

# Gender Stereotypes in Children's Readers

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**G**ender development is a critical part of the earliest and most important learning experience of the young child. Parents, caregivers and teachers formulate the social structure that initiates the young into their gender-specific roles.

This article presents some controversial ideas. Please write in to *Education 2000* and let us know what you think – The Editorial Board

“If teachers, parents or caregivers cannot find stories that are not stereotyped, then the only solution is to write their own”



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Major influences on gender role development and socialisation of young children occur through children's story books or any other reading material, which seem to shape and have a dramatic effect on their attitudes, their understanding and their behaviour.

Storying is a social practice and that it is inevitably a gendered practice. Stories have a functional role in our culture; we live a good deal of our lives on the power of various stories, and it is through stories that we position ourselves in relation to others, and ourselves positioned by the stories of our culture.

(Gilbert 1992: 186)

This article explores the role of texts in the production of gender-specific identities.

## Books and Values

Luke (1994) points out that books are the primary vehicles for the presentation of societal values to the young child. Authors of these books have told their stories not only to entertain but also to present cultural values and social standards. For a very long time books defined society's prevailing standards of masculine and feminine role development. The young child's sense of personal and gender significance is influenced, changed, and connected to the world community through these books written by adults.

Storybooks help young children learn about what other boys and girls do, say or feel, and also provide other experiences and insights different from those of home or the community. Readers learn from a story what is expected of children and come to realise the accepted standards of right and wrong within the complexity of their gender. Storybooks provide role models and clear images that prescribe recipes about how and what children should be like when they grow up.

Gilbert (1992) argues that children receive a reasonably steady diet of gender stereotyping through classroom literature. These 'stereotypes might have detrimental effects on the development of self-concept; it also seemed likely that they might have effect on other, more cognitive developmental domains as well.' (Peterson and Lach, 1990: 186) They point out that stereotypical books affect 'readers'

perceptions of others' behaviour, their memory for that behaviour and the inferences they draw from it as well as a variety of dimensions of cognitive performance.' (Peterson and Lach, 1990: 195)

Furthermore as Richardson (1986) points out, school books that present stereotyped messages about social roles and behaviour, often emphasise either directly or indirectly the importance of maintaining traditional roles and behaviour patterns, rather than questioning or facilitating change of those traditional views. These books play an active part in maintaining the existing social structure by moulding these future adults into a copy of individuals making up today's society.

Story telling helps structure and regulate cultural meanings. By telling some stories rather than others and by carefully organising the story's events in a particular way, will help structure and regulate dominant and acceptable versions of parenting and marriage, childhood and adolescence, and of course, femininity and masculinity. Stories function in our culture as powerful means of social control, and can also be seen as design shapers and influences of the young in gender development. (Gilbert 1992). Gilbert states that through stories we learn how we talk, how we act and how we look; we learn what is acceptable and what is not.

Numerous studies showed that in many stories 'females were portrayed as passive, dependent and generally incapable, and that males were typically portrayed as active, independent and generally competent' (Peterson and Lach, 1990: 185). This can be clearly shown through close examination of fairy-tales.

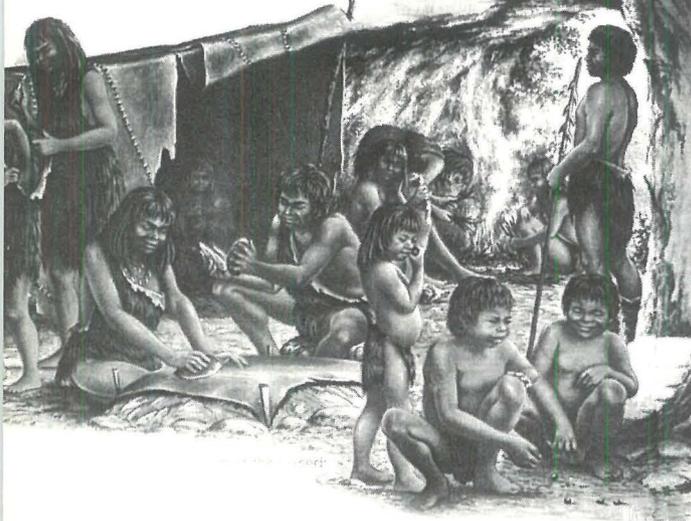
Stories, like *Cinderella*, *Snow-white* and *Sleeping Beauty* have had a damaging effect on many children because they present the image of women in their traditional social roles, and perpetuate the myth of the happy-ever-after marriage. These kind of stories encourage 'passive female behaviour, male domination and even rape' (Westland 1993:238). Further research by Ezell (1985) and Dowling (1991) implies that there is a connection between the features of fairy-tales, where girls wait for their godmothers and princes to come to their rescue, and women's fear of independence in their adult lives.

In a study on children's perspectives on gender roles in fairy-tales, Westland (1993) elicited the following factors. Boys seemed to be quite happy with the traditional pattern of fairy-tales; princes are able to do what they liked. On the other hand, girls, although happily

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## A Stone Age Home

This family lived twenty-five thousand years ago in France.  
Look at their home. Can you imagine what life was like there?



**While he is at home playing with marbles, his sisters help the women make clothes, cook and keep the fire burning.**

exploiting the pictorial qualities of long hair and lovely frocks that indulged towards femininity, perceived princesses as having unattractively restricted lives. When they were given a choice between sweet and tough princesses, they opted for the latter. Westland advises that if these children are given the opportunity to create princesses who free themselves from the tower, 'they may be developing ways of thinking that will help them to combat more insidious attempts to keep women and men locked in restrictive social roles' (Westland 1993: 246).

Stereotyped stories and characters are not only found in fairytales but unfortunately also in our school readers.

## Changing our Reading

Between 1979 and 1982 women's organisations became more sensitive to the issue of gender. They put forward specific demands in order that primary school readers should be changed,

arguing they maintained gender stereotypes, undermining the role of women and prolonging the relations of power and the submission of women to men.

Deliyanni-Kouimtzi's (1992) analysis of primary school readers in Greece clearly showed: (a) the emphasis on the passive and submissive role of the women in

contrast to the active, dynamic and creative presence of the men; (b) the complete dominance of the male gender; (c) the stereotyped distribution of roles and duties; (d) the traditional organisation of the family. Women were represented as limited to the duties determined by the 'trptych of wife-mother-housewife' (Deliyanni-Kouimtzi 1992: 72), and in a role that was left unchallenged. Women's dominance in the house was also unquestioned, reigning supreme as the 'queen of the household'. In spite of all this, however, it is worth noting that Deliyanni-Kouimtzi points out the lack of any reaction from primary school teachers throughout this period. (1992: 73)

Textbooks in the new readers seem to be presenting a new version of family life. 'Adult men (usually fathers) are shown carrying out, conscientiously and without complaint, many domestic tasks previously considered 'privileged', exclusively female tasks.' (Deliyanni-Kouimtzi 1992: 76) Now men shop, lay the table, help the children with their homework, and at the same time express tenderness and love to children (a totally uncharacteristic form of masculinity represented in previous reading schemes). In earlier reading schemes, women took first place in the home. This change made women lose many of their responsibilities resulting in a more dominating presence of men.

New books helped for the image of women to become increasingly blurred, to the extent that one wonders what real purpose is served by women's presence. Deliyanni-Kouimtzi explains that the presence of women at work is referred to only in relation to their absence from the home. It is due to this absence that the man is obliged to take himself some of the duties that a woman would have fulfilled if she did not work. This element is in itself positive but the overall effect is that the role of the man is enriched by many new activities, while the female presence is stripped of many of its traditional characteristics without the addition of any substantial new role. Deliyanni-

Kouimtzi concludes that in view of the above, new primary school reading books still continue to produce the ideology of the male hegemony in this particular element of the educational system.

## Stereotyped texts in local schools

Two readers used in two local schools were analysed (1. Mac Iver A. 1983. *What a Fright! And other stories*. Glasgow: Bell and Bain Ltd. 2. Warlow, A. 1993. *Reasons for writing: Anthology 1*. Bucks: Ginn and Company Ltd.). The reason behind our choice was that these schools do not adapt co-education in their early childhood education program.

Are readers in these schools free from stereotyped material? Is the choice of readers influenced according to the children's particular gender, being single-sexed schools?

Our analysis was based on characteristics used by Peterson and Lach in their study.

The books' content was coded as follows:

- Gender of the Author
- Gender of the main character
- Number and gender of other 'subsidiary' characters
- Type of main character (whether it is a person, animal or 'other')

The first book (girls' school) showed complete dominance in male characters (both main and subsidiary). The book opens with a story called: "*The Butcher and the Dog*". In this story it is taken for granted that the butcher is a male (also depicted in the picture) while the pronoun *he* is used to refer to the dog.

The second book (boys' school) created a balance between the two genders but only in number value. The roles given to males and females in the stories are still very stereotyped.

An example of which is the third story presented in this book. The story is called "*A Stone Age Home*". The story is concerned with the roles of males and females in the family. Ced (main character) says that when he is old enough would be allowed to go hunting with his father. Until then he is to stay at home with his sisters. He continues to tell us that while he is at home playing with marbles, his sisters help the women make clothes, cook and keep the fire burning.

One realises that both books clearly promote and try to channel children into society's preformatted niches of male and female roles.

If teachers, parents or caregivers cannot find stories that are not stereotyped, then the only solution is to write their own new stories. Self-written stories are potentially a powerful tool for the teacher who wants critical imagination to become part of the 'obviousness' of the classroom. One aim would be 'to enable girls to position themselves as agentic rather than passive: increasing the numbers of ways girls can be.' (Jones 1993: 23) Another aim would be to make desirable the widest possible range of positions for both

girls and boys. Golden points out that one of the

Important conditions of possibility for making a wide range of positions available and desirable, is for both girls and boys to hear and read about large numbers of heroes of both sexes.

(Golden 1996: 331)

This means that the base line for a teacher would be to tell and read stories with equal numbers of both females and males as central characters, acting in equally powerful ways, not stereotyped gender. A solution can be that when traditional stories offer

supremacy of male heroes, the teacher might make up or find a corresponding number of female heroes. Golden advises that

It would seem preferable to avoid stories with passive heroines who are seen primarily as 'objects' of the males gaze, stories that are familiar in the dominant culture-Another source of story material would be the lives of contemporary women and men of achievement.

(Golden 1996: 332)

The teacher should be free to adapt, modify or restructure any characteristic or character of the story. As s/he needs to examine any story and thus make visible to him/herself the way binary thinking is embedded in it – to begin the 'the process of deconstructing the story'. (Golden 1996: 333) In order to do this the teacher must keep in mind that 'no attribute and no positioning is essentially gendered'. (Golden 1996: 333) Like this as s/he begins to shape and change stories and in turn hopefully change and shape children's understanding of gender.

Golden continues to explain that the teacher would need

To have an understanding of identity as multiple and fluid, not unitary and fixed; of gender as a construction, not a biological given; of themselves as positioned and taking up positions within discourse. They would need to understand the present time as one of change and transition in terms of cultural understandings about gender, and be willing to take questions about gender on board as a serious and central question for our time.

(Golden 1996: 328)

Such teachers would understand that children bring with them to the classroom a range of experiences that they go through discourse and their own lived experiences of gender within their family. In view of this the teacher's knowledge of the male and female positions available to children should be presented in an ethical way that values the individual child and respects his/her view.

'Bringing together the deconstruction, imagination and values to examine and adapt traditional or original narratives gives teachers one's strategy with which to tackle questions about gender'. (Golden 1996: 334) Sometimes this process might lead a teacher to abandon a story or make small changes that might make its telling more enjoyable and appropriate. In this way, the teacher might achieve many hero positions that are desirable and available to both girls and boys.

'*Bill's New Frock*' by Anne Fine is one of the most recent examples of such stories. In this story, the author literally places a boy into girl's shoes or in this case, a pretty pink frock.

Through her study, Anne Fine shows that boys and girls have a clear view of the expectations held for their own gender and 'the combination of text and discussion helps it to the surface'. (Wing 1997: 501)

This story raised more awareness about different ways in which girls and boys are treated. Through the issues raised in the text, children are able to identify themselves with Bill.

Peter and Lack (1990) concluded that although a lot of new books present fewer stereotypical images than they did in the past, the decrease is not statistically significant.

When a child reads a book, s/he brings with him/her a set of expectations about the way that characters should behave, differing from each other due to the different experiences they have had.

For example, in *Bill's New Frock*, humour is constructed from the fact that although Bill is internally a boy, will be treated differently because he looks like a girl.

Although children's attitudes about gender stereotyping are influenced by many factors, it seems that awareness can be raised 'with a book as a catalyst' (Wing 1997: 503), that children can identify with, through discussion (an opportunity to express opinions and listen to others) and the teacher's intervention.

If children are constructing their inner worlds from information they receive at a very early age, then it is important that books for children of all ages present alternatives ways of viewing man and women, boys and girls, if one truly desires equal opportunities.

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## When a child reads a book, s/he brings with him/her a set of expectations about the way that characters should behave

### 35 NAN'S STORY



I rose at seven o'clock every morning and helped Aunt Nell to make the breakfast. After breakfast, I washed the dishes and helped to tidy the house. It was my job to look after the chickens. I fed them with a mixture of meal, seed, and crumbs of bread. Afterwards I went to the coop and collected the eggs in a basket. Another of my jobs was to feed the little piglets. Their food was made up of all the scraps which had been left over from our meals. Next I went with Aunt Nell to watch her milk the cows.

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### 35 DICK'S STORY



I did not rise as early as Nan, and had always to hurry to be in time for breakfast. Every morning I went with Uncle Fred to see if the sheep and lambs were safe and well. On our way back, we visited the fields to see how the crops were growing. There were fields of hay, wheat, potatoes, cabbages, and turnips.

One day the sheep were gathered together and driven into a pen by Betty, the clever collie. They were afterwards taken out one by one and sheared by Uncle Fred and a shepherd named Sam. This work is done in summer so that the sheep will not feel the cold when their coats of wool are cut off.

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