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An Analysis of Sexism in the
Core Picture Books from
The California State Department of Education's
Recommended Readings in Literature

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses sex-role stereotyping in core picture books from the California State Department of Education's Recommended Readings in Literature using modified criteria from past studies of sexism in children's literature, notably Weitzman et al (1972), Kolbe and La Voie (1981), Collins et al (1984) and Stewig and Higgs (1973). A survey of previous literature notes the types, trends, and influences of sexism in children's literature.

INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, in 1986, the California State Department of Education and advisory committee published Recommended Readings in Literature to serve a need in the educational system. The document was the culmination of over a years' effort by teachers, administrators, curriculum planners and librarians throughout California. Their intent was not to prescribe literature, rather it was

to (1) encourage students to read and to view reading as a worthwhile activity;

(2) help local curriculum planners select books for their reading programs; and

(3) stimulate educators at the local level to evaluate their literature programs and change or improve them, if necessary

(California State Department of Education, 1986, vi)

These commendable motives led to the development of a list of 1,010 titles in ten different categories of literature, spanning grades kindergarten through eighth. Within the ten categories, each book is designated as core, extended or recreational-motivational. The Core books are those which educators are encouraged to teach in the classroom, and should be given "close reading and intensive consideration" (ibid, ix).

As potential teaching material for primary age children, an evaluation of core picture books from the Recommended Readings in Literature for their possible influence on those children would be useful. Sex role portrayal in children's books is one aspect of literature that impacts on the developing sex role identification of the child (Knell, 1979; Flerx, 1976; and Scott, 1979). This study seeks to assess the presence and magnitude of sex role bias in the core picture books to better evaluate their suitability as teaching material.

LITERATURE REVIEW

By the time children enter school, they have already internalized many of our society's values and customs. Their behavior, expectations and aspirations, in many ways, are already formed; in other ways are yet to be formed. "Sex-role socialization constitutes one of the most important learning experiences for the young child. By the time the child enters kindergarten, he or she is able to make sex-role distinctions and express sex-role preferences" (Weitzman, 1972, p. 1125). These encoded behaviors and norms are further refined by lessons and experiences of the first few years of school (Williams, 1975).

Knowledge of theories on the formative years of the child (Bloom, 1965 and Piaget, 1952) suggests that exposure to materials which are sexist or racist in nature has a great impact on the child's developing self concept (Yawkey, 1976). Concern over the child's literary environment has prompted research into the amount of sexism present in children's books, especially picture books. These studies seek to ascertain: what kind of sexism, if any, is present; what trends exist; and what effect sex-role stereotyping in literature has on the formation of children's value systems and behavior patterns.

Two different approaches in analyzing sexism have been popular. One study, first performed by Weitzman et al in 1972, focused on frequency of female characters, illustrations and types of activity in relation to those of males in Caldecott

Medal Winners and Honors books from 1967-71. The second type of study calculated the types and frequencies of male and female occupations represented in picture books selected at random (Stewig, 1973). Both of these approaches successfully established that a considerable amount of sexism did exist in the books surveyed.

These studies identified three major problems with the portrayal of male and female characters in children's literature. Females appeared less frequently than did males in titles, major and minor characters, and illustrations. As Weitzman wrote, "women are simply invisible... even when women can be found in the books, they often play insignificant roles, remaining both inconspicuous and nameless" (p. 1128). In relation to male characters, female characters are more likely to be portrayed in a negative fashion. In many of these books, women and girls are passive, weak, unintelligent and dependent while the men and boys are brave, adventuresome, independent and strong. The last problem with the portrayal of women in the books is the very limited scope of societal and familial roles they are shown to fulfill (Scott 1979, p. 396). In Weitzman's Caldecott survey, no female occupational roles besides mother and housewife were present. Other occupational surveys showed a dearth of female roles. One found a 5:1 difference between male and female occupations represented (Hillman, 1977). "The inescapable conclusion to be drawn ... is that women are not depicted in the rich variety of professional roles in which they are

engaged today" (Stewig, 1973, p. 241).

As these original studies were recreated to assess new developments in sex-role portrayal, interesting trends were observed. Kolbe et al (1981) and Collins et al (1984) gathered similar data to that computed by Weitzman. They found that females were more frequently found in illustrations, titles, and major or minor characters. "While the data show some shift from the sexism previously present in young children's books, this change occurred in the frequency of female pictures and characters, not in role portrayal and characterization," Kolbe elaborates (p. 373). Improvement of the lot of the picture book female continued, however, in the Collins study. Looking specifically at characterization, this study upheld that female characters in central roles had characteristics Weitzman found common only to male central figures. They were more often brave, strong, adventurous and active. Insignificant female roles showed less alteration from the results of Weitzman.

TABLE 1
Comparison of Ratios
Caldecott Medal Winners and Honors Books

Basis for Comparison	Weitzman, et al 1967-71	Kolbe, et al 1970-79	Collins, et al 1979-80
Titles			
Male:Female	8:1	2:3	2:1
Central Roles			
Male:Female	3.5:1	----	1.7:1
Human Pictures			
Male:Female	7.6:1	1.8:1	1.4:1
Animal Pictures			
Male:Female	95:1	2.66:1	3.5:1
Human & Animal Pictures			
Male:Female	11:1	----	1.9:1

Another study, recreating Weitzman's criteria, assessed random books from three categories: (A) those published pre-woman's movement 1903-65, (B) those published post-woman's movement 1966-75, and (C) those recommended in a non-sexist list of books (St. Peter, 1979). Results from this study are noteworthy. The percentage of books with male central characters actually went up in the post-woman's movement category. Likewise, the number of illustrations of males increased while those of females dropped from categories A to B. Category C was unsurprisingly high in both female main characters and illustrations. Additionally, this study rated characters' activities on an expressive/instrumental scale. The assessment concluded that males were more fixedly stereotyped into instrumental roles than females into expressive.

A 1985 study of Newbery Medal Winners from 1977-84 detected a positive trend for both males and females (Kinman, 1985). The characters evaluated in these books provided quality role models for both genders. They were realistic portrayals of persons with diverse abilities and opportunities making choices that "provide the children reading these books with positive images that help to reinforce positive self-images in the readers" (ibid, p. 888).

The only area where little improvement on the portrayal of women has been detected is that of occupational representation. Hillman (1977) compared books from two periods, the 1930's and 1963-73, and found a surprising lack of expansion in the occupational roles of the women characters. Male career options

totalled 149 and 150 different occupations respectively for the periods. Occupations relating to female characters in the books amounted to 30 and 39. Additionally, increasing technological specificity, illustrating the 'changing times,' was registered mainly in the male occupational list. Little proof was available in the women's career representation that three decades had passed.

The limited range of occupational roles for women presents a restrictive, servile view of adulthood to many children... If children's literature is a force in the socialization of youth, this narrow view could severely limit children's aspirations.

(Hillman, 1976, p. 4)

A basic premise throughout these studies is that children's literature impacts the developing child. Weitzman argues "preschool children invest their intellects and imaginations in picture books at a time when they are forming their self-images and future expectations" (p. 1146). "Children's picture books, as one agent of socialization, are excellent opportunities to enculturate young children with open attitudes and values toward sex typed behavior and sex role models" expands Yawkey (p. 548). Additional researchers have delved into the substance of these theories, trying to establish the extent, if any, sexist and nonsexist literature has on the behaviors and attitudes of the

readers.

Flerx et al (1976) studied the effect of books containing egalitarian sex roles on the modification of female sex role stereotypes. They demonstrated that the stereotypes could be modified, especially in children 4 to 5 years old. Knell et al (1979) concluded that reading material might affect attitudes and reinforce established stereotypes, but could not change well established stereotypes. They also noted a greater effect in younger aged children. The 1979 study performed by Scott and Feldman-Summers illustrated that both boys and girls increased their perceptions of the number of girls who could engage in activities traditionally thought to be male when exposed to books portraying females in those male dominated roles. This change in perception however, does not necessarily modify the behavior of the individual. The altered perception was also shown to be specific to the activity present in the study and did not extend to other sex role behaviors.

That literature has some influence on children's sex role stereotypes has, therefore, been established. However, the magnitude and generalization of the cause-effect relationship remains unclear. The age, previously established stereotypes and developmental stage of the child will modify the effect of egalitarian literature. Other socialization factors, such as parents, teachers, peers, and mass media interact in the child's development, thus complicating the issue.

Exposure to egalitarian or sexist literature does impact the

sex role identification of children and their subsequent aspirations and self concept. The selection of literature to be used as instructional material, especially in the primary grades where the effect on development is strongest, is therefore crucial. Recommended Readings in Literature, as such a list, deserves study.

METHOD

In order to effectively assess the twenty-six core picture books from Recommended Readings in Literature a modified criteria from Weitzman et al (1972), Kolbe and La Voie (1981), Collins et al (1984) and Stewig and Higgs (1973) was used. The content of the picture books was analyzed in three ways. First, individual totals were computed into the following ratios:

1. Males in title: Females in title
2. Males in central role: Females in central role
3. Males in pictures: Females in pictures
4. Male animals in pictures: Female animals in pictures
5. Male humans and animals in pictures: Female humans and animals in pictures.

Second, each book was divided into one of four categories:

- A. Male in central role
- B. Female in central role
- C. Male and female sharing central role
- D. No central character

Characters in each category A through C were distinguished as significant or insignificant. Significant roles were operationally defined as those in which the character performed an important task, action or function; insignificant characters were those who were present but did nothing to further the action or plot of the story. The significant and insignificant

characters were then grouped by gender and evaluated on these dimensions: Active/Passive, Action Indoors/Outdoors and Traditional/Nontraditional. Active characters were those who responded independently, with self-sufficiency and intellect to situations around them, while passive characters depended upon others for their ideas, self-concept and motivation. For the Action Indoors/Outdoors comparison, characters were analyzed for customary locus of action. In the Traditional/ Nontraditional comparison, the characters were rated traditional if they fulfilled the typical sex-role expectations as culturally defined. Nontraditional characters were those who performed roles conventionally assigned to the opposite sex (Kolbe, 1981, p. 370 and Collins, 1984, p. 280).

Third, for each book of the study, adult male and female activity as indicated by illustration or text was distinguished and recorded in two categories; occupational role or recreational activity. Activities were tallied once for each book in which present.

Core Picture Books
Recommended Readings in Literature

- Anno, Mitsumasa
Anno's Counting Book
- Burton, Virginia L.
The Little House
- Carle, Eric
One, Two, Three, to the Zoo
- Carle, Eric
The Very Hungry Caterpillar
- Cooney, Barbara
Miss Rumphius
- Crews, Donald
Freight Train
- De Regniers, Beatrice S.
May I Bring a Friend?
- Feelings, Muriel
Mojo Means One: Swahili Counting Book
(Illustrated by Tom Feelings)
- Freeman, Don
Corduroy
- Gackenbach, Dick
Harry and the Terrible Whatzit
- Hoban, Russell
Bread and Jam for Frances
(Illustrated by Lillian Hoban)
- Hoban, Tana
A Children's Zoo
- Hutchins, Pat
Rosie's Walk
- Kantrowitz, Mildred
Maxie
- Keats, Ezra J.
Snowy Day
- Krass, Ruth
The Carrot Seed
(Illustrated by Crockett Johnson)

- * Marshall, James
George and Martha, What Do You See?
- Martin, Jr., Bill
Brown Bear, Brown Bear
- McCloskey, Robert
Make Way for Ducklings
- Musgrove, Margaret
Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions
(Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon)
- Potter, Beatrice
The Tale of Peter Rabbit
- Rosario, Idalia
Idalia's Project ABC-Proyecto ABC: An Urban Alphabet Book in English and Spanish
- Slobodkina, Esphyr
Caps for Sale
- Turkle, Brinton
Deep in the Forest
- Viorst, Judith
Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day
(Illustrated by Ray Cruz)
- Waber, Bernard
Ira Sleeps Over
- Ward, Lynd
The Biggest Bear

* Not present in study, unable to locate.

RESULTS

Analysis of the frequency of gender presence in the titles, central characters and illustrations of these books showed male frequency higher than female in most instances (Table 2). Animal illustrations were the only area in which females rated higher incidence. These ratios, as compared with those of Caldecott Winners and Honors Books 1967-82 from Weitzman (1972), Koibe (1981) and Collins (1984) (Table 1), demonstrated rates generally closer to equilibrium between male and female incidence.

TABLE 2
Raw Data and Ratios

Area for Comparison	Male	Female	Ratio male:female
Titles	6	4	1.5:1
Central Role	13	9	1.4:1
Human Illustrations	820	491	1.7:1
Animal Illustrations	76	92	1:1.2
Human & Animal Illustrations	896	583	1.5:1

The division of the core picture books by gender of the central character(s) resulted as follows:

A. Male in central role	10 books
B. Female in central role	5 books
C. Male and female sharing central role	3 books
D. No central character	8 books

Data on the examination of significant and insignificant characters within each of these categories is recorded in tables 3 and 4.

TABLE 3
Significant Character Analysis

Category	A	P	I	O	T	N

Male Central Role: 10 books						
MALE (N=15)	14	1	5	10	12	3
FEMALE (N=5)	4	1	3	2	4	1

Female Central Role: 5 books						
MALE (N=5)	5	0	5	0	5	0
FEMALE (N=7)	4	3	4	3	6	1

Shared Central Role: 3 books						
MALE (N=4)	4	0	1	3	4	1
FEMALE (N=4)	3	1	2	2	4	0

A= active		I= indoors			T= traditional	
P= passive		O= outdoors			N= nontraditional	

TABLE 4
Insignificant Character Analysis

Category	A	P	I	O	T	N

Male Central Role: 10 books						
MALE (N=11)	8	3	1	10	11	0
FEMALE (N=10)	2	8	4	6	10	0

Female Central Role: 5 books						
MALE (N=2)	2	0	1	1	2	0
FEMALE (N=5)	1	4	4	1	5	0

Shared Central Role: 3 books						
MALE (N=5)	4	1	5	0	4	1
FEMALE (N=5)	3	2	3	2	3	2

A= active	I= indoors				T= traditional	
P= passive	O= outdoors				N= nontraditional	

For the male central character, these results support Weitzman's (1972) findings. A male in the central role was more likely to be active, traditional and outdoors. Apart from the locus of action, this held true for significant male characters in books with female protagonists also. The insignificant male characters had a higher incidence of passive roles, although the majority remained active. Customary locale of action varied from group to group, while the roles remained routinely traditional.

Female significant characters displayed the trend noted in

Collins (1984). They, like male central characters, were more often active than passive, traditional than nontraditional. However, they had a higher occurrence of passive characteristics than did the males from the same books. Notably, significant female characters were passive most often in those books with a female protagonist. The locale dimension in this study demonstrated that females were outdoors almost as frequently as indoors, especially when in a main role. The insignificant female roles characterized traditional, passive persons in the first two categories. In books with shared central roles, the females rated almost equally in every dimension.

Occupational role analysis of the core picture books illustrated a marked inequity between men and women. More than a 5:1 disparity existed between the amount of male vs. female occupations represented. (Tables 5 and 6)

TABLE 5

Female Occupational Roles:	Number of Books
Saleswoman	3
Queen	2
Teacher	1
Librarian	1
Artist	1
Farmer	1
Housewife/Mother	
Watch Children	7
Cook	5
Shop for Food/Clothes	3
Serve Food	3
Laundry	3
Chauffeur Kids	2
Tend Animals	2
Garden	1
Haul Water	1
Sewing	1

7 occupations represented

TABLE 6

Male Occupational Roles	Number of Books
Farmer	8
Truck Driver	3
Construction Worker	3
Salesman	3
King	2
Hunter	2
Apt. Superintendent	2
Policeman	2
Herder	2
Priest	2
Wild Animal Catcher	1
Businessman	1
Dentist	1
Artist	1
Mailman	1
Doctor	1
Cook	1
Bus Driver	1
Gas Station Attendent	1
Janitor	1
Park Boat Operator	1
Taxi Driver	1
Street Sweep	1
Weaver	1
Musician	1
Fisherman	1
Ferryman	1
Miner	1
Photographer	1
Train Conductor	1
Dairy Farmer	1
Architect	1
Chimney Sweep	1
Machine Operator	1
Surveyor	1
Railroad Builder	1
Househusband/Father	
Cook	2
Pick Apples	1
Mow Lawn	1
Shovel Snow	1
37 Occupations Represented	

The role of housewife/mother, through many representational activities, occurred three times more often than any other occupational role. Conversely, men were shown 8:1 in roles other than househusband/father.

Recreationally, men and women appeared to be more evenly matched. Both genders in these books enjoyed a variety of hobbies and amusements, though men had a slight edge in the occurrence of these activities. The differences seemed insignificant. (Table 7 & 8)

TABLE 7

Female Recreational Activity	Number of Books
Read Newspaper/Books	4
Garden	3
Walk	3
Travel	2
Shop	2
Dance	2
Drink	1
Pick Flowers	1
Fish	1
Ride Elephant	1
Hunt Butterflies	1
Swing	1
Roll Yarn	1
Visit Zoo	1
Climb Mountain	1
Ride Camel	1
Ride Bike	1
Draw	1
Clean Litter	1
Political Activist	1
Walk Dog	1
Ride Boat	1
Tell Stories	1
Visit Friends	1
Visit Park	1

TABLE 8

Male Recreational Activity	Number of Books
Read Newspaper/Book	8
Dance	2
Shop	2
Travel	2
Walk Dog	2
Play Instrument	2
Walk	2
Ride Horse	2
Drink	2
Pick Flowers	2
Fish	1
Ride Elephant	1
Hunt Butterflies	1
Push Swing	1
Hold Yarn	1
Visit Zoo	1
Listen to Albums	1
Eat	1
Sleep	1
Climb Mountain	1
Karate	1
Clean Litter	1
Ride Boat	1
Visit Park	1
Pray	1
Sing	1
Tell Stories	1
Ski	1
Visit Friends	1

DISCUSSION

Results from this study confirmed what other studies have found: sexism exists in picture books. The books from Recommended Readings in Literature are no exception. The magnitude of that sexism, as indicated by frequency of gender representation, in relation to results from the Weitzman, Kolbe, and Collins studies appears moderate. Although direct comparison of data from those studies to the present study would be inaccurate since the books were chosen from different sources, the amount of sexism illustrated in those past studies was used to provide a "norm" by which to rate these books. By this standard, the core picture books, dating from the turn of the century to 1985, seem rather egalitarian. The rate of male:female incidence in all categories is closer to equal. Females even rate higher in one category.

On their own, the results have a less egalitarian semblance. Gender representation in titles, main roles and pictures as well as characterization and occupational representation are all areas in which the results demonstrate continuing sexual bias against women. This perpetuating sex role bias requires understanding before educators can successfully overcome the potential negative influence on students.

The reasons for the inequality of gender representation have been linked by some to our language (Gunderson, 1976; Nilsen, 1971 & 1973). Robin Lakoff, in her book Language and Woman's Place, dicusses the lack of a truly neuter pronoun in English.

Although she emphasises that linguistically there are more critical issues, for purposes of this study, pronominal usage can explain some disparities found in children's literature (Lakoff, 1975, pp. 44-45).

To a certain extent, the gender of characters in picture books is not critical. Many roles would fulfill the same purpose whether a male or a female were portrayed. However, often the author is forced to make a decision. Since 'he' can theoretically stand for either gender in our language, it seems rational for the author to chose that form over 'she' for a character for whom gender is not vital. This creates a problem. Although adults understand that words such as 'man' and 'mankind' include women as well, children are more apt to be literal in their understanding. Words such as 'fireman', 'policeman' and 'mailman' compound the situation.

This pronominal explanation for the higher frequency of male characters does not account for the predominance of male central characters. The authors most likely make a more conscious decision about the gender of their protagonist.

Illustrators also contribute to the dominance of males in picture books. In this study, there were nearly two pictures of males for every picture of a female. The cause of this inequity is unclear. Are men easier to draw than women? That seems unlikely. Yet the statistics remain the same.

The frequency of gender representation in titles, main roles and pictures becomes an issue in the classroom only if the

educator continuously choses to utilize those books with one gender overwhelmingly represented. Individual books do not create the disparity. It is the overbalancing effect of extremes in representation from many books that influences the child's development. This problem can be easily be circumvented by conscious review and selection.

Factors more vital than number of pictures are characterization and role portrayal. Weitzman found "...in the world of picture books boys are active and girls are passive" (p. 1131). This holds true, if to a lesser extent, in this study. Female characters were uniformly more passive than males. However, significant female characters were frequently active. Variety of characterization was more obviously missing in the male characters. In this regard, male characters were more strictly stereotyped. Both genders are generally traditional in portrayal, perpetuating the norms of societal sex role definition. The locus of action dimension of this study is less conclusive than it was in Weitzman.

If continuously confronted with a single view of behavior, attitude and ability, can young children be expected to develop a broad understanding of their potential roles? Diversity in the characters of both sexes children are introduced to through books can expand their understanding of the 'correct' perimeters of behavior. Girls can be strong and independent. Boys can cry and be scared. Through careful selection, educators and parents can be instrumental in ensuring children are exposed to diverse role

models in their books.

The disparity found in occupational roles is perhaps the most striking discovery of this study. The continuation of this inequality in picture books illustrates a fundamental problem. Where are the role models for little girls? The dearth of women working outside the home in these books may influence the development of children's aspirations and expectations in some way. As a society, it seems our goals should include maximizing our future through our youth. Egalitarian, creative books would seem an ideal contribution to that goal.

Stories have always been a means for perpetuating the fundamental cultural values and myths. Stories have also been a stimulus for fantasy, imagination and achievement. Books could develop this latter quality to encourage the imagination and creativity of all children. This would provide an important implementation of the growing demand for both girls and boys to have a real opportunity to fulfill their human potential. (Weitzman, 1972, p. 1148)

Educators can further these goals by providing diversity in their classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

No list of recommended books should be selected on one isolated factor. The core picture books from Recommended Reading in Literature, despite their sexual bias, have much to commend them. They are quality literature with excellent illustrations and interesting stories which will doubtless entertain many children. The important thing is for the educators who are to use these books to be aware of the sex role stereotypes that exist in them and in other children's literature. The teacher and parent will undoubtedly have more impact on the children than any one book. The solution begins there. "It is easier to eliminate stereotypes from materials ... than to change the attitude of people and the manifestation of these attitudes reflected in people's language" (Gunderson, 1976, p. 302). If the educator is sensitive to these problems and seeks to provide diversity, the children will grow with a broader understanding of possible roles than illustrated in these books.

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