GENDER ISSUES IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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In recent decades, extensive studies from diverse disciplines have focused on children's developmental awareness of different gender roles and the relationships between genders. Among these studies, researchers agree that children's picture books have an increasingly significant place in children's development because these books are a widely available cultural resource, offering young children a multitude of opportunities to gain information, become familiar with the printed pictures, be entertained, and experience perspectives other than their own. In such books, males are habitually described as active and domineering, while females rarely reveal their identities and very frequently are represented as meek and mild. This valuable venue for children's gender development thus unfortunately reflects engrained societal attitudes and biases in the available choices and expectations assigned to different genders. This discriminatory portrayal in many children's picture books also runs the risk of leading children toward a misrepresented and misguided realization of their true potential in their expanding world.

Gender bias as portrayed in children's literature is still as prevalent today as in past decades, and remains a problem in light of the fact that gender stereotypes and sexism in children's picture books affect the development of gender identity in young children (e.g., Allen, Allen, & Sigler, 1993; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Numerous studies (e.g., Fox, 1993; Singh, 1998) of children's literature content indicate that male figures dominate the majority of books. This condition affects children's development and perceptions. Children adopt certain roles and behaviors as part of their socialization process. Many of these gender-based, behavioral roles arise from identification with others. The development of gender-role identity is important to children's self-perception, and influences adults' and peers' treatment of children (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993). Gender affects others' expectations of children and youngsters often do not understand the expected behavior. The purpose of this article is to examine the current gender issues extensively revealed in children's literature.

As mentioned, literature is one of the homes of gender stereotypes. The books that children read and that are read to them have psycho-social uses at a time when children are continually constructing ideas from information around them and assimilating new knowledge with previous knowledge (Elliker, 2005). In general, children's literature is said to provide characters and events with which children can identify and through which they can consider their own actions, beliefs, and emotions (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). The characters and situations in books introduce children to what the world may look like through others' eyes, and offer opportunities for children to further construct
their own views of self and the world. 

Strictly speaking, everything that children read contributes to the formation of self-images that help to construct children’s self-identity. For example, girls can imagine themselves as women and boys can imagine themselves as men (Singh, 1998). Images and specific language used in picture books have the potential to affect children’s developmental processes in various ways as a result of reading at crucial stages of development (Kramer, 2001).

Besides being an important resource for developing children’s language skills, children’s books play a significant part in transmitting a society’s culture. Without question, children develop gender-role identities during their early years, and one factor that influences this identity is the literature that children read or is read to them (Allen et al., 1993). Picture books also have a particular influence on gender identities because they are viewed at a time when children are in the process of developing their individual identities. Moreover, gender identity is a pervasive social classification that is established early in childhood and is an important aspect of self-esteem.

The following parts of this article focus on: (a) the situation of gender bias and stereotypes in children’s literature, and (b) selected research studies on trends relating to images of both men and women used in pictures, titles, and central roles of children as characters in these books.

Gender Bias and Stereotypes in Children’s Literature

The concern about sexism in children’s literature is based on the contention that books influence children’s behavior. Without question, the gender-roles portrayed in children’s picture books influence their audiences, but the magnitude and generalization of this influence and its impact on behavior are not completely understood. In addition, according to Kolbe and Voie (1981), children’s books are not the only influence on children’s gender-role attitudes; nonetheless, they can play an important role in eliminating sexism by presenting egalitarian gender roles.

The impact of gender role stereotyping in children’s literature has been examined in numerous studies over the past decades. Many researchers have acknowledged that literature can influence the gender stereotypes of young children, and that gender bias is present in the content, language, and illustrations of many children’s books (Kittelberger, 2002). In other words, children’s books are an important cultural mechanism for teaching gender roles to children (Taylor, 2003). The bias influencing gender stereotypical thinking may limit children’s choices, interests, and abilities. In most children’s picture books, males characteristically dominate titles, pictures, and texts. Female characters, on the other hand, are not only under-represented in titles and central roles, but also appear unimportant. According to researchers’ findings (i.e., Fox, 1993; Kolbe & Voie, 1981), 85% of the main characters in stories for children are male, and female characters rarely do anything. Examples of sexism are clearly abundant, even from a quick glance at a dozen randomly selected books.

Gender stereotypes in literature prevent female human potential from being real-
ized by depriving girls of a range of strong, alternative role models. Moreover, present studies showed that female and male characters are not presented equally (Turner-Bowker, 1996). Female characters were found to be presented significantly less often in pictures and titles than were male characters. Also consistent with gender stereotypes, male characters were more often described as potent, powerful, and more active than female characters.

As mentioned, gender bias is easily found in the content, language, and illustrations of a large number of children's books. This bias may be seen in the extent to which a main character represents a gender in children's books and how that gender is portrayed. Moreover, Kramer (2001) asserted that contemporary society often categorizes both genders with outdated and stereotypical images and biased language, all of which are considered problems in children's literature.


Books for children have reflected societal attitudes in limiting choices and maintaining discrimination. Most traditional books show females dressed in skirts or dresses even when they are engaged in activities inappropriate for this sort of costume. Illustrations also have conventionally placed females in passive observer roles, while males have been pictured as active. Studies have demonstrated time and time again that illustrations confirm the subordinate, less valued role for the female, while stressing the active, adventuresome, admirable role for male.

In addition, most themes represented in children's book reflect the expectation that male characters will use their brains to effectively and creatively solve problems, while female characters are portrayed as more concerned with appearance. Females are depicted as dependent, emotional, silly, clumsy, and lacking intelligence. They are passive, gentle, domestic, motherly, and unassertive (Kramer, 2001). Males typically are portrayed as competent and achievement-oriented, while the image of females is that they are limited in what they can do, and are less competent in their ability to accomplish things (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993). That is to say, female characters are involved in few of the activities and assigned few of the characteristics or goals that are accorded prestige and esteem in today's society. In reality, women do pursue and achieve goals, as well as engage in daily business/professional activities.

Peterson and Lanch asserted that gender development is a critical part of the earliest and most important learning experience of young children (as cited in Narahara, 1998). Children's picture books not only possess an incomparable charm for children, but also have a long-term influence on their gender development. That is, in addition to entertainment, children's picture books also communicate cultural
and social norms to young children. Illustrations also have an equal responsibility to tell the story because characters’ pictures evoke feelings, emotions, and reactions as young readers observe illustrated facial expressions. Based on this affirmation of importance, children’s picture books perform faithfully the role of furthering the development of children’s gender identities.

**Selected Research Studies Demonstrating Genders Inequalities**

Much has been written about children’s literature and gender stereotyping, describing its influences on the gender attitudes of children (e.g., Allen et al., 1993; Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; Martinez & Nash, 1993; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Gender role stereotypes affect how children perceive themselves. A negative portrayal of a child’s own gender may affect that child’s self-identity and self-esteem. Some researchers (e.g., Peterson & Lach, as cited in Narahara, 1998) found that an awareness of stereotypes changed children’s attitudes. Yet children who were read non-sexist stories over a sustained period of time reduced their notions of gender-role stereotypes. These children also developed fewer stereotypical attitudes about jobs after being read stories about people who fought gender discrimination.

According to findings from the studies of Key and Wertzman (as cited in Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993), males predominated in situations with “second-sex” themes, such as passivity and victimization. Also, females were greatly underrepresented in titles and central roles. Furthermore, the illustrations in children’s picture books depicted most activity being accomplished by males. Key and Wertzman concluded that this trend in children’s books is based on the premise that “boys do, girls are,” making gender stereotypes a strong influence affecting children’s perceptions of the behaviors and attitudes of each gender.

Also, Turner-Bowker (1996) found that the most commonly used female descriptors were **beautiful, frightened, and worthless**. In contrast, the most commonly used male descriptors were big, horrible, and fierce. However, she thought that this might be due to females fulfilling their stereotypical roles. Further, female characters were found significantly less frequently in pictures and titles. Conversely, she contended that, recently, their representation in central roles had increased in proportion to those for male characters.

Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999) found in their study that it was possible to influence children’s gender attitudes through children’s literature and related activities. They suggested that use of children’s literature materials and interventions in children’s literature must be sustained, focused, and intensive in order to effect change. In addition, Trepanier-Street and Romatowski suggested the importance of investigating whether or not a change in gender attitudes may be generalized to a wider number of occupational roles than those portrayed in the books.
used in re-examining young children’s gender attitudes and thinking about occupational roles.

Recent studies (e.g., Narahara, 1998; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999) on gender equality in children’s literature found inequality in children’s books. Although non-sexist books were more likely than sexist books to portray female characters who adopted male-stereotypical characteristics and roles, both types of books similarly portrayed the stereotypical female as a person devoted to domestic chores and leisure activities (Diekman & Mumen, 2004). Such portrayals may contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality, particularly if touted as examples of equality.

Summary of Selected Research

As mentioned earlier, some conclusions can be drawn. First, gender development is a critical part of the earliest and most important learning experiences. For young children, picture books are important because they provide role models for children in defining standards for feminine and masculine behavior. Next, gender stereotypes and sexism limit children’s potential growth and development. Non-sexist books, on the other hand, produce positive changes in self-concept, attitudes, and behavior (Narahara, 1998).

In other words, children’s gender attitudes may be positively changed through the reading of appropriate children’s literature and other book-related activities (Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999). Moreover, Trepanier-Street and Romatowski suggested that young children’s attitudes, while still generally stereotypical, are beginning to be more flexible regarding occupational roles for men and women. They also suggested that a valuable resource for influencing children’s gender attitudes is the careful selection of reading material and the use of books and related activities that promote gender-neutral attitudes.

Diekman and Murnen’s study (2004) provided evidence that even books praised as non-sexist portrayed, at best, a narrow vision of gender equality in which women adopt stereotypically male attributes and roles. Most striking was the frequent portrayals of females in stereotypically common personalities, domestic roles, and leisure roles.

Non-sexist books succeeded in portraying female characters as adopting the characteristics and roles identified with masculine gender roles. However, they did not portray male characters as adopting aspects of feminine gender roles or female characters as shedding feminine gender roles. In addition, these findings support the conceptualization of sexism as a multi-dimensional construct. Even in the domain of children’s literature, sexism manifests itself in diverse ways.

Conclusion

Children’s reading materials are a widely available cultural resource that children may draw on to make sense of gender. Books for children have reflected societal attitudes in limiting choices and maintaining discrimination (Rudman, 1995). Most picture books show females dressed in skirts or dresses, even when they are engaged in activities for which the costumes are inappropriate. Illustrations have
conventionally placed females in passive observer roles, while males have been pictured as active. Illustrations confirm the subordinate, less valued role of the female and stress the active, adventuresome, and admirable role of the male. When a female is permitted to retain active qualities, the message conveyed to children is that she is the notable exception because all other girls in books are "normal."

Children's picture books have an increasingly significant place in children's development because they offer young children a multitude of opportunities to gain information, to become familiar with the printed pictures, to be entertained, and to experience perspectives other than their own (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). Gender is perhaps the basic dimension through which children perceive their social world and their places in it (Taylor, 2003). Gender shapes social organization, influences how young children interact with each other, and even determines how young children evaluate themselves. Over the past decades, increased female representation in titles, central roles, and pictures appears to indicate that more and more authors of children's books are aware of and sensitive to women's changing roles.

In order to build a gender-equal literature learning environment, it is important to consider the attitudes of both authors and teachers when selecting children's books. Ideally, all children's books used in classrooms should have well-rounded male and female characters. That is to say, teachers should select books in which individuals have distinct personalities regardless of their genders. Characters' achievements should not be evaluated on the basis of gender, and females should not always be portrayed as weaker and more delicate than males. In addition, teachers may choose books that have counter-sexist attitudes embedded in them. For example, feminist texts can help children recognize gender-stereotypical messages. Also, combining traditional and non-traditional books can spark discussion of how genders are portrayed in different books that promote gender-neutral attitudes (Singh, 1998).

Teachers need to make a conscious effort to select books that reflect fairness to both genders. Since young children cannot yet make this choice, the responsibility must be the adults'. Moreover, increased effort is needed from publishers and authors to provide children with literature that more closely parallels the roles of males and females in contemporary society.

The growing literature on anti-bias in curricula and culturally inclusive pedagogy in the early years of education provides many examples of the ways that programs can provide powerful messages about gender roles (Dellmann-Jenkins et al., 1993). The use of picture books that portray non-traditional gender roles, including boys and men in nurturing or care-giving roles, as well as girls and women in active, leadership roles, provides an important contrast to the commonly popular cultural messages often seen and heard by very young children. Hence, the use of appropriate children's literature must be well-timed as children construct their views of human diversity.
References


