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Research into Practice

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How can teachers use children's literature to support development of critical literacy skills?

Developing Critical Literacy Skills

Exploring Masculine and Feminine Stereotypes in Children's Literature

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Research Tells Us

- Children's literature contributes to the transmission of ideologies, particularly with respect to gender.
- Gender asymmetry is greatest in stories about animals who are given exaggerated human traits (e.g., adult females depicted by exaggeratedly long eyelashes, a pearl necklace, an apron).
- Sexist representations impact child development, conveying "rules" for how to be masculine and feminine and how one is supposed to act as a boy or a girl.
- Critical literacy activities help children understand how stereotypes are created in literature and how they exert influence on behaviour.

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Developing critical literacy skills is a major challenge for teachers who are preparing students for a world that is saturated with information.¹ A major part of the challenge is to show students how text, in all its forms, carries subtle messages regarding relationships of power, often justifying social inequities. Many researchers suggest that by integrating critical literacy into daily classroom activities, teachers can help students understand how texts are constructed and how authors are able to influence their understanding of the world.²

Children's literature is an ideal resource for helping children develop critical literacy skills because it encompasses tales, poetry, novels, comic strips, documentaries and activity books for a diverse range of learners. Further, as Morgan argues, books for children of all ages are infused with the cultural values of society and contribute to the transmission of ideologies from one generation to the next.³ Given that equality of the sexes is one of the foundations of our democratic society, it is important to support students in developing their critical literacy skills by considering the values and ideologies inherent in the representations of femininity and masculinity in books written for children.

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Gender Representation in Children’s Literature

Children’s books mirror the values and images transmitted to children by adults. They act as vehicles for passing ideologies from generation to generation.⁴ By carefully examining collections of literature from various perspectives, researchers have been able to identify and describe the ideologies inherent in representations of gender.

Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada and Ross were among the first researchers to note that there is a greater emphasis on male characters in children’s literature.⁵ Moreover, while male characters are represented in roles associated with power and success, female characters are more often represented in domestic or subordinate roles. Recent studies report similar results, showing that little has changed in this regard.^{6,7}

Brugeilles, Cromer and Cromer have observed that male dominance is even found in books in which the characters are animals.⁸ Thus, stories that anthropomorphize animals do not resolve the issue of sexism; gender asymmetry is greatest in animals that are ascribed human traits. These traits are often exaggerated so as to unequivocally convey femininity or masculinity. For example, adult females are often depicted with exaggeratedly long eyelashes, a pearl necklace and an apron. Adult males are often depicted sitting in an easy chair with glasses and a newspaper. Ferrez and Dafflon Novelle note that the types of animals used to represent characters also vary according to gender: mice are most often used to represent female characters and bears are most often used to represent male characters.⁹

Few studies have been conducted on gender representation in Canadian children’s literature. However, one study on this subject found that, much like in foreign children’s literature, significant asymmetry exists.¹⁰ For example, an analysis of the illustrations contained in books that have won Governor General’s Literary Awards shows that female characters are under-represented, except in domestic activities. Conversely, very few male characters are depicted performing domestic activities; they are most often depicted engaging in leisure activities or in professional activities. In another study on sexist stereotypes with respect to parents, it was found that, over the years, images of mothers have continued to be traditional, whereas images of fathers have evolved somewhat, though father characters continue to be less engaged with children than mother characters.¹¹

These studies suggest that children’s literature conveys masculine and feminine stereotypes. How are children affected by these representations?

Impact of Sexist Representations on Child Development

Dafflon Novelle explains that a child’s gender identity forms gradually through interactions with others and exposure to media, including books.¹² Witnessing the beliefs and values that prevail in this social context, a child forms simplified representations of the roles and attributes associated with masculinity and femininity. When these beliefs and values convey sexist stereotypes, they are likely to create a dichotomy in the child’s mind in terms of the traits, such as appearance, physical and intellectual abilities, areas of interest and occupation that he or she associates with each gender. A child will scrutinize his or her environment in search of “rules” he or she feels the need to conform to and use them as the foundation to build his or her gender identity.

In children’s books, masculine and feminine gender representations offer children self-images for the present and the future. Books that convey sexist representations have damaging effects on both boys and girls, although girls suffer more of the consequences. For example, a stereotypical representation of occupations and professions along gender lines encourages girls to choose traditionally

female fields of employment, which often leads to situations in which they are subordinate.¹³ Correspondingly, stereotypical representations observed in children's literature may prevent girls from realizing their full potential because they deprive them of positive, powerful alternative models.

Critical Literacy in the Classroom

Critical literacy may be defined as a lens, or overlay, for viewing texts that becomes a regular part of classroom practice.¹⁴ This process helps the reader discover that texts are not neutral. By taking the social, political and economic conditions in which texts are produced into account, the reader is able to identify the power relationships, inequities and injustices they may contain.¹⁵ In a critical literacy process, the teacher's role is to support students in taking an inquiring and analytical approach to reading. Teachers encourage students to move beyond the literal meaning and determine both what has been said and what has been left unsaid in order to analyze and evaluate the author's meaning and intent.^{16,17}

Helen Lenski¹⁸ proposes some guiding principles for teaching critical literacy in a classroom setting:

- Take into consideration the purpose of the text and the author's intentions.
- Examine the representation of various groups in the text.
- Understand that texts offer a particular view of the world.
- Analyze the methods used to transmit the message.
- Take into consideration the power of the language used by the author.
- Read the text from different perspectives.
- Encourage students to take a stand on the author's statements.
- Provide students with the opportunity to consider and clarify their own points of view.
- Provide students with the opportunity to take social action.

Some Classroom Activities

Princes and Princesses as Depicted in Fairy Tales

When reading traditional tales, students can be asked to compare the physical and psychological characteristics of princes and princesses as well as their respective qualities, which are often stereotyped. They can then be asked to compare these books, written from traditional viewpoints, with books that contain unconventional princes and princesses. Information on the criteria selected can be entered into a table with one column for each book that has been read and one row for each criterion down the left hand side of the table. Once the table has been filled out, students can be asked to comment on the authors' choices in describing their characters, based on their gender. In the process, the students will develop their critical literacy skills.

Occupations and Professions

For a period of one week, students can be asked to note the gender of the characters in occupations and professions represented in the books that they read either in a group or on their own (by means of two charts, one for female characters and one for male characters). Using charts or a Venn diagram, they can then be asked to compare the occupations and professions attributed to men and to women. They can be asked to be on the look-out, in subsequent reading, for books in which both men and women make non-traditional career choices. Occupations and professions attributed solely to women in the books they read are noted in one circle and those attributed solely to men are noted

Implications for Practice

Some Classroom Activities

- Ask children to make a Venn diagram to compare characteristics of princes and princesses in traditional fairy tales. Then, do the same for more contemporary fairy tales like "The Paper Bag Princess." Then compare the two.
- For one week, ask children to compare male and female jobs in the books they are reading. A Venn diagram can be used to demonstrate occupations that are attributed to men or women only and which ones are attributed to both. This is then followed by discussion of real life today.
- Ask children to compare books designed by publishers for "boys" and those for "girls" in terms of covers, colours and content. They then write a journal entry about how these features influenced their book choice.

Critical literacy involves explicitly teaching children to examine purpose, points of view represented or absent and issues of power and privilege.

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in another circle. Occupations and professions attributed to both women and men are noted in the overlapping area. As students compare the occupations and professions attributed to characters of either gender in children's literature to the occupations and professions of people in real life today, they develop their critical literacy skills.

“Boys’ Collections” and “Girls’ Collections”

Students can be introduced to books or collections of books designed by publishers for either girls or boys. They can be encouraged to reflect on the techniques publishers use to appeal to the target clientele. They will likely discover that colours, covers and content vary based on the intended readership. The students can be asked to share their reactions to the stereotypes that are conveyed. Are they influenced by these aspects when they choose a book? Students could record their opinions, reactions and observations to these promotional efforts in a journal. Their journal entries could be used as a starting point for future group discussions.

Conclusion

Gender equality is an important value in our society. Children's literature is an important tool for socialization; it has the power to influence a child's gender identity construction and to influence social relationships among tomorrow's adults. Children must be exposed to books that break stereotypes. And yet books that contain stereotypical representations may continue to be a part of the literary corpus for children because, in spite of this shortcoming, they may inculcate other important values that support harmonious relationships in society. Through the development of critical literacy skills, students learn to decipher the symbols that denote the power relationships, inequities or injustices that they witness, not only in relation to sexism, but anywhere where discrimination may exist. This skill will help them to develop thought processes that will enable them to understand societal issues and to become engaged citizens in a democratic society.

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