

Gender Biases and Nontraditional Literature in the Urban Elementary Classroom

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Abstract: Gender stereotypes pervade children's literature. This action research project sought to alter stereotypical perceptions of gender roles held by a classroom of urban elementary school students through the introduction of nontraditional gender role literature. Results suggested that some stereotypical perceptions could be altered through utilization and discussion of such literature.

Due to gender- and racially-based oppressive, prejudicial, and discriminatory aspects historically fundamental within American society, how individuals or groups are perceived by society remains important. The manner in which individuals come to perceive their social world is heavily dependent upon the physical, psychological, and social environments available to them. Therefore, forming adaptive perceptions of societal constructs (such as gender roles) can be viewed as a significant developmental challenge. Furthermore, such a challenge may be incrementally more difficult for individuals from environments involving multiple constraints that may prevent exposure to diverse notions of social ideologies. One environment that may significantly limit access to alternative views of adjustment may be that of the inner-city. Urban populations of children are often confronted with institutionalized inequality at school and within the greater community, potentially prompting relational crises in the adaptive negotiation of racial and gender identity development (Stevens, 2002). Therefore, investigating the perceptions of gender roles held by children in urban environments may provide meaningful insight into factors and processes that promote and maintain particular experiences among members of this group. Listening to the representative voices of these children may reveal specific and unique developmental mechanisms guiding psychosocial perceptual adjustment, and in turn explain future developmental outcomes.

Emergent gender role beliefs are generally dictated by factors such as societal barriers, guidelines of cultures, and particular customs of families (Stevens, 2002). Unfortunately, many influences upon these developing perceptions of gender roles may exhibit gender preferences that are typical of traditional societal views. For example, from preadolescence, children within our society are bombarded with images of females manifesting inferior gender-roles. By kindergarten, children assign females a smaller range of lesser-paying jobs than their male counterparts (Stroeher, 1994). In addition, as females grow older, they assign escalating statuses to masculine jobs and male workers, while deeming themselves inadequate to function within such positions (Durkin & Nugent, 1998; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001). Stereotypes of gender inferiority pervade books (Wason-Ellam, 1997), television (Durkin & Nugent), and other aspects of popular culture. Children come to reflect these stereotypes in their attitudes and cognitions (MacGillivray & Martinez, 1998). Fictional characters from children's literature can influence children's schemas for subsequent perceptions of the world and their role in it (Zipes, 1986). Knowledge of gender stereotypes increases with age in elementary school, and core gender stereotypes solidify well before school-age (Zemore, Fiske, & Kim, 2000). *Teen-Talk Barbie*, for

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sale only a decade ago, giggled, “Math is hard! I love shopping! Will we ever have enough clothes?” (Ben-Zeev et al., 2005). The present action research project sought to alter perceptions that may develop through such stereotypical portrayals of gender in a classroom of students in an urban elementary school through the introduction of nontraditional gender role literature.

Method

Action research involves practitioner self-reflection in an effort to increase the justice of their work (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). In this respect, it was appropriate to use my own class in the investigation. The research project took place at an urban elementary school in Miami, Florida where I was a fourth grade teacher. The student composition of the school was 73% African American, 25% Hispanic, and 1% White. Over 90% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch (MDCPS, 2006). The participants included a classroom of 33 fourth grade 10- and 11-year-old students (23 male, and 10 female; 25 African American, and 8 Hispanic).

One facet of action research includes providing a vehicle for educators to develop a better understanding of students as learners (Rogers et al., 2007). The goal of action research is to investigate a perceived problem, or achieve a goal in current practice (Gall et al., 2007). In this spirit, the current study sought to investigate gender perceptions, but also attempted to take steps to change traditional stereotypical perceptions through literature and discussion.

Initial information was gathered through daily observations of students and teachers within my school. Observations were collected in daily journals and events and information relevant to gender role stereotyping were highlighted. A survey was administered to participants. The survey items reflected traditional gender stereotypes, and were derived from Measurement of Gender-Role Attitudes, Beliefs, and Principles (Prasad & Baron, 1996) (see Appendix A). The initial survey was followed by semi-structured group interviews. The group interview sample was deliberately chosen from my class. Purposeful cluster sampling was used to select four groups of 4 fourth-graders. Each group included male and female participants. The students in each group were friendly with, and had conversational familiarity with, each other.

The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. They centered on student perceptions of gender roles. Interviews were guided by the predetermined set of survey questions, but considerable latitude was given and follow-up questions were based on student responses. Extensive fieldnotes were taken to capture relevant statements. Fieldnotes were then rewritten and coded, categorizing similar statements of perception and experience. The coded passages were reanalyzed to determine which were related to participants’ perceptions of gender.

Following the initial surveys and interviews, participants read and reported on a number of children’s books depicting nontraditional pursuits of boys and girls (see Appendix B). Each book met the criteria of a main child character acting contrary to a prevalent gender stereotype. The books were reported on in a simple book report format: Students were to predict what they believed would happen in the story, read the story, then summarize the story, describe the main character, and reflect upon their prediction. Post-intervention, students completed the gender-role surveys, and participated in group interviews for a second time. Post-intervention interviews centered on the students’ book reports; books were discussed individually and collectively. The same coding process was implemented.

Results

Pre-Intervention

Analyses of pre-intervention surveys and interviews revealed three major categories of gender biases: (a) social roles, (b) academic competence, and (c) future competence.

Social roles. Consistent with traditional social role stereotypes, students predominantly rated girls as better at chores, housework, and taking care of children, while a large majority rated boys as tougher, faster, and better at sports. These social gender biases were consistent across gender. A response typical from both boys and girls when questioned about typical female jobs was given by one participant: “Girls be taking care of the kids and stuff.”

Academic competence. In *general* academic categories, participants consistently rated girls as being more competent than boys. Although some said that boys and girls performed equally, none said that boys do better homework or receive more A’s. Furthermore, only one student said boys turn in better classwork. These responses were similar across gender, except girls were more likely to rate themselves as *smarter*. Boys were unwilling to make that jump—mostly rating girls and boys of equal intelligence. Responses differed by gender, however, regarding *specific* academic areas. Boys very rarely rated girls as superior in specific areas such as math and reading. Girls most often said that boys and girls displayed equal competence in specific academic areas, even rating boys more competent in science. Although they recognized superior overall academic performance by females, consistent with societal stereotyping they ranked males as better in specific mathematics and science areas. When participants were confronted with the apparent incongruity of rating boys as more competent in specific areas, yet less competent in general, answers were conflicting. Whereas many boys assured me they were better at math, others questioned their confident peers: “No, boys don’t do better no way; look at the 100% [bulletin] board; it’s mostly girls!” Boys searched for explanations: “Girls just don’t want to tell the truth and admit we better,” a boy explained. “But all the girls I know get A’s,” another countered. “Boys not really better at math...even though I still say boys are better,” a boy displayed his confusion. “That’s because boys don’t do homework,” one hypothesized. “Boys just be playing outside more,” said another. “They don’t be focusing on they work,” yet another commented. “Girls do their homework because they don’t have video games.” Another boy jumped in, “Boys attract to Nintendo.” The general consensus was that boys would do better than, or as well as girls if they had fewer distractions. The responsibility for lackluster performance was relinquished from the males and placed on distracting outside influences.

Future competence. Participants’ gender perceptions of future competence were very different from those of present academic competence. Seventy-six percent of students expected males and females to perform equally in high school. Correspondingly, 70% expected males and females will perform equally in college. The students who did not expect equal performance expected girls to do better in high school, but boys to outperform girls in college. Following schooling, there was a big swing in expectations. The majority of students believed boys would be better at working outside the home. Students chose boys over girls to get a better and higher-paying job and to have more money. Analyzed by gender, girls’ responses were relatively equally distributed regarding who would succeed in the working world, often choosing *same*. Boys, however, overwhelmingly chose themselves as more competent in every area following high school leading up to a career outside the home. Overall, gender perceptions of a more successful working career favored boys, whereas perceptions of present academic competence favored girls. When presented with this apparent disparity, participants said it does not surprise them; girls said things would “even out,” whereas boys were more adamant that they would come out on top. “The older [girls] get, they get worse; they see their moms and be like that...Girls work at home or stay and do nothing.” Several participants seemed convinced that future success was less necessary for girls than boys. Despite differences in present performance, boys were often undaunted about their opportunities for future success; they said that “boys grow

into it.” Oppositely to boys, responsibility for lesser competence in girls was placed directly on the girls themselves. The consensus was that when boys didn’t succeed, an outside influence (Nintendo, playing outside) affected performance. However, when girls didn’t succeed, it was characterized as a personal choice to “do nothing,” an intrinsic character flaw.

Intervention – Discussions of Nontraditional Literature

During discussions, students were especially cognizant of qualities of characters that reflected nontraditional gender roles. “Jacob is special because he shares feelings with dad,” one girl mentioned about a male character. This is not a common action for males in children’s literature. “He liked to sit and smell the flowers...he did not fight” a boy said of another male. This cognizance was also apparent in statements about female characters. “The girl did courageous things,” a girl described one female character. Courage is an attribute often reserved for male characters in children’s literature. “She had a caterpillar with her and loved all kinds of slimy things normal girls would not touch,” a boy said of another girl. The students also recognized what the stories had in common: “Oooh, the girls all had their own way of doing something,” and “the girls wanted to do something that boys do.” Also, “boys do what the girls do, like [being] good at taking care of something.” Dialoguing helps students influence their own change (McIntyre, Chatzopoulos, Politi, & Roz, 2007). Students became the agents for change as the discussion continued, and girls became offended when some pursuits were called “boy things.” A girl explained, “Sports ain’t a boy thing; a lot of girls [are] good at it.” Statements describing similarities in books then began to become less gender-oriented. “All [characters] did what they wanted to do and be what they wanted to be,” a boy articulated. One girl verbalized the books’ general theme: “Being *it* no matter what anyone else thinks about it.”

Post-Intervention Surveys

Some encouraging trends emerged from post-intervention surveys. Most notably, there was a clear response difference in the areas most heavily tied to gender stereotypes. These included both social role items and specific academic areas. These items were also most often the focus of the nontraditional literature.

Social roles. Whereas in pre-intervention surveys 73% of participants rated girls as better at childcare, in post-intervention surveys, the majority of participants rated both genders as equally competent at this task. The majority of participants also rated both genders as equally competent at chores and housework. Similarly, whereas in pre-intervention surveys 79% of participants rated boys as better at sports, in post-intervention surveys, almost half of the participants rated both genders as equally competent at this task. These increases in perceptions of equal competence in such social role performance held true across gender.

Academic competence. Similar to pre-intervention, in *general* academic categories, students consistently rated girls as presently being more competent than boys. They reported that girls do better homework, receive more A’s, and do better classwork. These responses were similar across gender. When speaking about *specific* academic areas such as math, boys often rated themselves superior pre-intervention. Post-intervention, however, the large majority of boys rated genders equally competent in these areas.

Future competence. Notably, the collection of gender-fair literature did not change participant perception of gender difference between present and future success. Students still consistently rated girls as presently more academically competent. Also, although girls now rated themselves in a more equal light, boys still consistently rated themselves as more competent in the professional world following college.

Discussion and Implications

In the elementary school environment, girls perform equal to or better than boys on nearly every measure of achievement, but by the time they graduate high school or college, they have fallen behind (M. Sadker & Sadker, 1995). Biased classroom interaction decreases females' confidence in their intellectual abilities (Crawford & MacLeod, 1990). Courses of study and careers remain gender segregated and even gifted programs often reinforce gender segregation (D. M. Sadker, 2000). Societal stereotyping may be a major cause of these phenomena. Child perceptions mirror our societal reality and not an equitable ideal. The byproducts of the social power structure are stereotypical perceptions of gender roles evidenced in this study; this may cause children to limit their future paths based on the perception that future success is tied to gender, and that male flaws are environmentally caused while female flaws are intrinsic traits.

Clearly, gender biases are reinforced at school. Classrooms are microcosms of society. It thus follows that normal socialization patterns of young children that often lead to distorted perceptions of gender roles are reflected in the classrooms. In the elementary classroom, this bias is embedded in literature (Ernst, 1995), and thus is implicitly part of the curriculum. Using literature that omits contributions of women, generalizes the experiences of either gender, and stereotypes gender roles is common. Stereotypes in traditional children's literature can condition boys and girls to accept such gender images (Fox, 1993). In contrast, this study demonstrates how nontraditional gender role literature provides children the opportunity to reevaluate their gender biases and inspires them to adopt more gender fair perceptions. Educators are often unaware of the subtle gender bias that often occurs in the classrooms (Lundeberg, 1997). This research provides evidence of how the use of nontraditional gender role literature allows students to develop more flexible attitudes towards gender roles, and helps students view each other as individuals, instead of as general members of a gender with a predetermined role. Educators and parents should be aware of the gender bias embedded in many educational materials and texts, and need to combat this bias. One method could include the use of nontraditional gender role literature. Such literature should include the following: individuals portrayed with distinctive personalities irrespective of their gender, achievement not evaluated on the basis of gender, occupations represented as gender-free, and individuals display emotion depending upon the situation, not on their gender (Rudman, 1995). Additionally, combining traditional and nontraditional literature brings about classroom dialoguing on gender stereotypes (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993). Many children's books can be used as catalysts for classroom dialogues (Joseph, 2004; McGowan, McGowan, & Wheeler, 1994) (see Appendix B for a list). Future research is necessary to explore the role of nontraditional gender-role children's literature in altering biased perceptions of children on a larger scale. Also, the role of teacher and parent perceptions in shaping gender stereotype awareness should be explored.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

For each statement, check BOYS, GIRLS, or SAME for what you *think* is the best answer.

	BOYS	GIRLS	SAME
Better at Math			
Turn in better homework			
Better at Reading			
Better at Science			
Better at sports			
Better at learning to use computers			
Faster runners			
Better at chores and housework			
Will get better jobs			
Better at taking care of children			
Will have more money in the future			
Better at working outside of the house			
Will do better in high school			
Will do better in college			
Better at baseball			
Teachers are nicer to			
Teachers give more A's to			
Teachers receive better work from			
Will be more successful			
Teachers pay more attention to			
Teachers like more			
More well-behaved			
Tougher			
Will get a higher paying job			
Smarter			

Appendix B

Nontraditional Children's Literature (Joseph, 2004)

Nontraditional Pursuits of Girls

- Adoff, A. (1988). *Flamboyant*.
- Alexander, S. H. (1992). *Maggie's whopper*.
- Anderson, L. H. (1996). *Ndito runs*.
- Bernhard, E. (1994). *The girl who wanted to hunt: A Siberian tale*.
- Birchman, D. F. (1995). *The raggly scraggly no-soap no-scrub girl*.
- Browne, E. (1993). *No problem*.
- Bushnell, J. (1996). *Sky dancer*.
- Cristaldi, K. (1992). *Baseball ballerina*.
- Fox, M. (1989). *Shoes from grandpa*.
- Gauch, P. L. (1992). *Bravo, Tanya*.
- Gauch, P. L. (1992). *This time, Tempe Wick?*
- Graham, B. (1992). *Rose meets Mr. Wintergarten*.
- Hamakama, S. (1999). *I look like a girl*.
- Hamilton, V. (1995). *Her stories: African American folktales, fairy tales, and true tales*.
- Henkes, K. (1987). *Sheila Rae, the brave*.
- Hilton, N. (1989). *A proper little lady*.
- Hoffman, M. (1991). *Amazing Grace*.
- Horvath, B. (1970). *Be nice to Josephine*.
- Hopkinson, D. (1993). *Sweet Clara and the freedom quilt*.
- Innocenti, R. (1985). *Rose Blanche*.
- Isaacs, A. (1994). *Swamp angel*.
- Johnson, A. (1993). *The girl who wore snakes*.
- Kellogg, S. (1995). *Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind Crockett*.
- Khalsa, D. K. (1990). *Cowboy dreams*.
- Kurtz, J. (1996). *Miro in the kingdom of the sun*.
- Leggat, B. A. (1992). *Punt, pass & point!*
- Little, J. (1991). *Jess was the brave one*.
- Martin, B., & Archambault, J. (1986). *White Dynamite and Curly Kid*.
- Martin, C.L.G. (1991). *Three brave women*.
- McCully, E.A. (1992). *Mirette on the high wire*.
- Merrill, J. (1992). *The girl who loved caterpillars*.
- Miller, M.L. (1985). *Dizzy from fools*.
- Nash, O. (1991). *The adventures of Isabel*.
- Oram, H. (1992). *Reckless Ruby*.
- Rollins, C. (1979). *Touchdown!*
- San Souci, R. D. (1992). *The samurai's daughter*.
- Stops, S. (1992). *Dulcie Dando, soccer star*.
- Tafari, N. (1996). *The brass ring*.
- Yolen, J. (1992). *Eeny, meeny, miney mole*.