance, so that researchers can obtain a full picture of this interaction. Furthermore, this study was descriptive

as well as interpretative when considering that the authors present an account of the phenomenon under study and the way the information was collected allowed the researcher to describe and analyze the invisible roles that are immersed within the classroom.

Data Collection Procedures

The main instrument that was used to gather information was a survey. (See Appendix 1). A survey is a way of providing statistical data. The design of this data instrument must take into account several aspects, Kalton (1983) signs the mode of data collection (whether by face to face interview, telephone interview, or self-completion form), the framing of the questions to be asked, and the method of processing the data, as well as the sample design. Before designing the survey it was thought about the population of this study, taking into account different respondents. The survey was answered by 30 students from a public school. Then, the information was tabulated and analyzed in order to report the results.

After tabulating the data gathered from the survey I found out that students have different perceptions about the role of women in their context but all of them had in common one role: the one of being a mother. For that reason, I decided to adapt an activity based on family descriptions to go deeper on their perceptions and see how they relate their context with the information provided. (See Appendix 2). Once the activity was developed by the students I collected them and analyzed their answers which show the results I explain next.

Findings

1. EQUALITY BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN: When facing the real life, a woman is in the same conditions as a man. It does not matter the gender. When tabulating the information we found some answers from the students as follows:

‘La sociedad cree que las mujeres no estamos al mismo nivel de capacidad de un hombre. Se equivoca’. (Student N°1).

‘Society believes that women are not at the same level of ability of men. It is wrong’. (Student N°1).

‘Siempre se tiene en cuenta al hombre, se piensa que se desempeña mejor y que puede hacer las cosas mejor que la mujer, sabiendo que la mujer también es estudiada, profesional y capaz’. (Student N° 2).

‘People always take men into account, it is thought that they perform better and can do things better than women, and we all know that women have studied, they are professional and able’. (Student N°2).

‘Cada quien busca lo que quiere hacer, si estudiar, trabajar o no hacer nada. Las oportunidades son iguales para todos, para quien quiera ser alguien’. (Student N°3)

‘Each person seeks what he or she wants to do, whether studying, working or doing nothing. The opportunities are the same for those who want to be somebody’. (Student N°3).

Equity is not the same as equality, in parallel, not all inequality is considered inequitable. The notion of inequity refers to "unnecessary and avoidable and unfair inequalities." (OPS/OMS). Therefore, recognizing that gender equality is an issue of human rights, social justice and development is a starting point. Gender equality means that the different behaviors, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and promoted equally. This does not mean that women and men should become equal, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female; it means that all human beings are free to develop their personal skills and making decisions.

The mean to achieve equality is gender equity, understood as justice in the treatment of women and men according to their needs. Therefore, gender equality implies the possibility of differential treatments to correct inequalities of departure; not necessarily equal measures, but conducive to equality in rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.

2. KINDS OF JOBS (Men vs. Women):

Despite the fact that we think that men and women have the same opportunities to get a job, it is clear that there are some activities which are conceived only for men. For example, truck driver, bricklayer, plumber, pilot, etc. But, is it because our society does not allow women to perform these kinds of jobs or because they are very tough jobs for women? According to the students opinions they argue that definitely there are some jobs that are only for men and women cannot do very hard

activities which require muscular force or simply because women would not look too feminine, in this sense, the role of a woman is to be feminine. Let us see some of their answers:

'Los hombres desempeñan algunos trabajos que las mujeres no pueden por causas físicas'. (Student N°4).

'Men perform some jobs that women can not because of physical reasons.'

'Muchas veces los trabajos exigen fuerza física y para esto son mejores los hombres. Pero igual, las mujeres son tan importantes como los hombres'. (Student N°5)

'Many times some jobs demand physical force and men are better to perform them than women. However, women are as important as men.'

'Los trabajos más fuertes son para los hombres y para las mujeres son más de inteligencia'. (Student N°6).

'Jobs which require physical strength are for men and jobs which require intelligence are for women'

As we can see in the students' answers they show the perception they have about both, men and women, men are strong and they perform some jobs and women are weak and cannot strengthen too much. Another aspect that gets my attention is the opinion of the students about intelligence, they are implying that men are not intelligent enough to perform certain jobs, in other words they are implying that women are more intelligent than men because men are stronger than women.

3. CONFORMISM: Commonly we listen to most women saying: "I have achieved my role as a woman because I am a mother". That is what we found in our students' answers when they described the ideal role of a woman. It does not matter how good professional they are or how they can help the community. The perfect role for a woman would be to follow the next steps: go to the university, be professional, get a well-paying job and have a family to be a good mother. Make the ideal combination of being a professional, a wife and a mother; in this way a woman would not need to depend economically on another person or her husband. This category was shaped based on the next students' answers:

'La mujer debería ser madre de familia para que esté pendiente de sus hijos pero al mismo tiempo ser profesional y trabajar'. (Student N°7).

'A woman should be a mother and take care of her children but at the same time, she must be professional and work'.

'El rol ideal para una mujer sería estudiar, luego trabajar y pues formar una familia. Aportar en lo que pueda, ayudarse con la pareja y no depender del hombre'. (Student N° 8).

'The ideal role for a woman would be to study, then work and settle down. If she can, she can support the family. She should help her spouse and she should not depend economically on a man'

'Creo que las mujeres pueden conseguir lo que quieran: pueden estudiar, ser profesionales, trabajar y manejar un hogar, encontrar el equilibrio'. (Student N° 9).

'I think that women can get what they want. They can study, be professional, work and have a family. They can keep the balance'. (Student N° 9)

Conclusions

From the data tabulation it can be concluded that most of the families are not as large as in the past they could be, the average is 4 members per family. The inclusion of women in the workforce also has implications in the domestic sphere and therefore the roles and lifestyles of the other part of the population: men. The number of women in families is limited. We could find 2 or 3 women per families; the supremacy of men is notable. Data shows an increase in male participation in work such as childcare and food preparation, but the genre, in this case being a woman, continues to be decisive in the probability of taking responsibility for household work, while not including those who perform them. Even most families are nuclear constituted by mother, father and children. It is relevant to see all of the types of families that are found in society. Students recognize the important role of women in the leadership of the family, they see themselves as being responsible; it does not matter if they work or not. Also most of them think the best way to lead the family is through a shared responsibility but mothers are the base of the family.

Throughout history we have seen that the role of women has changed, and we have had to wait very long periods of time to see these changes. If a person who is 16 or 17 years old conceives the ideal role of a woman as being professional, getting a good job and having a family, it is because this person has experienced this view in his or her context, so we can say that this conception has been perpetuated generation after generation.

Talking about the role of women within the family and how these roles have evolved over time, students think they are changing their priorities and their way of thinking. Nowadays women prefer to study and work before having a family.

One perception students still have about human beings is that women cannot perform works which requires strength but intelligence and vice versa, men cannot perform some works which are conceived only for women.

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