Gender Issues in Children’s Literature

Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men (Mem Fox, 1993). Children’s books play an important part in developing children’s language skills, but it also plays an important part in transmitting a culture to the child. It is a fact that gender roles are an important aspect in our culture and society, thus children’s books contribute to the image children develop of themselves. In this paper I will address six major questions involving gender in children’s literature: How gender is present in children’s literature, why gender-representation in children’s literature is significant, what is the history of children’s books and how they have effects on gender development, how coloring books relate to this issue, how this applies to the twenty-first century, what teachers should keep in mind while selecting children’s books, and how teachers can use children’s literature to promote gender equality.

You may ask how gender is present in Children’s literature. Well, gender bias exists in the illustrations, content, and language in many children’s books today. A study from 1995 has shown that male names are represented almost twice as often as female names in the titles of books. It is also proven that in books regarding neutral-gender names frequently revolve around a male character. Many classic and popular stories where girls are portrayed usually reflect stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles. Such gender stereotyping is not only found in classic children’s books, but even Newberry and Caldecott medal winners. Girls are usually represented as sweet, naive, conforming, and dependant while boys are typically described as strong, adventurous, independent, and capable (Singh, 1998).
Gender-representation is significant in children’s literature in many different ways as I will explain in this portion of my paper. Gender is a big part of society today with the new, upcoming, and overwhelming support of LGBT issues. The relative lack of girl characters in texts made for young children limits the opportunity for girls to identify with their gender and validate their place in society. In other words, these stereotypes limit boys and girls freedom to express themselves due to the limiting gender roles present in stories they hear not only in schools, but in their homes from the day they are born. These unequal representations have major influences on gender role development and the socialization of young children as I will discuss in greater depth later in this paper (Singh, 1998).

Gender representation is also significant in the way that good stories make children realize accepted standards of right and wrong within the complexity of society. This means that not only the story line of a picture book makes it a good or bad story, but other issues in a book sometimes sends unconscious messages to children. This inequality of male and feminine roles influences the gender development and cognitive processes of our children (Patterson & Lach, 1990).

In order to help understand the effects these books have on gender development, I think it is important to point out the history of children’s books and how they came to be their own genre. Paterson and Lach indicate, “Prior to the eighteenth century, messages about expected behavior were much the same for girls and boys” (1990, p. 5). Children’s books became a genre in England in 1740 and eminent publishers like John Newberry began to publish these books. These books appeared to have a specified audience of male or female.

Since early boarding schools were sex-segregated, the idea that “the child’s emulations of the lives of the great would be more likely if girls read about famous women, and boys about famous men” (Paterson & Lach, p. 5). It was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that these gender segregated books became intended for audiences of mixed genders.
Boy’s literature contained messages that emphasized building up men like action, self-direction, and leadership where girl’s literature emphasized more on choosing messages for future mothers and wives. Books intended for consumption for boys encouraged a wide range of life possibility where books intended for girls directed toward a much narrower range of possibilities centered on domestic context. It is important to remember that books published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still in libraries and read to children today (Paterson & Lach, 1990).

The unequal representation of gender roles in children’s literature has influences on gender role development and socialization. Since we read children’s books to students and babies as such a young age, these become one of the biggest indicators of societal norms for them. Paterson and Lach suggest the idea that “Picture books offer young children a macrocosmic resource through which they can discover world’s beyond their own life-space” (1990, p. 4). Since children have such a limited variety of real world experience these books teach them things they would have learned from those real life experiences. It doesn’t matter if these books are still relevant to how things work in today’s society or not, they take them as fact because they do not yet have the ability to think critically.

You may ask how coloring books are related to gender in children’s literature. Fitzpatrick and McPherson include the statistics from 2009 that say, “Twelve percent of children’s books sold nationwide are coloring and activity books” (2009, p. 127). This means that we must not only focus our attention of picture books for children but also coloring and activity books because they send the same messages since we emphasize so much attention to coloring on children. They also offer the statistics that “Of 742 characters whose gender could be clearly distinguished, 435 (59%) were male and 306 (41%) were females” (2009, p. 132). To ensure their sample selections were random and were represented across socioeconomically areas they used zip codes from census data. Then, they used the
internet and telephone directories to find retail outlets where coloring books were commonly found. Once the venues were found they randomly selected coloring books (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2009).

The gender roles present for females include cooking, sewing, caring for infants, grocery shopping, being a teacher, and being a nurse. For males they include racing, wrestling, rescuing, being a doctor, and driving heavy equipment (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2009).

Of all the statistics taken by Fitzpatrick and McPherson, visual media messages that stereotype groups or individuals reinforce rather than challenge social misconceptions. This is problematic because images on a paper or screen become part of our common consciousness. The role models that are presented provide vicarious experiences that teach and shape our perceptions of the world (Fitzpatrick & McPherson, 2009).

A big question one might acquire is ok, so that was then, what about now? An article published in 2006 by Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young explored sexism in top selling books from 2001 and a 7 year sample of Caldecott award-winning books. Still, they discovered that male characters were present in illustrations and titles 53% more times than females characters were.

They also tested and proved the hypothesis’ that female main characters were more often portrayed indoors than outdoors; and the reverse for male characters. Female characters would be more passive, be rescued by another character, and behave in a nurturing or caring manner more often than male characters. Male characters would be portrayed as active, rescue another character, and behave assertively or aggressively more often than female characters. When occupations were concerned, they found that both female and male adults’ occupations were traditional than non-traditional. “Of 23 female adult characters shown with an occupation, 21 had stereotypically feminine occupations and only 2 had non-traditional occupations” (2006, p. 761). The same was shown for male occupations where out of 33 cases, only 4 had non-traditional occupations.
In conclusion of this more recent study of gender in children’s books, female characters were still shown as under-represented. Their data claims that this is relevant in not only prize-winning books, but also other books that parents today would purchase for their children. There is a growth in children’s literature that is more equalized in regards to male and female gender roles but these books haven’t yet reached teachers classroom libraries students are still seeing the older gendered books. This is why it is vital for teachers to pick and choose the right read aloud books to read in her classroom that go against strong gender roles so he/she can steer away from planting these stereotypes in students minds that create many harmful effects on cognitive, social, and gender development. (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2010).

What should teachers keep in mind while selecting children’s books? Well ideally, children’s books that are used by the teacher in classrooms should have well rounded male and female characters. However, teachers seldom have much control over the books they have access to. Several active steps can be taken to ensure the use of books that promote gender equity among the sexes.

One of the biggest recommendations is to look for books portraying girls/women in a positive light with active and dynamic roles. Another suggestion is to look for books that do not portray either gender in a stereotypical manner. Rudman (1995) recommends gender-neutral books where:

- Individuals are portrayed with distinctive personalities
- Achievements are not evaluated on the basis of gender
- Occupations are represented as gender-free
- Clothing is described in functional rather gender-based terms
- Females are not always weaker and more delicate than males
- Individuals are logical or emotional depending on the situation whether the character is male or female
• The language used in the text is gender-free

Teachers can use many different approaches to promote gender equality in children’s literature. First and foremost, it is important for the teacher to recognize and articulate her own attitudes because she is a role model to her students. After this is established, the teacher can use the following strategies to identify gender stereotypes and develop gender-equitable perceptions among students in the classroom:

• Collectively analyze gender assumptions in the text
• Raise questions about the main characters and their portrayal
• Ask children to reverse the genders of individuals, e.g., “What if sleeping beauty was a boy?” (Temple, 1993).
• Have children guess a writer’s gender on the basis of the story they have just heard (Lawrence, 1995).
• Ask children to use gender-neutral names in the stories they write and read this aloud to other students so that they can guess the protagonist’s gender (Lawrence, 1995).
• Have children adopt the opposite sex’s point of view about an exceptionally gendered issue (Lawrence, 1995).

Students can discuss a book by participating in the above activities in heterogeneous groups. Teachers can support the group discussions with thought-provoking questions that match the student’s grade levels. There are a number of different books available in your local library that can be used as a catalyst for group discussions. The activities above are designed to promote gender awareness and explore issues such as: respect for yourself and other individuals, similarities and differences between boys and girls, traditional and non-traditional gender roles, gender stereotypes, and friendship between boys and girls (Singh, p. 3).
It is important to remember that rethinking gender roles is an ongoing process and cannot be achieved in a single day. Students need to be encouraged to make their own choices that represent their personalities in these groups to achieve the highest level of self-empowerment.

In conclusion, throughout this paper I have explained seven important questions to explore when thinking about gender issues in children’s literature. We have learned that gender is most definitely present in not only mainstream children’s books, but Newbery and Caldecott award winners as well. Gender representation is an important thing for teachers to keep in mind while picking out books to read with their classrooms due to several different effects gender stereotyping has on children. Some of these effects include gender development and socialization due to their lack of real word experience which in return they gain from literature. We also touched on the issue that this gender stereotyping is also present in coloring books as they are a big part of children’s literature as well. This idea of gender stereotyping is not only an issue that has arisen from the history of children’s books but is also strongly present in top selling books in the twenty-first century.

One of the biggest recommendations for teachers to keep in mind while choosing books is to look for books portraying girls/women in a positive light with active and dynamic roles. Several different approaches can be taken to teach gender equality in the classroom. Two of these include collectively analyzing gender assumptions in the text and raising questions about the main characters and their portrayal.

This is definitely not something to shy away from for teachers in today’s society. Gender issues are a big and upcoming issue relating to discrimination. Knowing the facts and talking to them when children are young can be lead to positive results in upcoming generations.
Works Cited


