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PREVIEW

Gender and Ethnicity Stereotypes in Children's Books

By

Khaya Novick Eisenberg, M.S.Ed.

PREVIEW

**A Doctoral Project submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University**

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PSY.D PROJECT FINAL APPROVAL FORM

NAME: Khaya Novick Eisenberg, M.S.Ed.

TITLE OF PROJECT: Gender and Ethnicity Stereotypes in Children's Books

DOCTORAL PROJECT COMMITTEE:

PROJECT ADVISOR: Florence L. Denmark, Ph.D.
Name

Professor Pace University
Title Affiliation

PROJECT CONSULTANT: June Chisholm, Ph.D.
Name

Professor Pace University
Title Affiliation

FINAL APPROVAL OF COMPLETED PROJECT:

I have read the final version of the doctoral project and certify that it meets the relevant requirements for the Psy.D. degree in School-Clinical Child Psychology.

Florence L. Denmark
Project Advisor's Signature

4/1/02
Date

June F. Chisholm
Project Consultant's Signature

4/1/02
Date

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ABSTRACT

Children appear to retain the information they read in literature better than that which they read in their text books. Studies of children's books, therefore, are a valuable resource for gauging the messages internalized by children throughout their education. Most past examinations of children's books focus on gender stereotyping and demonstrate that children's literature, highly gender-biased in the past, is slowly improving in its egalitarianism. Less attention has been directed at biases against minority ethnic groups. This study included a content analysis of the literature incorporated in the elementary school curricula of different schools, focusing on gender and cultural biases which may be reflected in these books. Thirty general interest books read in the fourth and fifth grades (fifteen per grade) were compared with thirty multicultural books written for fourth and fifth graders (fifteen per grade) in terms of how they portrayed male and female characters of different ethnic groups. Findings indicated that minority characters, while depicted positively on the whole, were underrepresented in the general interest books. No significant differences were found in terms of character image, intelligence, and socioeconomic status for various ethnic and gender groups. The adjectives used to describe Asian characters in multicultural books were evaluated out of context and perceived significantly more negatively than those adjectives used with reference to African or Native American characters. Finally, minority authors were underrepresented among in the general interest book sample.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Elementary school children are exposed to literature both inside and outside the classroom which shapes their views, influencing their stereotypes, values, and tastes (Spitz, 1994). Books provide children with role models which affect the way in which they learn to perceive themselves. By selecting children's books to be read as part of the curriculum, schools are giving official sanction to the role models endorsed by the books (Purcell & Stewart, 1990).

Children's books have the potential to either perpetuate or arrest the development of gender and ethnic stereotypes. By portraying males in active roles and females in passive, domestic roles, books give children the message that their gender restricts them from behaving in a way that is not gender-stereotyped. Similarly, books which include ethnic minority characters can communicate messages about their status both to children of minority groups and to White children. Schools must be selective in choosing children's literature to ensure that common ground between the genders and White and non-White groups is created and cultivated by these books (Stotsky, 1992). This study will investigate whether children's books in school curricula sanction stereotypes of gender and ethnic groups.

The Pervasive Influence of Children's Books

Basal reader series have been the most popular means of teaching reading in the elementary schools for many years. These series generally include teachers' manuals and lesson plans, one or more readiness books, some preprimers, a primer, a first reader, and one or two readers for each successive grade level through grade six or eight. Efforts are being made to improve today's basal readers in terms of their sensitivity to various groups (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1996).

Some educators encourage supplementation of basal reader series through the incorporation of classic literature into the curriculum. These classics are likely to be less sensitive to all children, having been written in an earlier age when cultural pluralism was not emphasized. It is important for teachers selecting literature for the consumption of their students to attend to issues such as human values, multiculturalism, and aesthetic standards (Norton, 1991).

The view exists that more effective learning across all content areas might be facilitated through the use of children's fiction books, which exhibit a better literary quality than textbooks (Levstik, 1990; Moss, 1991). In a Social Studies classroom, children's fiction books were found to be significantly more effective than the use of the textbook in facilitating content acquisition (Jones, Coombs, & McKinney, 1994). This may suggest that the material in children's books is better retained than that in textbooks.

It is evident that children's books have the power to influence children's impressions of themselves and others as a male, a female, as well as a member of a given ethnic group. As our society's diversity increases, teachers play a vital role in fostering a multicultural view in their classroom (Lickteig & Danielson, 1995). One of the most effective means of achieving this goal is through a careful selection of children's literature to be read in the classroom, designed to educate children about the many cultures in their midst and to counteract stereotypes (Farris, 1995; Sullivan, 1996; Walker-Dalhouse, 1992).

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Stereotyping in Children's Books

Children's books have been studied with regard to their representations of gender (see Collins, L. J., Ingoldsby, B. B., & Dellman, M. M., 1984; Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Turner-Bowker, 1996; Weitzman, L. J., Eifler, D., Hokada, E., & Ross, C., 1972). Examinations of gender biases in children's books were conducted as early as 1946 (Child, Potter, & Levine, 1946), continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Key, 1971), and even included one cross-cultural study of children's books in five countries (Denmark & Waters, 1977). These early studies found universally that protagonists tended to be White, male, and handsome (Shepard, 1962); that female characters were underrepresented and usually played a supporting, passive role (Honigmann, 1967); that large animals were classified as male while small animals and inanimate objects were considered female (Fisher, 1970) and that many classic novels such as those authored by Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson, still read today by schoolchildren, do not include even one female in the entire plot (Key, 1971).

Caldecott medal and honors children's books published between 1937 and 1989 were found to depict household tools as being used primarily by women.