Gender Stereotyping in Children’s Literature and Its Impact on Students

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Background

According to Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (McLeod, 2011), children learn behaviors through observation of the real world. From parents and teachers to television characters and movie stars, children seek to imitate and model the actions, personalities, and images of those around them. They adopt the behaviors they see valued and accepted by society while ignoring behaviors that are rejected. In this way, children tend to fall into what some might consider stereotypes, especially in the area of gender identity.

One of the most influential sources of student learning during childhood is literature. Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993) identify children’s books as one of the most crucial avenues through which values and attitudes are shared (p. 220). According to Gooden and Gooden (2001), “Books are often the most frequent interaction that young children have with others” (p. 90). As a result, an argument exists that the characters, personalities, and ideas expressed in children’s stories play a major role in the shaping of students’ gender identities. Many claim that stereotyped portrayals of the sexes negatively impact children by limiting their idea of themselves and their role in society (Hamilton et. al., 2006). An examination of gender roles throughout the decades, the history of children’s literature, and the psychology behind how students learn social behaviors proves to be key in understanding this argument.

The idea of specific male and female roles in society pervades all of human history. Societies and cultures throughout the centuries have placed on men and women certain personalities and occupations they deem as valuable or desirable. Children’s gender identities are shaped by these perceived roles which lead to shared beliefs that are often oversimplified to become gender stereotypes (Kortenhaus & Demarst, 1993). A cross cultural study on child rearing practices and personality development by Arganian (1973) identified boys as being
aggressive and trained for achievement and self reliance. Girls, on the other hand, are socialized for nurturance and responsibility. In addition, they are expected to obey more than boys.

Other research reflects similar findings of the 1997 study. According to Hales (1999), in legends and literature, women were typically portrayed as “emotional, irrational, manipulative, deceitful, never to be trusted” (p. 3). Hippocrates (460-370 B.C.) viewed women as “…a damp, soggy creature”. Aristotle used the phrase “a mutilated male” (p.4). Medieval monks considered women a necessary evil, “a ‘sack of dung’ wrapped in seductive flesh” (Hales, 1999, p.5).

Beginning in the eighteenth century, women had a slightly more positive role in society, however, not altogether ideal. They were the self-sacrificing “angel of the house” (Hales, 1999, p. 4). They loved, but lacked intellect and operated mostly in the background. According to Barnet and Rivers (2004), during the Victorian era, women were viewed as delicate and too fragile for the dangers of the world outside of the home. Society identified the “good women” during this period as someone who sacrificed for others. Aggressive and self-motivated women were looked down upon as evil and often took the form of wicked stepmothers and witches in literature. For example, in the story of Cinderella, it is the evil stepmother who is so aggressive in preventing her stepdaughter from meeting the prince. Cinderella on the other hand, remains passive throughout much of the story and requires help from others to achieve her goal.

The publication of Little Women in 1871 marks a shift of the single track ideal of women’s roles to a dualism in what it means to be feminine. The well known “tomboy” character became a staple of American literature with the introduction of Jo March (Throne, 1993). According to Throne, “Fictional tomboys chafe at the restrictions of imposed femininity and “girly-girl” ways” (p.112). They are adventurous and often seen outdoors engaging in
activities with boys. Stories of fictional “tomboys” continued into the twentieth century and included *Caddie Woodlawn*, published in 1935. Throughout the book Caddie fights against her lady-like mother and sister as the family seeks to live in the new American frontier.

Over the next few decades, “motherhood” as the ideal role of women came to the forefront of American society. In the 1920’s, advocates of the women’s suffrage movement argued that women had the right to vote because they cared for others. “The 1950’s sanctified suburban mom - an outgrowth of the effort to get women out of the jobs they held during World War II and didn’t want to leave” (Barnett and Rivers, 2004, p.19). Women took on the roles of housekeeper, wife, and mother and aimed to please everyone in the household. In the 1970’s, the women’s rights movement worked to expand women’s roles. The focus for women shifted from the ability to care to the ability to achieve. Since this time, women’s roles have expanded as independence and professionalism become increasingly valued traits. Women are shedding the old stereotypes of womanly behavior by holding professional jobs, having fewer kids, and holding positions of civic and international authority (Hales, 1999).

Still, stereotypes of women continue to exist in modern day culture. Even in the 1970’s Wenar (1971) described females as nutrient and sociable. They express feelings of tenderness and fear and are domestic and child-care focused. According to Throne (1993), friend groups are smaller, more private and focused on relationships and intimacy. In 1982, *In a Different Voice* by Carol Gilligan was published. In this book, Gilligan argues that women are different and possess specific abilities that make them unique but not incompetent in the professional or real world (Barnett and Rivers, 2004). This idea, while controversial, sparked the modern day debate in regard to female gender stereotypes and whether they should be considered inferior or valuable in society.
Society has also developed gender specific stereotypes for males throughout history. Unlike women, their roles have remained relatively stable throughout the centuries. Men were the hunters in prehistoric times, dominating the environment around them. According to Barnett and Rivers (2004) it was this role that, “equipped males with a distinct advantage that still plays out in the workplace today, giving men an edge in jobs from piloting airlines through the sky to governing a state” (p.127). Boys play outdoors and engage in more “rough and tumble” activities. Their talk and actions surround physical strength and force (Thorne, 1993). Men dominate and seize the initiative. They are encouraged toward aggression when threatened and remain unsentimental and stoic when presented with pain or anxiety. Their focus is on work and the acquisition of money and power (Wenar, 1971).

Just as the “tomboy” figure emerged for women toward the end of the nineteenth century, the “sissy” stereotype for males appeared in the 1970’s. According to Thorne (2004), timidity, passivity, and dependence characterize the “sissy” and embody stereotypes viewed as childish or feminine. While the “tomboy” is not typically perceived as a negative characteristic, a “sissy” is a derogatory term with which males do not want to be associated. However, Barnett and Rivers (2004) note that over the last twenty years, males have demonstrated more caregiving behaviors. They explain that in today’s society, children’s success depends on their level of education and ability to navigate the job world. The father sees himself as responsible for his child and thus takes an active role in their upbringing. While males continue to be stereotyped as the more aggressive, stronger, and driven gender, modern society has given them a larger role within the family environment, influencing their view of their ideal role within the past few decades.
Although there have been considerable gains in the area of perceived gender roles and stereotypes, distinct dichotomy between male and female identities in society remains. Popular children’s stories and books continue to have a profound impact on students’ perceived identities. Just as gender stereotypes have endured through generations, children’s literature has expanded and played crucial roles in the socialization of the human race.

In examining the history of children’s literature it is important to first note the origins and motives behind the first storytellers. According to Boyd (2009), stories resulted from the need to share information and serve as an important incentive for participating in society. Through storytelling, socialization is learned through passive observation. We learn lessons and gain vital information from others who have more knowledge and are able to give first hand accounts of their experiences. In addition to the need to share information is the desire to understand mankind in sharing and developing stories. According to Meigs (1953), folk stories reflect man’s attempt to explain forces in both the material and spiritual world around him. In this way, values, attitudes, and social roles have been passed down through the centuries primarily through storytelling, and in literate cultures, children’s books (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993).

The earliest and most popular children’s stories began with Aesop’s Fables during the period of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Aesop was a slave, and his stories reflect the oral language of subordinates. Nurses and servants would share these oral fables with the children under their care. Themes of power and control dominated these tales (Lerer, 2008). Morality was closely linked to status, class, and birth. In addition, these stories reflected the child’s world, where adult rituals and rigors could be challenged. In Greek classrooms, students translated his fables from the oral to written form. As a result, they shifted from stories written by and for people of low class to being received by the high society of men, teachers, and the
noblility (Lerer, 2008). By inducting these stories into Greek education, Aesop’s fables, once simply words from a slave, became literature for the educated and noble class. The stories had significant impact on Greek education and were at the center of early reading and writing.

The second shift in the history of children’s literature arose as the result of Christianity and the influence of St. Augustine. Augustine supported the use of fables in teaching students literacy as well as moral lessons. He believed that instruction in oral-based literature would assist students in the art of preaching, and analytical reading of these simple fables could be transferred into deeper study of the scriptures (Lerer, 2008). These fables mingled with the culture and found a new part in Christian literature that resulted in increased writing and love of learning (Meigs, 1953, p. 14).

The study of the classics that existed in the Greek and Roman schools continued into the Medieval classroom. The goals, however, shifted with the changing environment as distinctive social features such as feudalism, courtly service, mercantilism, and civic consciousness resulted in a type of children’s literature different than those influenced by classical inheritance (Lerer, 2008). Here is seen the beginnings of gender specific roles outlined in books specifically designed for children. Manuals instructed boys and girls in proper behavior and their roles in society and the family. They were expected to take their place in the community, working at all ages as apprentices, pages, and housemaids. These roles dominated literature which provided instruction in moral and social behavior. Writing during this time was also deeply religious. In his manual, Didascalicon, Hugh of St. Victor described all of the world as a book written by the finger of God, full of signs and symbols in need of interpretation (Lerer, 2009). It was also during this time that the King James Version of the Bible was published. The rich and beautiful language proved highly influential in shaping the writing of many authors as well (Meigs, 1954).
The Puritan movement shifted ideas of childhood from that of a “small adult” as in Medieval times, to a time of growth and development (Lerer, 2008). While the Puritans are widely known for their strict attention to rigid rules, they valued and adored their children. According to Lerer (2008), “Under the aegis of the Puritans, children’s books became a new and separate kind of literature” (p. 81). Children learned to read and write not simply for academic success or apprenticeship, but in order to experience spiritual growth. *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan (1678) is the most well known piece of literature to emerge from this era. The book represents the epitome of moral literacy that dominated the Puritan culture. Books were written to shape and mold children’s lives increasingly into the ideal Christian characters outlined in the Bible (Meigs, 1954).

John Locke was another influential character in the development of children’s literature. He is most well known for his belief that children are born a “blank slate” or “tabula rasa” (Lerer, 2008, p. 104). His philosophy on children’s education included radical ideas not previously considered in other developmental theories during the time. His convictions were based on his belief that children learn through experience in the real world. He was the first to introduce the need for enjoyment and amusement in a child’s educational and developmental experience. He believed that children’s minds should be cherished and spared instead of roughly and peremptorily handled. According to Lerer (2008), Locke’s impact on children’s literature during this time lies “…in his emphasis on the particulars of sensory experience, his fascination with the playthings of the world, and his creation of a figurative language of such things to explain just what fills the mind” (p.107). Locke’s ideals impacted many areas of children’s literature including the emergence of fictional biography of inanimate objects marking the shift from heavier, religious doctrine to the lighter themes we associate with stories today.
As children’s literature continued to morph and develop as a result of shifting cultural influences, one book, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* proved extremely influential in creating the next most popular theme, the adventure story. The tale emphasized self-inspection and a preoccupation with lists and inventories highlighting the idea of self-sufficiency. Children were encouraged to imagine themselves in the same situations, offering a model for particular experiences which lead to education and learning (p. 130). At the same time, overarching themes of salvation, providence, and the divine remained from previous influences such as the Puritans and John Locke.

With the emergence of the adventure story came a new focus that started to address issues of gender roles and ideal characters in society. Questions of what it means to be a boy and how boys should behave came from books such as *Robinson Crusoe* and continued to define ideals of manhood. Previously, boys were simply called to be moral, social beings. Now, there was a specific style to adopt, one that called for boldness and confidence. Verbal ease and proficiency were highly valued as were accent and proof of literacy. According to Lerer (2008), “Their dress, their cleanliness, their self-attentions all contribute to an ideal of a healthy, social world” (p. 171).

Up to this point, the main focus of children’s literature was on the human race, individuals and their inner workings and capabilities. Like John Locke’s ideas of child development, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution also had a profound impact on children’s literature. His influence however, dealt more with the changing nature of storytelling rather than the evolution of human kind. According to Lerer (2008), “The world of Darwin was a world of the imagination: a world of literary narrative, of metaphor, of invention” (p. 174). Metaphors and similes, especially involving aspects of the natural world, began to infiltrate children’s
literature. As a result, nonsense literature developed and evolution’s new ideas led to stories of fantasy. Children’s literature came to include stories of animal worlds and new creatures. Nonsense was a force of the imagination that could challenge the logic and laws of civil life and explore the limits of social expectation. During this movement, “...characters were turned into caricature through the eyes of a child” (Leer, 2008, p. 191). Prominent authors during this time included Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, and Edward Lear, all of whom often crossed the line between nonsense and social satire.

Fairy tales are another type of genre that developed over centuries of storytelling and, as a result, carried with them the themes and ideas of a variety of cultures, values and ideas. The original fairy tales grew out of European folk tales. They taught ideal behavior and arose to narrate social criticism or offer moral instruction disguised as fantasy. Family lives were a prevalent theme that, over the years, shifted to the desire for economic gain as the stories began to ask questions about national origin, linguistic development, and personal and public psychology.

One of the most recognizable characters in any fairy tale is the princess. The princess represents what many girls, who have ever been exposed to such stories, aspires to be: beautiful, elegant, poised, rich, and in love with a brave and handsome prince. Writers throughout the centuries have used literature to define what it means to be a woman. Just as stories like Robinson Crusoe helped boys discover their ideal roles in society, literature has helped shaped females’ understanding of what it means to be a woman throughout the centuries. According to Lerer (2008), historically, females have been put on stage. Their physical appearance and how they sound are important. They often appear as objects of sexual desire or derision and remain lost or threatened in adventure situations.
The late 1800’s to early 1900’s marked the period of the beginning of modern literature. Social and political movement such as World War I, child labor, and welfare were highly influential during this time. According to Lerer (2008), children’s books became preoccupied with “the occult, the fantastic, and the spiritual” (p. 255). Personification and animation of automobiles and vehicular machines dominated literature with the emergence of new technological advances. This period, also called “The Edwardian Age” created the ideas of childhood we continue to recognize today, that children are highly imaginative and see the world through distinctively different eyes. As such, their literature must reflect these ideals in order to best contribute to their development as creative and successful members in society.

Examining the psychology behind how students learn social and behavioral norms is essential in understanding the potential effects of literature on their ideas of gender roles and identity. The common debate among psychologists and researchers is whether or not gender identities and behavioral norms are innate, or learned. Oskamp et al. (1996) argues that both social learning theories and research indicate that children learn what to believe and what to do through their observations of the real world. He goes on to propose that gender differences are well-established within the first few years of life.

Arganian (1973), also distinguishes between the two sides in the nature versus nurture argument. He suggests that on the one hand, there is the belief that children are psychosexually neutral at birth. Experience and socialization shape individuals and there are no absolute or inherent traits. This would suggest that factors such as parenting and culture segregate boys and girls and create gender differences (Barnett & Rivers (2004). The second view Arganian describes as innate psychosexuality. Here, male and female differences in physical attributes
lead to psychological distinctions that create the gender dichotomy. In other words, children are born with specific, hardwired traits they will naturally gravitate toward regardless of environmental or other socializing factors.

Barnett and Rivers (2004) offer a combination of both nature and nurture in their explanation of child development: “We are all a product of interacting forces, including our genes, our personalities, our environment, and chance” (p. 12). They explain that as children, our exploration of the world stimulates neural activity which transforms the brain and effects the way we perceive the world. Socialization occurs as children observe the world around them and learn to model the values they perceive as desirable.

Research also indicates specific sources that play important roles in influencing how children learn social and behavioral norms. According to Thorne (1993), children observe and take note of the gender stereotypes present throughout their environment in places such as books, songs, advertisements, television programs, and movies. In addition, he notes that parents can influence gender identity in the ways that they name, dress, and play with their children. He identifies the classroom as another important socializing environment containing “hidden curricula” that distinguish between race, class, and gender. Books, graphics, content of classroom talk, as well as academic and behavior expectations all contain subtle messages that help reproduce gender inequalities that also exist in the larger society.

Wenar (1971) also discusses the importance of society in defining gender roles claiming that everyone, from parents and teachers to salesmen and advertisers, play a part in enforcing the prescribed sex roles. In this way, the message of gender differences is clear and inescapable. Children imitate the behaviors that are reinforced by parents, peers, and society. As a result, the child becomes self-rewarding or self-punishing dependent upon the view they are fulfilling.
According to Arganian (1973), peer groups may be equally or more powerful than adults in teaching and maintaining gender-consistent values and behaviors. Family composition is also important in the socialization process. The availability or absence of either the father or the mother will have a bearing on the development of a child. As Agrarian (1973) points out, “one particular father-absence study...found that early father absence had serious detrimental effects on the first born sons in many areas of development and impaired their ability to relate to peers” (p. 57). At the same time, mothers in father-absent families, who encourage masculinity in their sons proved highly influential in their adoption of male-specific gender roles.

Researchers agree that while other environmental factors play significant roles in the socialization of students, books remain one of the most influential sources of student learning. According to Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993), the transportation of values and attitudes is primarily achieved through storytelling, and in literate cultures, storybooks. Gooden and Gooden (2001) note that books offer young children access to the lives of other people, providing a powerful source for the socialization of gender roles. Oskamp et al. (1996) also contend that picture books written specifically for certain age groups are a major socializing agent for school children. In addition, children’s literature not only offers relevant social information, but it also acts as a guide to human behaviors that effect our reflections and decisions (Boyd, 2009).

Picture books give students an identity with which to model their interests and ideals (Silvey, 2009). They offer plots, relationships, and metaphors that assist children in their search for how to conform to gender identities (Schwarcz and Schwarcz, 1991). According to Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999), using children’s literature and related activities in the classroom provide powerful experiences to impact children’s gender identities. Peter Neumeyer
identifies the *Boy Scouts of America Handbook for Boys* as one of his favorite childhood books. He explains that it taught him what every ten year old boy wanted to know, giving him a model from which to imitate interests, behaviors, and ideas (Silvey, 2009).

When students are most likely to be influenced by environmental factors is also significant to researchers examining its effects on gender identity. Wenar (1971) identifies the period between age three and seven as the time when children gradually learn sex identification for themselves. Arganian (1973) claims children can correctly label themselves as a gender by the age of three. The largest difference in play between the sexes occurs between the ages of eight and ten and decreases as age increases. Wenar also uses Kohlberg’s theories to claim that sex permanence occurs between this time period, making a change of sex inconceivable as they begin to reward or punish and enjoy or hate experiences that are consistent with the image they believe they must have.

**Prior Research**

Given this insight into the development of children’s behavior norms and identities, many researchers have conducted studies on the presence of gender stereotyping in children’s books throughout the past decades. Most research is two-fold in that it examines both the presence of gender-specific characters and themes within books, as well as determines whether or not the content has impacted its readers, either positively or negatively.

Kolbe and Voie (1981) selected nineteen Caldecott Medal winners and honor selections from the years 1972 to 1979 to conduct a study to test the results of previous research by Weitzman (1979). In the previous study, Weitzaman concluded that children’s books portrayed traditional sex roles and that female roles were more stereotyped and less prestigious than male roles. Kolbe and Voie systematically analyzed the children’s books to determine whether or not
gender bias was present by taking note of specific traits within each book. They looked at the number of females present, both human and animal form, the sex of the character in the title and his or her central role, the significance of the role played by each character, the sex of the character on the front and back cover, the sex of the author, the sex of the illustrator, and the number of pictures of males and females in the book. In addition, characters were rated as expressive or instrumental, significant or insignificant, and stereotyped or non-stereotyped.

The conclusions of this study revealed little overall change in the content of picture books from the beginning of the 1970’s to the end. However, when examined more closely, data revealed a greater number of male pictures for four out of the eight years with the number of female pictures only greater in 1976. In addition, female roles remained expressive, non-significant, and stereotyped while male roles were instrumental and significant, but also stereotyped. While Kolbe and Voie discovered an upward trend in the number of female characters in books across the time period, women’s roles and characterization remained the same. Their conclusion indicated that young children’s books continue to promote gender-stereotyped roles. While the influence of children’s literature provides for the potential change and improvement of cultural values, young children’s books continue to reflect sexist ideals (Kolbie & Voie, 1981).

Kortenhaus and Demarest also conducted similar research in 1993. Their study looked at one hundred and twenty five non-award winning picture books and twenty five Caldecott winner or runners-up published between the 1940’s and 1980’s. Kortenhaus and Demarest also examined the literature by looking at the number of males and females in the titles, central roles, pictures, and animal characterizations. In addition, they analyzed the activities of the central characters. Characters labeled “instrumental dependent” took initiative, made decisions, and
were creative. “Passive dependent” characters were fairly static and required help from others to perform a task.

The results of this study reveal that male to female ratios in the books were relatively the same. While books published after the 1970’s show a more equal distribution of male and female characters in all categories, males were still depicted fifty percent more than females in all categories. Females were occasionally pictured in more active roles, but males continued to outnumber them in this characteristic by three to one. In addition, females outnumbered males in passive behavior by four and six tenths to one. In their conclusion, Kortenhaus and Demarest claimed, “Comparisons of all chosen items confirmed the trend of decreasing sexism in children’s picture books” (p. 228-229).

A few years later, Oskcamp et al. (1996) conducted a nearly identical study. Twenty-two Caldecott award and honors books from the years 1986 to 1991 were examined and analyzed using the same criteria as previous researchers. The results of this study revealed a near equality in the proportion of female illustrations to male illustrations. In terms of the location or setting of these characters, this study showed that both males and females moved toward outdoor locations. Typically, only males were depicted in outdoor settings. In addition, this study found an equal number of salient traits for both male and female characters. At the same time, females were more dependent and submissive, while males were independent and creative. This led Oskcamp and colleagues to conclude that gender-stereotyped behavior in the Caldecott Award books has faded but not altogether disappeared. Still, they note that children’s books provide young girls with greater variety of gender roles, behavioral traits, and activities with which to model and adopt (Oskamp et al., 1996).
Gooden and Gooden’s research in 2001 continued to examine the presence of gender stereotyping in children’s books published between 1995 and 1999. Again, their analysis of the books was similar to that of previous researchers, examining the number of male and female characters, illustrations, and the types of activities and personalities they were given. Their results revealed an equity in the number of male and female main characters. While males continued to play a variety of stereotypical roles, females were given more non-traditional roles such as pilots, ambulance drivers, and scuba instructors. Males, on the other hand continued to hold traditional values and were seldom seen exhibiting female traits such as caring for children, going grocery shopping, or doing household chores. Overall, this study concluded that the prevalence of gender stereotypes decreased slightly but stereotyped images of both sexes still remain significant and influential in students’ perceptions of their role in society.

More recently, Hamilton et. al (2006) looked at two hundred of the top-selling children’s picture books, both award and non-award winning, published between the years 1995-2001. Specifically, they observed the gender representations in the illustrations and characters; the characters’ behaviors, settings, and personality; as well as the relationship between author sex and character sex. The results of this study showed that both male and female characters played active roles and that rescue behaviors, typically seen in male personalities, were equally likely for both genders. At the same time, occupations for both genders remained more traditional than not, with women portrayed as the more nurturing character and often placed indoors and at home. According to Hamilton and colleagues, two times as many adult male as adult female characters were portrayed as having a job outside of the home (49% and 25%, respectively). In addition, they found that Caldecott books underrepresented female characters more than popular books. In concluding, Hamilton et al. claimed, “modern children’s books continue to provide
nightly reinforcement of the idea that boys and men are more interesting and important than are girls and women” (p. 764).

**Affects of Gender Stereotyping on Students**

Given this extensive research on the presence of gender stereotyping in children’s books, the question of whether or not it positively or negatively impacts students is important to address. According to Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993), male character traits, such as competence, instrumentation, and achievement motivation, are traditionally perceived as more desirable than female traits, which include nurturant, dependent, and submissive behaviors. As Hamilton and colleagues (2006) note, authors, whether consciously or subconsciously, often promote sexism is subtle and overt ways. Examples include the height and placement of male or female characters in illustrations. Gooden and Gooden (2001) claim, “Psychologists and leaders of liberation groups affirm that gender stereotyping in children’s books has detrimental effects on the children’s perception of women’s roles” (p. 89). Oskcamp and colleagues (1996) also report that the gender-stereotyped roles in children’s literature present students with restricted role models. As a result, their behaviors are shaped in stereotyped directions.

Barnett and Rivers (2004) take this claim one step further by asserting that these stereotypes may affect the cognitive development and academic success of girls. They state that the stereotypes discourage girls from pursuing certain subjects like mathematics, starting at an early age. Our culture has convinced women that they don’t belong in certain professional fields. Also, certain situations may cause individuals extra anxiety if they are aware of the associated negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypes can also influence a student’s ability to perform well on assessments. When individuals become aware of negative stereotypes
associated with their identity, whether in regard to race, gender, or socioeconomic status, that knowledge can become a barrier to their ability to perform well (Barnett & Rivers, 2004).

In light of these conclusions, there remains the issue of how to address and eliminate gender stereotyping in children’s literature. Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993) express the need for the representation of both males and females in a variety of roles (p. 231). Women should be portrayed as more active and productive, rather than dull and unimaginative as in the past. Men should be seen as caregivers and nurturing figures, rather than simply stoic and aggressive. Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1996) identify teachers, caregivers, and other school personnel as individuals who share the responsibility in creating programs, activities, and curriculum that encourage students to view themselves in a variety of roles and professions. They also suggest exposing students to non-stereotypical models of male or female personalities through the use of high quality children’s books. Findings in the Oskcamp et al. (1996) study offer encouraging results in this area. Their research showed a greater portrayal of male roles as well as an increase in the number of female characters and their roles in literature, offering both boys and girls a wider range of acceptable behavioral traits with which to model. Continuing to bring awareness to the increasing flexibility of gender roles will be an important socializing mechanism for modern students.

**Findings and Results of Teacher Survey**

As Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1996) indicated, teachers play a critical role in exposing students to a variety of gender roles in order to encourage a gender equitable view of the world. Their understanding and awareness of gender stereotyping in their classrooms is key in combating associated negative stereotypes. In an effort to connect these research findings to current practices in schooling, I sought to determine current teachers’ views and understanding
of this concept through a survey given to twenty teachers at a local elementary school. The goal of the survey was to identify the current level of teachers’ awareness of gender stereotyping in children’s literature and whether or not they felt students were negatively affected by their presence. Of the twenty surveys distributed, fourteen were filled out and collected. The surveys were anonymous, but teachers were asked to indicate which grade they taught and their number of years in service (see attached survey).

The first portion of the survey asked teachers about their classroom library, specifically, its existence and composition. All teachers indicated they had a classroom library. When asked how they decide which books to include in their library, teachers identified student interest, grade level appropriateness, genre, current topics, and personal favorites as key considerations. Books that covered a wide range of life experiences for the variety of demographics represented in the school were also valued. The survey also asked teachers to identify which types of genres and formats are included in their classroom library. Picture books, leveled readers, chapter books, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, traditional literature, fairy tales, and informational books were among the most common genres teachers claimed to have in their libraries. Graphic novels were the least represented genre, with only three teachers claiming to have access to this type of literature in their libraries.

The second portion of the survey addressed the idea of specific valuable traits among students as identified by both peers and the teacher. The first question asked teachers to identify what traits they believed their students valued in each other. Teachers were given the following bank of words and were told to choose as many as applied; assertive, caring, cheerful, quiet, motivated, trusting, respectful, energetic, extroverted, introverted, sympathetic, disciplined, patient, personable, tough, calm, creative, daring, humorous, intelligent, and pretty/handsome.
The results indicate that children most value those personalities in each other that are humorous, respectful, and caring. The ability to be personable, motivated, cheerful, and creative were also among the top personality traits identified by teachers as having peer to peer value. Assertiveness, introversion, quietness were among the lowest valued traits indicated by teacher responses. In addition, the survey asked teachers to identify which personality traits (from the same bank as in question one) they appreciated in their students. Five out of the fourteen teachers chose all personality traits as those that they value in their students. Three out of fourteen teachers identified all personality traits except “pretty/handsome” in their survey. Motivated, respectful, and creative were among the most valued traits by teachers. Those valued the least by teachers were pretty/handsome, calmness, quietness, and patience.

The third portion of the survey sought to reveal teachers’ awareness of gender-stereotyping in their classroom. The first question asked teachers whether they believed some types of children’s literature reflected stereotypical male and female behaviors and personality traits. Thirteen out of fourteen teachers said that these stereotypical traits were present in some types of children’s literature. One teacher answered that they were “somewhat” reflected. When asked to identify the extent they believed gender stereotyping occurs in children’s literature, five out of fourteen teachers believed they are present only in books published over twenty years ago. Two teachers said they are present in books published within the last twenty years, and three teachers found gender stereotyping reflected in only a small number of books. Four teachers said that both books published over twenty years ago and within the past twenty years contain gender stereotypes. They also indicated that while gender stereotyping is still present in some children’s books published today, it is significantly less than those published in the past.
When asked if they have observed any male or female stereotypical behaviors with their students, nine out of fourteen teachers said yes and five teachers said no. For the teachers that did find these stereotypes present in their students’ personalities and behaviors, I asked whether or not they believed their students’ views of themselves were positively or negatively impacted by them. Three out of the nine teachers said they believe students are negatively impacted by the gender-stereotyped roles and personalities. Five teachers indicated that the positive or negative impact depended on the situation and parent and teacher responses to those stereotypes. One teacher said she believed that these stereotypes did not affect her students and that she believes they are all confident in who they are as individuals.

The results of this survey align with current research on gender-stereotyping in children’s books. Teachers recognized the importance of exposing students to a wide variety of rich and diverse literature. Teachers, especially in the younger grades, commented that they used books as important sources of information to teach their students social skills. This concept is also reflected by Gooden and Gooden (2001) who claim children's books are, “a powerful vehicle for the socialization of gender roles” (p. 91).

In reflecting on the traits identified as valuable by both students and teachers, “caring” was one of the traits teachers identified as students valuing in each other. This shows that while females are stereotypically associated with having caring personalities, this trait is something that is valued by both males and females, indicating a positive stereotype for girls. At the same time, other personalities associated with females such as introversion and quietness were among the least valued by students, representing negative female stereotyped traits. On the other hand, assertiveness, a trait usually identified with males was also considered one of the lesser valued traits peers view in each other. Teachers tended to value traits in their students not normally
associated with specific genders such as motivated, respectful, and creative. However, those least valued by teachers tend to be those associated with female stereotypes such as pretty/handsome, calmness, quietness, and patience. These results reflect mixed reactions to valuable personality traits. While some characteristics of females were valued, such as caring, others were not, such as calmness and quietness. No specific male characteristics were identified as being valued by either students or teachers, but assertiveness, a trait typically associated with boys, was among the least valued by peers according to their teachers. These results show that gender specific character traits and their value continue to redefine themselves as social roles for both males and females expand.

This survey also showed that teachers were highly aware of the presence of gender-stereotyping in children’s books with all but one teacher indicating they believed these traits to be reflected in some types of children’s literature. Teachers also recognized the trend revealed in the conclusion of studies conducted by Kortenhaus and Demarest (1993), Oskamp et al. (1996), and Gooden and Gooden (2001). They believe that presence of gender stereotyping has decreased over the past decades and continues to decrease with the rise in the number of female characters in books as well as increased characterization and gender roles for both males and females.

As the majority of teachers surveyed recognized stereotypical male and female behaviors with their students, their responses to whether or not they believed they were positively or negatively impacted by those stereotypes were both informative and revealing. The school counselor believed that these stereotypes have a negative impact on students’ views of themselves, “I believe there is a reason why girls in younger ages tend to be ‘better students’ and
yet we still have more men in positions with higher degrees, more power, and higher status. Women receive messages throughout life that tell them that is not their role.”

One teacher indicated that she believed that stereotypes are negative when associated with a negative consequence. Another teacher also said that it depended on how students internalized those stereotypes. One kindergarten teacher also noted that a teacher or parent’s response to noting these stereotypes makes the difference in how children respond to them. As Wenar (1971) also explains, parents, peers, and the society can influence how children view themselves. The child is self-rewarding or self-punishing according to how he or she feels they are fulfilling the prescribed gender roles. One teacher’s response also reflected this idea, that as long as students can live up to their prescribed stereotypes, their self-image is not affected. The stereotype negatively impacts students when they run up against something that forces them out of that mold.

The results of this survey provide useful insight into current teachers’ perspectives on gender-stereotyping and its presence and impact in today’s classrooms. The findings align with current research and contribute to the idea that while gender-stereotyping continues to pervade many children’s books, more and more popular texts are being published portraying both males and females in increasingly dynamic roles. As revealed by both researchers and teachers in the survey, much of the responsibility of whether or not the stereotypes still present in society and some children’s books positively or negatively affects students’ behavior, cognition, and overall view of themselves depends largely on our response to them. Every child, whether male or female, possesses individual traits and characteristics that make up their personality. This personality influences their behaviors and decisions throughout their life. Whether or not these traits fulfill stereotypical male or female roles, parents, teachers, and other members of society
out to encourage children to view themselves capable of a wide variety of roles. As one first
grade teacher indicated in her survey, “Just today, a little girl asked if girls could be a president
of the United States. The answer was a definite yes. She responded, ‘I think I’ll be the first.’ I
think she has the potential.”
Resources


Teacher Survey

Grade that you teach:__________________

Number of years as a teacher:__________________
Do you have a classroom library?

Yes/No

How did you decide on what books to include in your classroom library?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

What genre/types of books are included in your classroom library? (CHECK all that apply)
☐ Picture books
☐ Leveled readers
☐ Chapter books
☐ Fiction
☐ Non-fiction
☐ Poetry
☐ Traditional Literature
☐ Fairy Tales
☐ Informational
☐ Graphic Novels

What traits do you believe your students value in each other? (CIRCLE all that apply)
assertive caring cheerful quiet motivated trusting respectful energetic extroverted introverted sympathetic disciplined trusting personable tough calm creative daring humorous intelligent pretty/handsome

What traits do you value in your students? (CIRCLE all that apply)
assertive caring cheerful quiet motivated trusting respectful energetic extroverted introverted sympathetic disciplined trusting personable tough calm creative daring humorous intelligent pretty/handsome

Historically, males have been characterized as more aggressive, adventurous, and superior. Women have been characterized as weak, introverted, and mostly valued for their looks. Do you believe these stereotypes are reflected in some types of children’s literature.

Yes/No

If yes, describe the extent to which gender stereotyping occurs in children’s literature.
A. Only in books published over twenty years ago
B. In books published within the last twenty years
C. Only in a small number of books

Have you observed any stereotypical male/female behaviors with your students?

Yes/No

If yes, do you believe these stereotypes have a positive or negative impact on students’ view of themselves?