Introduction and Rationale

Can teachers transform perceptions of gender identity by merely reading the “right” books to their students? Typically, books have shown a greater number of male characters with strong personalities and roles, while females have been less prevalent in literature and have been given less dominant roles when they do appear. Could we, by exposing our students to a variety of stories—in which both male and female characters play a variety of roles—help our students to become more open to different ideas or values with respect to the respective roles of the two genders? We began investigating this issue by reading various stories to our students and examining what they preferred to read about, and whom they identified with in the stories.

The purpose of this study was to examine which characters boys and girls identified with when they read stories containing male or female protagonists. Many authors and researchers argue that readers identify with characters of their own gender. Since male characters dominate the majority of children’s literature, female readers lack role models and see an unrepresentative view of the world through children’s books. Fox (1993) states that both genders should act in literature the same way as they do in real life.

Studies have demonstrated quite clearly that the reading materials that we expose our children to shape their attitudes, their understanding, and their behavior (Peterson & Lach, 1990). Research has found that the longer children are exposed to sex-bias and stereotypes, the more sex-stereotyped their attitudes become (Campbell & Wittenberg, 1980). Therefore, if we as teachers and parents promote stories that demonstrate a variety of role models, children should have less rigid attitudes and beliefs about typical behaviour for boys and girls.

Many studies have indicated specific trends in boys’ and girls’ preferences with regards to literature. Bleakley, Westerberg, and Hopkins (1988) (cited in Sadker, Sadker, & Klein, 1991) found that “when male and female fifth-grade students were exposed to adventure, mystery, and humorous stories, boys rated stories more interesting when the main characters were male; girls were more interested in reading about female protagonists, although their preference was less pronounced” (278).
Schau and Scott (1984) suggested sex stereotyping was the reason why some boys preferred reading about male characters. Literature with male protagonists was more likely to be filled with adventure and exciting details than literature with female protagonists (Sadker, et al., 1991).

From our many and various experiences with books in classrooms and in libraries, we too have found that male characters predominate children’s literature. To promote gender equity, Singh (1998, on-line resource) recommended that teachers actively seek out books that portray “girls/women in a positive light with active, dynamic roles” and books that do not portray either gender in a stereotypical manner. Since young children are not old enough to choose books that reflect fairness to both genders, the responsibility for doing so rests upon parents and teachers (Narahara, 1998).

After reading Chapter 7 in Davies (1993), we questioned the concept of positioning one’s self in a story. Was it true that girls imagine or position themselves as female characters and that boys position themselves as male characters when they read or hear stories? We tested this assertion with Grade 1 students to see if, and in response to what kinds of literature, they would position themselves in stories as a protagonist of the opposite gender, or as a protagonist who was the same gender as themselves. Our variables of interest were gender and the level of adventurousness of the protagonist, but additional variables of culture and language came into play. We did not choose stories to reflect the ethnic or cultural makeup of the class, but as we examined the outcomes of the research, it became clear that there were variables other than gender and degree of excitement with which students identified. We have tried to discuss these additional variables as they presented themselves in the study.

At the outset of the study, Susan was optimistic about the willingness of her students to position themselves in a role that was opposite to their own gender. She predicted that both boys and girls would choose to position themselves as the more exciting and adventurous protagonist. Her prediction was based on her assumption that Grade 1 students did not yet have firm stereotypic beliefs about what constituted boys’ and girls’ behaviour. Kara predicted that the boys would choose to position themselves in the male protagonist’s role and that the girls would choose to position themselves in the female protagonist’s role, regardless of how adventurous the protagonist was. Her thinking was a reflection of her classroom and personal experience.

Data Sources and Methods

Class Profile
Susan had taught at Milestone Elementary School (the school and all student names used in this article are pseudonyms) in the primary grades for three years; however, it was her first year teaching Grade 1. Kara had taught at Milestone for eight years in a variety of grades; however, she was teaching with another school district at the time of the study, which was the end of February and early March, 2002, so the sample was drawn exclusively from Susan’s Grade 1 class. Milestone is located in a working-class neighborhood in central Vancouver. Approximately 560 students attended Milestone Elementary School. The majority of the students were Asian or Indo-Canadian. Seventy students were at the Grade 1 level, divided between four classes. Within each Grade 1 class there were twenty to twenty-two students; in each class, the majority (approximately 65%) of the students were boys. In total, Susan’s class had twenty students; fourteen boys and six girls. Between sixteen and eighteen of these students participated in each session. The students were told that they could be subjects in a study done by their classroom teacher and her research partner which involved listening to stories and drawing a picture. Students were given a brief description of our research proposal and two release forms, one for the students and one for their parents to sign. The students were given an option to participate in the study by having their drawings and comments used in our research, or to keep their drawings and not be included in our research. Only two boys chose not to participate in our research. They listened to the stories and took part in the activities, but we did not use their drawings or comments in our data.

What We Did
In each of three sessions, we read two stories to the students, one with a male and one with a female protagonist, and varied the relative amount of adventure and excitement the two main characters experienced. We considered, for example, a character who was able to fly more exciting and adventurous than one who visited with elderly people. In all of the stories, the main character was human and he or she was about the same age as the students, which was about six or seven years old.
At the beginning of the first session, students gathered at the carpeted area where large group discussions normally took place. Susan read them this statement and question: “Sometimes when people read they use their imagination and pretend that they are in the story and that they are one of the characters. Do you ever pretend that you are in stories that you read or hear?” Some discussion took place and all students seemed to understand the concept of positioning themselves in a story. Then Susan gave the instructions: “I’m going to read you two books and I will ask you to imagine yourself as one of the main characters from the story. Next you will be asked to draw a picture of the main character you would like to be and you may write about your choice. We will come back to the carpet and you can share your work.” Clarifications were made and then students listened to the stories. Susan realized the impact a teacher’s comments and body language could have on her students’ responses, so during the research she tried to be as non-biased as possible by not giving evaluative statements to students’ comments or questions.

After Susan read the two books at the carpeted area, she gave the students a sheet of half-lined and half-blank notebook paper on which to do their drawing and writing. Students then moved from the carpet to a desk; there were two clusters of desks and each cluster had ten seats. Communal pencils, erasers, crayons, and pencil crayons were placed in the middle of the group of desks; students were accustomed to sharing the supplies. Susan sat at one cluster of desks, and Kara at the other in order to listen and make notes on the students’ dialogue. There was also a tape recorder at each desk so that we could study the students’ discussions at a later date.

Books We Used

Keeping in mind Fox’s (1993) recommendation to introduce a variety of literature that reflected real people and events, we chose stories for our research that portrayed a number of diverse backgrounds. Collectively, the stories reflect a broad sampling of the wide variety of literature available. The cultures represented in the chosen stories included Siberian, Indian, Australian, Spanish, American, and Canadian.

Session One

In the first book, *The Girl Who Wanted to Hunt*, the protagonist was a female named Anga. In the second book, *The Story of Little Babaji*, the protagonist was a male named Little Babaji. We considered both the male and female protagonists’ roles to be exciting and adventurous.

Session Two

In the first book, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, the protagonist was a male named Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge. In the second book, *Abuela*, the protagonist was a female named Rosalba. In this pairing, we considered the female protagonist’s role to be more exciting and adventurous than the male protagonist’s role.

Session Three

In the first book, *Selina and The Bear Paw Quilt*, the protagonist was a female named Selina. In the second book, *The Magic Hockey Skates*, the protagonist was a male named Joey. We considered the male protagonist’s role to be more exciting and adventurous than the female protagonist’s role in this pairing.

Findings and Analysis

Consistent with the findings of Bleakley et al. (1988), the majority of boys in our study positioned themselves as the male protagonists, while most of the girls chose to position themselves in the role of an adventurous protagonist, regardless of that protagonist’s gender. When given a choice between an adventurous male and an adventurous female character, most girls chose the female character (see Tables 1, 2, and 3).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Protagonist (A)</th>
<th>Female Protagonist (A)</th>
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<td>Boys 11</td>
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<td>Girls 1</td>
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<th>Male Protagonist (A)</th>
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Table 1. Characters chosen in Session One (A = adventurous)

Table 2. Characters chosen in Session Two (A = adventurous)
Although most boys did not choose to identify with or draw the female character Anga in Session One, they did not make pejorative comments about her character hunting and doing things that her stepmother labeled as “boys’ activities.” Neither did they question Abuela and Rosalba in Session Two, flying around New York, which led us to believe that the boys accepted that a girl protagonist could be adventurous. Students occasionally referred to characters in terms of their gender, for example, “…the girl in the story,” “Are you picking the boy?” and “What is that boy’s name?” We even heard Sanjay commenting to Ian, “Just because he’s a boy doesn’t mean you have to be him.” We feel that, in general, students acknowledged the gender of the characters.

Most students were ready and willing to give opinions; they made a total of 171 comments during the three sessions (see Table 4). But, when broken down in terms of gender, the girls appeared to be quite reserved, making only 10 comments as compared to the 161 comments made by the boys over the three sessions. One of the remarks made by Aneena during the book Abuela in Session Two was barely audible on tape and was quickly drowned out by a few of the boys’ voices.

The greater number of comments made by boys was partly due to the make-up of the class (two-thirds of which were boys). Another reason the boys’ comments outnumbered the girls’ was because three of the boys in the class were quite outspoken, even with teacher intervention. As represented in Table 5, the three most vocal boys made 57% of all comments over the three sessions. During the research, boys’ voices and opinions predominated and, in general, this was the norm in the class.

The discussion at the two clusters of tables focused on the male characters during Sessions One and Three. For example, after The Story of Little Babaji, the conversation at one table centered on choosing Babaji as the favorite protagonist.
One student announced that his table was “the Babaji table.” After the story *The Magic Hockey Skates*, there was a great deal of discussion about the main character, Joey.

Some of the comments were as follows: “Joey is the best” and “I want to be Joey!” These comments may have created peer pressure for the students who had not yet decided who to draw. Most girls seemed to follow the same trend throughout; they drew an adventurous protagonist and their choice of protagonist did not appear to be affected by what others were doing. However, the three most vocal boys always drew the male protagonist, which made us question whether or not the choices of the less vocal boys was affected by peer pressure from their more vocal classmates.

We felt the following was an example of peer pressure that may have affected one boy’s choice. After the stories were read in Session Two, Sanjay said, “I like Rosalba” (the adventurous female protagonist). He seemed to be reassuring himself after initially choosing Rosalba as he said to the class, “You can be a girl if you want, you don’t have to be a boy because you’re a boy.” But, when he went back to the tables to draw his choice, he sat where the conversation centered on Wilfrid Gordon (the less adventurous male protagonist). Instead of Rosalba, Sanjay drew a boy on the monkey bars with his bellybutton showing (Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge). It was possible that he changed from the female to the male protagonist because others at the table influenced him. Sanjay’s reason for choosing Wilfrid was “because he helped.”

Rita is another example of a student who changed her mind. While she worked at the table during Session One she stated, “I want to be Babaji” (the adventurous male protagonist). But when it came time to draw her picture, she...
drew Anga, (the adventurous female protagonist), then wrote that she wanted to be Anga because she wanted to hunt and be a hunter.

Of the two girls who sat at Rita’s table, one girl drew Babaji and the other drew Anga; however, the boys at her table all drew Babaji.

It could have been that Rita liked both characters and after reflecting upon the stories, she decided to draw Anga just because she was female. Another possibility was that she drew Anga because she was able to “shrug off” the pressure to be like her peers who drew Babaji.

It seemed that a student’s culture had an impact on their choices of characters during this study. Specifically, it seemed that students identified with characters who were from familiar cultures. For example, Sanjay, Anil and Akash, three Indo-Canadian boys, became very excited with *The Story of Little Babaji* because it was based in India. They cheered and repeated the name “Babaji,” which means grandfather in Punjabi. Later, they positioned themselves as the character by making such statements as, “this is the Babaji table” and “I am Babaji.” Aneena also identified with her own Indo-Canadian culture; she too chose Babaji and drew a picture of a pink skinned Babaji and a tree.

Students demonstrated their awareness that skin tone is one potential difference between cultures when they discussed colouring the characters. Some of the students’ interpretation of the positioning concept was colouring the character’s skin the colour of their own skin. Nick said to Ian as he began to colour his picture, “Babaji’s not peach, he’s brown.” Ian replied, “He’s a little bit of peach, you’re supposed to do YOU as Babaji, you’re supposed to do yourself as Babaji.” When queried, we reiterated the positioning concept by stating, “You have to imagine yourself as the character” and left interpretation of the skin colour up to them.

Language also seemed to be a concept that students identified with during our reading activities. Students felt a personal connection to the literature when they heard words from the language that was spoken in their homes. Jose pointed out Spanish words in the book *Abuela*. He proudly announced, “Buenos dias, that means ‘Hi.’” Sanjay and Akash were just as quick to point out the Punjabi symbols and words in *The Story of Little Babaji*. For example, Akash commented, “It’s the same, we call our moms Mamaji and we call our dads Papaji.” He also announced, “Miss P, remember when you said butter, you say it ‘mokun’” (correctly pronounced). Sanjay then pointed out that there was another way to say butter, “Gai.”

We noted during our study that students commented and reflected upon objects in the stories that were personally relevant to them. During Session One, Akash commented on the turban the father wore in *The Story of Little Babaji*. He said, “It’s like Anil” (referring to a boy in the class who wore a turban) and Aneena exclaimed, “Those are Punjabi shoes” when she saw Little Babaji’s fancy new shoes. Aneena obviously identified with the dress of the character and we think...
that Aneena chose to position herself as the adventurous male character Little Babaji because of her Indo-Canadian background.

During the book *Abuela* in Session Two, a few students discussed the Statue of Liberty. Jose commented, “I have seen that before. You know. The news when the airplanes crashed.” We think that Jose chose to position himself as the adventurous female character Rosalba because of his Spanish background and also because he was familiar with the Statue of Liberty. By making personal connections to the stories, students seemed to enhance their involvement with, and perhaps understanding of, the stories.

Peterson and Lach (1990) stated: “Storybooks help young children learn about what other boys and girls do and say and feel” and “provide the young child with a broader social insight” (p. 189). For example, some of the boys demonstrated an awareness of altruism in Session Two by choosing the male protagonist Wilfrid Gordon, “because he helped,” and in Session Three when they chose Joey and gave the reason, “he played for his brother.”

However, the boys did not make comments about the altruistic behaviour of female protagonists. We believe this was because they did not identify with the female protagonists. Perhaps, in order for some boys and girls to identify with certain traits, they need to identify with the characters first. If they have trouble identifying with characters of a different sex, it may be best for them to read about characters of the same sex who display those traits.

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

We recommend that as teachers look for ways to bring social justice into their classrooms, they try to use literature that portrays people in a variety of roles who come from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. When choosing literature for children there are certain factors educators should keep in mind in order to introduce their students to a realistic reflection of the world. Teachers should consider the gender of role models being presented in stories, the ethnic backgrounds of the students, and gender biases within the stories they present to their students. Although we found that, in general, students in our study related to characters of their own gender, it is important to provide students with literature that reflects a variety of cultures and languages with characters in various roles, and to discuss the roles and cultures that are portrayed within them.

Campbell & Wirtenburg (1980) and Peterson & Lach (1990) recognized the importance of a variety of role models in their research. Role models in the media have a significant impact on young peoples’ beliefs and attitudes. Domestic and childcare ideologies of “typical” male and female character traits and the roles they play in family life have been entrenched in our minds. Gaskell (1992) demonstrated that socialized patterns of behaviour continue, unquestioned by a generation who saw a majority of mothers who stayed at home and fathers who worked outside of the home. In 1977 Gaskell interviewed young women and men who had just completed high school in Vancouver and found that they perceived women to be more capable of carrying out domestic work and childcare duties than men.

There are a variety of gender-based stereotypes that continue to pervade our consciousness. They must be challenged or traditional, inequitable patterns will continue. For example, Gaskell suggests that in order to help women achieve higher status, they must be paid more for their work outside the home and have adequate child-care facilities. We agree. Further, we believe that when children see adults in a variety of roles, in books and in real life, then they learn to tolerate, accept, and support a wide variety of roles and character traits in both males and females.

Studies that examined texts used in Canadian schools from 1970 to 1988 found that sex stereotyping continues, partly because the books reflected the fundamental reality of the unequal division of labour (Gaskell, McLaren and Novogrodsky, 1989). Gaskell et al. propose creating richer school programs that would transform the current male-based curriculum and adding references to women’s historical experiences. This “gender equitable” curriculum would incorporate “…knowledge that reflects the diverse experiences of women into what is deemed to be important school-based knowledge” (38).

The proposed changes would include, for example, studying female scientists, examining history from a female perspective, and discussing why nineteenth century female writers used male pen names. During our literature review we realized that there is a need for more research in the field of children’s literature and gender equity. While the studies we have cited resonated for us, the research was sparse and some of what we were able to find was potentially relevant.
Teachers should be aware of language, family background, and interests of their students because students make personal connections with what they read. The results from our research provide evidence that when students find personal similarities with the characters and situations they encounter in literature, they are more likely to connect with these characters and understand what is being taught in the stories they populate. We feel that it is important for teachers to know their students’ backgrounds so that they can prepare lessons that can make personal connections with all of the students in their class.

Teachers need to be aware of peer pressure in their classrooms. In our experience, there are always leaders and followers within classrooms, but it is important to allow all voices within a classroom to be heard. In terms of the characters chosen by students during our study, it was possible that peer pressure from the dominant students may have had an influence on the choices of the less vocal group of students. In order to prevent peer pressure from affecting which character students chose, we could have asked students to listen to the stories individually at a listening centre, then let them make their choice, without having heard what their peers thought of the stories.

Action research both opens up research possibilities and creates research challenges. Having more boys in the class may have shaped the results of this study because the boys’ voices were more dominant, but the realities of today’s classrooms do not reflect neat sample sizes or characteristics. Action research provides us with rich opportunities to examine what is happening in the world in which we function, and how different variables play out in real-life situations.

Action research also allowed us to examine the class more closely than we could have in a regular day, and after listening to the tapes and reading transcripts of class discussions, we were able to notice interesting patterns like the degree to which three students dominated classroom discussions.

In reading our results, a final cautionary note must be sounded. The small size of the group may have had an impact on the results of our research and we wonder if we can generalize our results having surveyed only eighteen students. The results of other similar studies can help to solidify or challenge our results.

Our objective was to investigate which characters children identified with in a story. We believe that children’s perceptions, behaviour, and attitudes are influenced by the characters they see and read about in picture books. It is very important to present gender-equitable literature that promotes a variety of characteristics for both male and female characters because gender stereotypic thinking may limit children’s interests and choices. Educators, publishers, and parents must be more aware of the effects literature has on children. We believe the results from this study will promote greater awareness of our students’ preferences and perceptions when reading and also raise our awareness of the literature we use in our classrooms.

In order to diminish gender stereotypes, we believe that it is important to create a wider, more equitable view of the world for our students than the one that has been portrayed in the past by biased textbooks and the predominance of strong male characters in stories. Children begin to formulate their values and beliefs early in their lives. Giving young people access to a variety of role models that they can emulate may allow them to see, and therefore have, more opportunities during their lives. We believe that it is important to reach children at a young age when their perceptions of gender roles and stereotypes are in their formative stages, allowing young children to experience a wide range of literatures, including stories about male and female characters who display a variety of characteristics.

One Year Later (Susan’s reflections)

Doing action research in my classroom raised my awareness of gender issues. As a result, I see gender biases in the words and actions that play out in my classroom more clearly now. For example, when I read to my students, I pay closer attention to what they say characters should or should not do, based upon their gender. One boy told me that a princess couldn’t save a prince. When he saw that scenario in a story, he exclaimed, “It should be the other way around; the prince rescues the princess!” Of course we discussed the likelihood of the situation and found out that most students believed it was possible for a princess to be a heroine. I also have heightened awareness of the language used in books. Recently, when reading Robert Munsch’s Fire Station, I changed the word “fireman” to “firefighter” as I read the book to the class and explained to my students that women can be firefighters too.
I regularly ask students to pretend that they are the characters in stories, and now, after having done this research, I am not surprised when I see that girls are more willing than boys to position themselves as a character of the opposite sex. As I continue to explore gender issues with my students, both boys and girls seem to be growing more accepting of characters that do not follow the typical or traditional roles for males and females. After discussing what male and female characters can do, students usually all agree, “They can do anything.” I believe that with more of these types of discussions, students will grow to be more accepting of characters and people in their lives when they do not strictly adhere to traditional roles.

Being able to listen to the tapes of student discussions afterward also allowed me to analyze the group dynamics in my class. It was only then that I realized how much discussion time the three most vocal boys claimed, and how they repeatedly dominated class discussions. One day I presented the class with some of the results of our survey. I cut a 100 cm strip of paper in segments to represent the percentage of comments made by each of the three vocal boys, the remainder of the boys, and all of the girls. The class was quite shocked with the visual image. Afterwards, I took steps to ensure that all students had a share of time to speak during discussions.

Participating in action research in my classroom was the richest form of professional development that I have experienced so far in my teaching career. It has given me the opportunity and time to examine, study, and reflect upon my own teaching practices. Investigating these teaching practices has shed light on aspects of my teaching that I took for granted, bringing them more fully into my consciousness. Because I participated in action research, I realize more fully how important it is to make a deliberate effort to create a more equitable environment for all students, a realization I will weave into all my future teaching practices.

References


Books Used in the Classroom


**About the Authors**

Susan Pinsonneault began her teaching career in Windsor, Ontario in 1991 and moved to Vancouver in 1994. She has been teaching for eight years at the primary level and is presently teaching Grade 1 at Sir Alexander Mackenzie Elementary School in Vancouver. Susan has a Masters of Education from UBC and is currently researching constructivism.

Kara Malhi completed her Masters of Education from the University of British Columbia in December 2002. She is presently on leave from the Vancouver School Board where she worked as a resource teacher. She is currently teaching Grade 3 at Sunshine Hills Elementary School in North Delta.