“He Swings On Buildings…That’s Why He’s My Role Model”

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Roberta Bondar, Gandhi, Moses, Winston Churchill, Emily Carr, Thomas Edison, Bill Gates, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Golda Meir, Hayley Wickenheiser, Mohammed, Mother Teresa, Nelly McClung, Wayne Gretzky, Joan of Arc, Marc Garneau, Harry Jerome, Roger Bannister, Amelia Earhart, Silken Laumann, John Glenn, Rick Hansen, Anne Frank, Helen Keller, Plato, King Arthur, Terry Fox...

The above characters, either real or mythological, are examples of heroes who have influenced not only the citizens of previous times, but also all who have heard their stories. It is a consistent human trait to remember the exemplary people who walked before us and are amongst us today. We learn from these role models to determine what is right, honourable, and just in our world. This process of discovery is essential to the development of contributing citizens of society (Assibey-Mensah, 1997; Benes & Steinbrink, 1998). According to Benes and Steinbrink (1998) “analyzing the lives of mortal heroes sets the stage for powerful discussion about the basic heroic qualities: sincerity, strength/courage, insight, principled leadership and, perhaps the most important, great ability” (paragraph 11). The potential value of integrating role models into the pedagogy of the modern classroom is the underpinning of this research.

We all have role models, those we look up to and want to be like. As children, we may have wanted to be firefighters, truck drivers, mothers, or teachers. When we came into contact with other external influences such as books, television, movies, or the music industry, our choices may have gravitated to heroes more fanciful such as Peter Pan, Sailor Moon, or Britney Spears. Adolescence introduced a variety of choices as our world expanded. Sports heroes, rock stars, historical figures, captains of industry, and political leaders became the new order in potential heroes. According to French and Pena (1991),

Heroes exert profound influence on individuals and even entire civilizations. For children, heroes, with their accompanying myths and legends, are part of the material from which their dreams and dramas are derived. Playing out these hero themes is one of the ways in which children come to understand their society and their own role within that society (8).

As educators, the process of how students choose their role models is of great interest to us. Foremost, knowing who our students wish to emulate helps to bring us into their world. It gives us insights into their dreams and desires for the future. Armed with this knowledge, it becomes possible to develop curriculum based on student’s interests, thereby giving students a sense of self-importance and worth. According to Grumet (1996), “Our relationships to the world are rooted in our relationships to the people who care for us. Their interest in us is necessary to our capacity to be interested in the world that interests them” (19).

Can we guide our students and assist them with choices that will enable them to live successfully in our present day society? Can we expose them to a wider variety of role models gathered from the past, present, and sources of literature? How might our own roles as educators influence children’s
choices of role models? However, before we can look at these questions, we must first ask the obvious, “Who do our children choose as role models and what are the influencing factors on that choice?”

**Definitions of Role Models**

Our research group determined that there is not merely one definition of a role model. Solomon (1997) defines role models as, “People with whom respondents could identify, and whose achievement, lifestyles, philosophies, and/or values had a positive impact on their self-esteem and aspirations in life.” (399).

Whereas Gibson and Cordova’s (1999) work with male’s and female’s role models further defines role models as “constructs created by observers based on the attitudes and values, outcomes or achievements, or interpersonal or process skills of single or multiple models with whom the observer seeks to enhance similarity based on his or her ideals, goals, and needs” (123).

Zirkel (2002) defines a role model as a person who students knew, a person who was the same race and gender, and a person who was noted by the students as doing something on the student’s personal list of possible career goals. It was noted that the students believed a role model was a person they most wished they could be more like (Zirkel, 2002). This definition emphasizes race and gender more than do the definitions of other researchers.

In an article by Assibey-Mensah (1997), the students in his study felt a role model was a popular figure in sports or show business. Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) broaden their understanding of the definition by examining the child’s social and emotional development. They write:

> As children shape their behavior and values, they may look to heroes and role models for guidance. They may identify the role models they wish to emulate based on possession of certain skills or attributes. While the child may not want to be exactly like the person, he or she may see possibilities in that person (161).

Several articles use the term heroes and role models interchangeably. For example, Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) say role models may be attributed to known people (i.e. parents, teachers), while “heroes are defined as figures who may be less attainable or larger than life” (Anderson, 2002, 161). Bromnick and Swallow (1999) use the terms heroes and role models most frequently, but also use “mentor” and “admired adults” in their research. Regardless of which term is used, the underlying intent is synonymous.

Assibey-Mensah (1997) states that students need to have a good understanding of the term, role model, before a study is commenced. We felt it was pertinent to devise our own definition of a role model so that our students, ranging from ages five to fifteen, understood the meaning of the word. Our definition, which we worded to be child-friendly, is that a role model is a person someone looks up to, the type of person he or she wants to be now, and the type of person he or she wants to become.

We believe our meaning incorporates several of the definitions we have found throughout the
Factors Influencing Children as They Consider Role Models

1) Entertainment

We live in a society in which children are barraged with a constant stream of entertainment, whether it comes from the radio, television, or computers (Signorielli, 2001). French and Pena (1991) postulated that while children four to six years of age still look to familiar people and occupations for their role models, older children have increasingly chosen their heroes from the realm of fantasy figures depicted on TV, videos, and comics. Educational programs, such as Mr. Rogers, Arthur, and Sesame Street, depict characters using problem solving skills available to all children including, talking it out, asking an adult for help, seeing the other person’s point of view, taking responsibility, tolerance, and embracing the diversity of others. The characters in educational television show growth and understanding with each experience; violence is not acceptable behaviour. Furthermore, women and men are depicted in a variety of roles, both professional and personal. They are often portrayed in gender-neutral roles in which both parents equally participate in the workplace and the home. It is not uncommon to find stay-at-home dads, or mothers running corporations on many of the educational shows on television today.

However, these shows co-exist with other kinds of programs that depict violence and negative images where magical powers and brute force are used as conflict resolution tools. Erickson (1980) (cited in Gash and Conway, 1997) asserts, “since television’s arrival, Irish and American cultures have entered an era where children’s exposure to a multiplicity of often conflicting role models has increased dramatically” (350). According to Signorielli (2001), “female characters were also more likely than male characters to be portrayed in traditional stereotypes such as being more emotional, romantic, affectionate and domestic” (347).

In contrast, “male characters are presented as more intelligent, more technical, more aggressive, and as asking and answering more questions but bragging less … male characters typically have recognizable jobs, whereas the females are often cast as caregivers” (347).

Today’s superheroes often share similar traits with their adversaries and “the lines between good and evil have blurred, both the hero and the villain are more omnipotent, and the weapons they yield are more destructive” (French & Pena, 1991, para. 6). While the parent is still the main influencing agent on children (Anderson & Cavallara, 2002), we suspect that media has become increasingly influential on children’s choices of role models.

2) Gender

A commonly held view in Western society is that children choose same sex role models and emulate their behaviours. Bandura (1977) (cited in Gibson & Cordova, 1999) found;

… boys tend to emulate the behaviour of male models to a substantially greater extent than they emulate female models and are much less inclined to adopt behaviour regarded as gender inappropriate, regardless of the gender of the models displaying it (123).
Similarly, Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) found, across four cultures, boys “consistently chose a same gender person as someone they look up to and admire” (165). Does this gender difference translate to adults? Gibson and Cordova’s (1999) study of organizations, (law firms) found male participants identified more with male role models. In contrast, the researchers found the women participants identified with both male and female role models (131). This finding is echoed by Anderson and Cavallaro’s (2002) and Bromnick and Swallow’s (1999), articles, which found girls chose both male and female role models. Anita Allen (1994), an African-American woman, poignantly reflected on her experiences of having a lack of professional female role models. She looked to her non-African American male professors as models to emulate and imitate to achieve academic success. Allen (1994) articulated why so many girls and women choose both male and female role models, because there are more men in leadership positions.

Recent research suggests boys and men identify with male role models associated with positions of power and are likely to choose female role models only when women are viewed in power positions (Gibson & Cordova, 1999; Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). However, we must question how society, the media, and institutions (schools and governments) shape role model positions for men and women. To recognize and understand the influences of how cultures and media interact on the socialization of males and females represent a cognitive shift in changing our perspectives of what we view is normal and acceptable.

3) Culture

Do cultural influences play a part in choosing a role model? First, Solomon (2002) makes a persuasive argument that students who are culturally different (in the dominant Canadian society) identify with teachers who are also culturally different. In Solomon’s (1999) case studies of teacher candidates, they “cited their own lack of role models as a reason why they wanted to become teachers and role models” (399). Second, we believe cultural ties influence familial roles in our students’ lives, especially in the multicultural Greater Vancouver area. Stewart, Bond, Deeds, and Chung (1999) found that Asian parental roles continue to play an influential part in their children’s development into adolescence. Asian teenagers who are recent immigrants to North America tended to internalize their parents’ expectations, specifically their mothers, and this appeared “to be a key variable through which the cultural effect on (the teens) autonomy expectations is exercised” (Stewart et al., 1999, 589). Similarly, within the Indo-Canadian community, retaining and “renewing their commitment to their native culture” (Dasgupta, 1998, 954) is very important. Dasgupta (1998) found that dating and intimate relations outside the Indo-American community is discouraged by the family elders, and those “parents who did let their children date admitted to maintaining separate standards for their sons and daughters” (964).

However, other researchers found that children who are culturally different from the dominant Canadian society do not always choose role models from their own cultural group. Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) found “Asian American and Latino children tended to name media heroes who were not of their same ethnicity” (167). In Allen’s (1994) paper, she was critical of being portrayed as a role model for African American people, especially to women. Allen (1994) argued that recruitment of minority people based solely on role modeling is flawed, in that placing expectations on a cultural group may cause more stereotyping of their “cultures and identities” (194).
4) Age

As children change and develop their identities their role models change too. In French and Pena’s (1991) article they discovered young children “were noted playing dramatic roles of people they were close to and desired to model … these models were family members and other real people of the community: teachers, store clerks, firefighters, nurses, and so on” (para. 39). Older children, seem to choose role models from parents, entertainers, and professional athletes (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). Both older children and adolescents seem to choose similar role models, entertainers, sports heroes, and pop stars (Bromnick & Swallow, 1999). During this transitional period from childhood to adolescence, the role models chosen became less general and more specific. A young child might choose a singer as their role model while an adolescent would choose a specific performer such as Shania Twain or Justin Timberlake. However, we noted in Anderson and Cavallaro’s (2002) and Bromnick and Swallow’s (1999) studies the researchers found boys from early primary to high school chose male sports figures overwhelmingly as their role models.

5) Relevance of Including Role Models in the Curriculum

Assibey-Mensah (1997) indicates that role models can help students become better and more productive citizens, they can contribute to students’ self-esteem and self-worth, they can help students become more law-abiding and responsible citizens, and they can influence students to accept and pursue goals. Furthermore, “the perceptions and values often associated with role models can help mold their [students’] personal development in a society in which the problems plaguing their existence continually lead to their inability to live to their fullest human potential” (Assibey-Mensah, 1997, 243).

Bromnick and Swallow (1999), while reviewing the positive aspects of role models on children, cite a U.S. study of adolescent males convicted of juvenile homicide. The subjects consistently reported they had no positive role models or heroes. The authors assert that role models can help students achieve a sense of personal identity, which is one of the most important goals for successful development during adolescence. By having a variety of role models, children are exposed to diversity and difference. They also get affirmation “that their race and gender are worthy of representation” (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002, 168). Furthermore, in Redding’s (1997) study with deaf children he notes that role models and significant figures in children’s lives are known to have influence on identity, self-confidence, and goal attainment.

Zirkel (2002) has many arguments about the benefits of students choosing role models who are the same race and gender. If students have same gender and racial role models, this allows the students to see the possibilities they have for their futures. For example, if a female Hispanic student has a role model who is female, Hispanic, and perhaps a doctor, the student is able to see more easily the possibilities of becoming a doctor. The role models can provide valuable information to address concerns that students might have about how they fit into the larger social context and whether society has a place for them (Zirkel, 2002). Zirkel (2002) believes that role models model more than just roles—they also model specific aspects of desirable roles such as wealth, social respect, and intelligence, as well as psychological constructs such as the importance of striving towards one’s goals (360). He claims, “social scientists have long noted the importance of role models in
psychological development and in the development of young people’s goals and aspirations” (357).

While there are many benefits to having role models, it may lead to high expectations of being unrealistically perfect which can be demoralizing as one strives to be like the chosen role model (Solomon, 2002; Allen, 1994). Anderson (2001) mentions when students choose role models from television they are sometimes set up for disappointment because the characteristics of those role models are unattainable. Furthermore, Lockwood and Kunda’s (2000) research indicates the importance of attainability as well as relevance. If individuals choose role models that have similar attributes or features as their own, then the role models will be more relevant. This will result in individuals having more positive feelings because they believe they can achieve what the role models have achieved. Regarding attainability, if the role model’s success seems attainable then the individuals will be inspired because they will be able to achieve a similar level of success (Lockwood & Kunda, 2000).

Through students becoming consciously aware of role models, they will realize the importance of having role models throughout their lives. As well, it is important for students to be involved in developing the curriculum so their voices are heard.

The review of this literature has supported our initial assertion that there is a need for the inclusion of role models in the curriculum. It is our endeavour as teacher researchers to inquire about the choices children make for role models and see how we can use these findings in our daily practice. As well, we hope to make children cognitively aware of the process by which they make their identifications and choices. We leave you with the words of Solomon’s (1997) study: “… their [the children’s] lives were inspired by role models, they, in turn, are convinced they can make a difference in the lives of the next generation” (405).

**Four Site Experiences**

**The Teacher Researchers**

This research on which children choose as their role models was undertaken by four female teacher researchers working in the two largest urban school districts in the lower mainland of British Columbia, Canada. Mary is a primary specialist working in a kindergarten class. Karen is a full time teacher of a Grade Three class. Catherine is a full time computer teacher who works with students from kindergarten to Grade Seven. She worked with a Grade Seven class for two extra periods a week to conduct this research. Kim is a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing and works with students from kindergarten to Grade Twelve. As an itinerant teacher, she sees her students on an average of once or twice a week on a pullout basis.

All of the students were presented with age appropriate examples of role models in a variety of mediums. This included discussion, storybooks, and non-fiction. Age appropriate materials were chosen to illuminate the diversity of characteristics that describe role models. Students then completed a worksheet in which the students named their role model and described why they chose this person and what are the person’s characteristics. (See Figure 1)

Finally, the teacher-researcher asked a series of discussion questions, which allowed the students to talk with a small group of peers. Their responses were then scripted by the teacher-researcher.

The study was divided into three segments.

1. Each teacher developed the concept of a ‘role model’ with her students.

2. Next, the students completed an activity describing their own role models and his or her other characteristics. (See Figure 1 & 2)

3. Finally, the students met with their teacher-researcher in small groups and discussed questions pertaining to role models, the research, and how the students’ age, gender, or culture might affect their choice of role model.

Due to the differing developmental stages of our pupils, each teacher modified the lessons for her student.

We invite you to visit the different classrooms to see what emerged during the study.

**Mary – Kindergarten**

Mary’s school is centrally located in Vancouver. The school population is approximately 315 people and grades range from Kindergarten to Grade Seven. The school is situated in a working class part of the city and the students’ cultural backgrounds are diverse, for example East Indian, Tamil, Filipino, Chinese, Korean, Ismaili, First Nations, English, and Canadian, thus reflecting the multi-ethnicities of this community. The school receives funding for all day Kindergarten classes, and a lunch program.

The participants in this study consisted of nineteen all day kindergarteners, ten boys and nine girls, and between the ages of five to six years. All of the Kindergarten participants are considered to be English as a Second Language (E.S.L.) students.

The students were acquainted with a definition of a role model and in small and large groups, discussed what a role model is. Pictures and stories of role models were presented by the teacher. The students had access to various readings that portrayed possible role models. Fictional books (such as Clifford and Franklin) and non-fiction books (for example, about doctors and firefighters) were available in the classroom display and library areas. Each student was asked to depict one role model, and to write about his/her role model on a worksheet (Figure 1). During this writing activity I asked the children (to verbally tell me about and describe their role models as I wrote down their responses. In the same small groups, I asked a series of follow-up discussion questions about their role models, and recorded their responses. I adapted some of the wording of the discussion questions because most of the children had difficulties answering them.

For my analysis of the collected data, six participants were randomly chosen: three girls and three boys. I will use pseudonyms for those selected.

The three female participants had varied role models: Sally chose a figure skater, Kathy chose an astronaut, and Priya chose her mother. Fourteen role model characteristics were generated from the
responses of the three girls. They were: female, occupation, sports figure, family person, helpful, practice, good player, takes care, education/schooling, think, strong, buys things, athletic, and learning. Twelve of the characteristics had one response, two clusters of two responses (helpful and learning) and one cluster of three responses for the female characteristic.

The three male participants all chose sports figures: John and Chris both chose hockey players, and Dave chose a basketball player. Eight role model characteristics were collated from the boys’ responses. The characteristics were: male, encouragement, shares, team play, good player, practice, athletic, and include sports figures. There were five clusters of three responses for male: team play, sports figure, plays, and athletic; two clusters of two responses for encouragement, and shares; and one response each for good player and practice.

Karen – Grade Three

Karen’s school has approximately 580 students divided into 24 divisions ranging from Kindergarten to Grade Seven. The school is situated in the southeastern area of Vancouver, which is composed of various ethnic backgrounds, such as Canadian, East Indian, Pakistani, Malaysian, Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Cambodian, Sri Lankan, Filipino, and Vietnamese etc. Approximately 80% of the students at the school are English as a Second Language learners (E.S.L.) Karen’s Grade Three class consisted of twenty-three students, six boys and seventeen girls (eight and nine years of age). All of the students, except for three, are E.S.L.

Similar lessons were conducted as in Mary’s kindergarten class. I began the lessons by asking the students what they thought a role model was. We had an in depth discussion about the definition the four teacher researchers devised, so all students were very familiar with the concept of a role model. I gave the students examples of characteristics from the story, Little Red Riding Hood. I put the students into small groups and had them create a list of characteristics that role models might have. To reinforce the role model concept, I used the book “Mercedes and the Chocolate Pilot” by Margot Theis Raven. This book was chosen to illustrate to the students the pilot’s positive attributes. Another lesson used non-fiction books that depicted community workers, sports figures, musicians, religious figures, and entertainers to further develop the idea of role models. In the final lesson, the students chose their individual role models. I made the students promise not to share their choice with other students because I did not want all the girls to influence one another when choosing their role models. Each student completed an activity sheet, then I met with the small groups to discuss and record follow-up questions about the process of choosing role models.

After conducting the research in the Grade Three class, the work of three boys and three girls was selected randomly in order to analyze it in depth.

All three of the boys chose role models who are in the entertainment business. One of the boys, Thinesan, chose Spiderman as his role model. He chose this character because he is brave, friendly, a happy person, smart, cool and because he saves kids and fights bad guys. Another boy named Mandeep chose a singer named DMX as his role model. The characteristics DMX has that are important to Mandeep are genius, smart, a good person, helpful, responsible, kind, and never greedy. The last boy, Nathan decided to pick a female role model. Nathan said, “I chose a female because I want to explore different things and try things I don’t know about”. He believes Wonder Woman has
characteristics that he wants to have such as she cares for people, is honest, cheerful, tough, serious, strong, knowledgeable, helpful, and responsible.

One girl picked an entertainer and the two others chose family members. The first girl chose Lizzie McGuire who is a television character played by Hilary Duff. Harjinder wrote that Lizzie McGuire is her role model because she is kind, nice, pretty, happy, not mean to people, smart, helpful, and not greedy. The second girl, Jasdeep, selected her mom as her role model because her mom is very fair, not greedy, responsible, nice, kind, smart, friendly, and a hard worker. The last female, Ginger, chose her big sister because she is pretty, smart, has a nice voice, knowledgeable, helpful, giving, caring, honest, and hilarious.

**Catherine - Grade Seven**

Catherine and Karen work at the same elementary school in Vancouver. The school has approximately 580 students divided into 24 divisions ranging from Kindergarten to Grade Seven. The school is situated in the southeastern area of Vancouver, which is composed of various ethnic backgrounds, such as Canadian, East Indian, Pakistani, Malaysian, Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Cambodian, Sri Lankan, Filipino, and Vietnamese etc. Approximately 80% of the students at the school are English as a Second Language learners (E.S.L.) Catherine’s Grade Seven class consisted of seventeen boys and thirteen girls. Nine of the boys and three of the girls are E.S.L.

As the computer teacher in the school, I taught this class for two periods a week all year. For the research, I increased my time with this class by two to three blocks a week for a period of five weeks. The initial stage of the research involved the whole class in discussion. During this time, we developed the concept of a role model and explored the characteristics the students felt were valuable to them. The students were encouraged to elaborate upon the qualities they looked for in role models. These characteristics were listed on chart paper. I used books and pictures as examples of potential role models and the students compiled a list of people who could be role models. For the final sessions, the children were then divided into random groups of five. I presented the groups with a worksheet to complete (Figure 2). The student’s chose a role model of their own and listed characteristics to describe this person. After, they were encouraged to write a paragraph explaining why they chose this person to be a role model. While still in the small group, the children were asked a series of questions (Figure 3). I scripted their answers for further analysis.

The collected data of three girls and three boys was randomly sampled from the thirty Grade Seven students in the study.

The three boys in the study all chose professional athletes. Ajay selected Todd Bertuzzi and Jeevan chose Trevor Linden, both of the Vancouver Canucks. Kyle preferred the basketball star Michael Jordan. All three of the students listed athletic ability and being respectful as the characteristics that they valued in a role model. At least two of the students also chose the following qualities: good leader, gifted, honest, and hard worker.

Two girls in the study chose family members as their role models. Alysha chose her mom and Navpreet, her female cousins (who are in their early twenties). Shivani chose Kara Lang, a Canadian national team soccer player. Two or more of the girls listed the characteristics of good leader as;
intelligent, respectful, and honest, as the characteristics they valued the most about their role model.

**Kim – Grades 8, 9 & 10**

The portion of the study was comprised of five high school age students, two in Grade Eight, two in Grade Nine, and one in Grade Ten. The schools were situated in middle to upper-middle class neighbourhoods in Surrey. The school attended by the Grade Eight girls was predominantly made up of students from South Asia and the pupils in the other school were primarily Canadian and Asian.

The students ranged in age from twelve to fifteen years old and the gender split was four girls and one boy. Three students are hard of hearing and use hearing aids, and assistive listening devices to aid them in acquiring information in a variety of settings. One profoundly deaf student communicates through sign language and has an interpreter at school. Of the two Grade Eight girls, one has normal hearing.

The research was conducted during the students’ regular pullout sessions. As an itinerant teacher and due to the nature of the work I need to do with my students, I see them outside the classroom individually or in small groups. During the initial lesson, I introduced the definitions of role models. The students were encouraged to brainstorm the characteristics of a role model and to give examples of possible role models. I provided examples of recognized role models using books on heroes, and articles from the Internet.

The second session saw the students involved in a writing activity in which they listed the characteristics of a role model and then wrote a one-page report on their personal role model. They were asked to indicate why they chose this particular individual and to support their answer. In the final session the students were presented with a list of discussion questions regarding their choice of role models, which included “What did you learn about yourself? How valuable was this activity to you? And how could your teacher benefit by knowing your role model?” (See Figure 3).

I work with a small group of students and as such, used a purposeful sampling when choosing my participants. Four of the students are hard of hearing and one is profoundly deaf and communicates using ASL (American Sign Language). The final subject, a friend of one of the hard of hearing students, asked if she could participate.

Sam chose a recognized athlete as his role model. The characteristics he cited as being most important were: to be a hard worker, disciplined, determination, and have an ability to overcome obstacles. The remaining four girls, Farah, Eve, Sukdeep, and Mandy all chose family members as their role models. Farah chose her sister and cited: hard working, brave, intelligence, and standing up for oneself as being the most important characteristics a role model should possess. Eve chose her sister, her grandfather and her parents as her role models and found it hard to narrow her choices to one. The characteristics she chose to be most important were to be: hard working, intelligent, to believe in oneself, and to put others ahead of oneself. Sukdeep chose her mother and felt that the characteristics her mother possessed which made her a role model were to be: caring, open-minded, empathetic and to be a hard worker. Mandy chose her grandfather as her role model and cited: caring, kind, funny goal orientated, and artistic as the characteristics of a role model.

Discoveries: Gender

Many major themes, which we feel influence children’s choices of role models, arose from our research. We believe gender is a factor when our student participants chose their role models. In our research we found eleven students identified males and twelve students chose females as their role models. When we delved deeper into our findings our interest in whom the students chose was heightened. Nine boys named a “same gender person” (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002, p. 165), while ten girls chose females. Only one boy chose a female, and three girls identified males. Seven boys named professional male sport figures, athletes or teams, and only two girls chose female athletes. Family members were mentioned prominently: seven girls chose mothers, sisters, or cousins (females), two girls chose their grandfathers. One male entertainer (singer) was chosen by a boy, as well, a girl chose a female singer/actress. Two boys chose superheroes (fantasy), however, one boy chose Spiderman and the other boy chose Wonder Woman. Lastly, one girl chose an occupation (astronaut).

In analyzing our findings, attributes used to describe male and female role models were distinct and gender related. Boys used definitive terms, such as: athletic, strong, fight, leadership, brave, smart, hard worker, and tough to describe their male role models. One example was a Grade Seven boy who described his hockey role model, Trevor Linden, as having “great leadership.” However, Nathan, who chose a female superhero, described her as “…tough … protects the land … and she is strong.”

Our discovery echoes the sentiment in Anderson and Caballero’s (2002) article that boys tend to emulate same sex models, but will choose a female model when she displays male characteristics. In contrast, the girls presented their female role models in descriptors such as being: kind, nice, helping, smart, pretty, having a nice voice, happy, and funny. Praia, a kindergartener, said her “… mum takes care of me. She helps me and family people.” One Grade Seven student, Alyssa, described her mother in this way: “(she) makes me feel better after I have been emotionally hurt.”

In our research, we found the thirteen girl respondents identified both female (77%) and male (30%) role models. Only one boy chose a female role model. These features are consistent to the findings in Anderson and Cavallaro’s (2002), Bromnick and Swallow’s (1999), and Gibson and Cordova’s (1999) articles, where females chose male and female role models, and the male participates rarely chose a female role model. Bromnick and Swallow (1999) clearly state, “it appeared acceptable for the young women to admire a man, but not vice versa” (para. 31).

Most of the literature we have reviewed pertaining to role models indicates it is not very common for boys to choose females. Usually, males tend to choose females when the females are in positions of power (Anderson & Cavallaro, 2002). It could be argued that Wonder Woman is a woman with power. Furthermore, when opposite sex models are chosen, girls tend to choose them more than boys probably because boys are more rigidly sex-typed than girls (Anderson, 2001). This point was articulated vividly when the teacher researcher asked the Grade Three students if they could pick a role model of the opposite sex and most said yes. One girl said, “I couldn’t think of a male role model right now.” One of the boys said, “I would never ever pick a female.” Another boy commented, “I was going to pick a female, but people would laugh at me. All the boys picked boys so they would laugh at me.” The boy who did choose a female placed his hand on his paper to cover
up the name of his role model so his peers would not see. These examples illustrate that gender, as well as peer pressure, play a part in who students’ role models are or at least who they tell us their role models are.

**Entertainment**

Entertainment was another theme that emerged after analyzing the data. Anderson and Cavallaro (2002) found “that 34% of the children named their parents as role models and heroes…the next highest category (20%) was entertainers” (166). Bromnick and Swallow’s (1999) research also indicated that role models from mass media and entertainment become more popular, especially as children begin to widen their horizons beyond the family.

Anderson’s study (2001) found, in a survey of teenagers, that boys chose media figures more often than girls partly because there are more males on television. We found this to be true when we examined the choices of the Grade Three boys. Potter (1986) (cited in Anderson, 2001) postulated reasons children pick entertainers as role models:

> because children do not have much experience with the real world, television can often serve as an ‘early window’ on the world. Moreover, those who believe that television is an accurate representation of reality are more likely to identify with its characters and subsequently to choose these media figures as role models (109).

Anderson (2001) also found that mass media becomes increasingly important as kids get older because it is a place where they learn to emulate values and behaviour. In fact, many adolescents identify with entertainers and compare themselves to them (Anderson, 2001).

We found a cluster of four Grade Three students who chose role models from the entertainment field. Harjinder, a female student, chose Lizzie McGuire as her role model because “she is kind and nice and she is so, so pretty!” This character, portrayed by the actress Hilary Duff, is the protagonist of a popular children’s TV show aptly named Lizzie McGuire. We believe the female participant was able to identify Hilary Duff as being inter-changeable with the character she plays. Duff has launched her own clothing line, has been in movies, and sings.

> “Spins a web any size … look out, here comes Spiderman” (theme from Spiderman television cartoon series). While girls have been inundated with images of Lizzie McGuire, boys have been captured in Spiderman’s web. As a result of the movie Spiderman, and good marketing techniques, ranging from red t-shirts to school backpacks, we find it is not surprising boys consider Spiderman as a role model. A Grade Three boy said, “Spiderman is my role model because he is brave and he fights bad guys.”

If characters from television and movies seem to be popular role models, so are musicians. One boy picked DMX, a rapper he has seen on television and in video games. Mandeep explained, “I like his songs because they are so cool.” When we, the teacher researchers did an Internet search for some DMX songs, many contained profane lyrics, such as “Let’s set this shit off” and “Fuck y’all niggaz.”

In our opinion, this is not an ideal role model for an eight-year-old child. He may hear swearing from other sources, but the fact that his role model uses this language regularly in his songs might make it
seem acceptable to Mandeep. It is surprising to us that a child of this age somehow gained access to such an age inappropriate style of music. As a result of us knowing our students, we can help them recognize role models that are perhaps more suitable.

Our younger and less mature students tended to base their choice of role model on a person or occupation they would like to become when they grow up. The older and more mature students, on the other hand, chose role models for their achievements, skill level, or perceived characteristics. The next stage of development shows the ability to analyze the potential role models’ characteristics and actions. This growth is exhibited in the results of our students, who chose athletes. The kindergarten boys selected two hockey players and a basketball player. All three boys expressed their enjoyment in playing these games. For example, Chris claimed he “wants to be a hockey player.” Sally also chose a sport based on her own experience (figure skating), and recognized the need to practice her sport.

The studies of Anderson and Cavallaro (2002), Bromnick and Swallow (1999) noted large clusters of boys choosing athletes as their role models. Seven boys and two girls chose athletes as role models for our study. This represents 39% of the role models in our study. Sam, in high school, picked Alan Iverson, a NBA basketball player. Sam based his choice on the skills of Iverson as well as the adversity the player had experienced before his success in the professional sports arena. The Grade Seven boys in the study clearly stated they would personally only consider a person as a role model if the person had athletic ability or appeared to be physically fit. The individual did not have to be a professional athlete, but needed to have the physicality of an athlete. Kyle said, “A role model doesn’t have to be an athlete, but I would only choose one.” Shivani is a Grade Seven student and involved in many team sports, including soccer. She chose Kara Lang of the Canadian National Women’s Soccer Team as her role model. Shivani chose this role model on her skill, commitment, and “using her gift given from God.” Lang is not a celebrity athlete. She is not high profile in the media nor is women’s soccer. In contrast, the other students selected well-known, celebrity athletes. These athletes are not only successful in their sport, but also in the marketing and salary aspects of the male dominated sports industry.

We witnessed the ability of a Grade Seven student to analyze events and change his perspective based on a specific incident. Ajay chose Todd Bertuzzi, of the Vancouver Canucks, as his role model. A few of the reasons Ajay gave for picking Bertuzzi are: “When he is on ice he is amazing and really brave because every game he hits players a lot and body checks them” and “He gets respect from his team but not from other teams.” Shortly after Ajay completed his worksheet and discussed his choice in the small group, Todd Bertuzzi checked a player from behind and caused a serious and possibly career ending injury. One researcher asked Ajay how he felt and if it affected his admiration of the hockey player. He replied, “I’m really disappointed. I don’t know if he’ll still be my role model. What he (Bertuzzi) does in the future will make up my mind.” Ajay showed the maturity to weigh his values against the actions of his role model. The severity of the incident seemed to have changed Ajay’s perspective. He was once proud of the strength and aggression of the hockey player, now he is unsure whether Bertuzzi will remain his role model, as he does not want to align himself with this extreme show of aggression.
Culture

One of the emerging themes that arose from the research was the effect of culture on a child’s choice of role models. We found the older the students, the more likely they were to choose a family member as their role model, especially for the girls. How does this relate to culture? The subjects in our study were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. However, the girls who chose family members as their role models were predominantly of East Indian, Taiwanese, and North African Muslim descent.

As teacher researchers working with East Indian students, we observed that strong cultural and family ties exist for them. Six of the female subjects chose family members as their role models. Most identified their mothers, but Gurdave, a high school student, deviated from the others by choosing her grandfather. Initially, she wanted to choose an entertainer, which is consistent with younger children as was seen with the Grade Three subjects. Her views later conformed to those of her female peers, as evidenced in her statement, that “I learned that I thought a person had to be a singer or a dancer to be a role model and then I looked at my grandfather and realized he had all the characteristics I admired.” Gurdave is East Indian and in this culture, close-knit families with many generations living under one roof are the norm. As well, it is common for the whole family including the very young to be included at all social gatherings. “Due to this kind of socialization, the children internalize the values of the parents at an early age and, thus, learn to behave in accordance with the ethos of the family. They also feel they owe a debt of gratitude to their parents” (Basit, 1997, 426).

Eve, one of the five Asian student participants born in Taiwan, chose her parents, her sister, and her grandfather as her role models. Even though the students had been asked to pick only one role model, she felt strongly that all three deserved mentioning. In a study of Asian and Caucasian mothers and teenagers with regards to value expectations and autonomy issues, Stewart et al. (1999) found that “an individual’s value priorities are heavily influenced by the dominant ideologies of a culture” (577) and that while collective societies, such as Asia and South Asia embraced interdependence, Caucasian societies valued autonomy.

Farah belongs to a close-knit Muslim family. She chose her eighteen-year-old sister as her role model citing her sister’s popularity, intelligence, and determination as the reasons for her choice.

It must be noted that none of the boys, regardless of culture, chose family members as role models. Young boys tend to gravitate to superheroes or sports figures when choosing role models. This could be due to the fact that in some cultures, especially in the South Asian community, young males are more autonomous and given more latitude than females of the same age. Boys have more freedom, more access to the outside world and therefore more experiences while the girls seem to be more sheltered (Basit, 1997; Dasgupta, 1998).

In contrast, girls have more familial and cultural expectations placed upon them. Muslim girls rarely adopt western practices such as going out unchaperoned, dating, wearing suggestive clothing or engaging in pre-marital sex (Basit, 1997). Mani (1992) (cited in Dasgupta, 1998) argues “women, meanwhile, are quite frequently policed with the stick of tradition: it is women who are called on to preserve the ways of the old country” (964).
One cultural aspect that needs to be mentioned is that four of the subjects are deaf or hard of hearing. Significantly, none of them chose a deaf role model. This contradicts Hill’s (1993) assertion that deaf children need deaf role models. The profoundly deaf boy chose an athlete, whose main characteristics are determination and drive. One possible reason is that Sam attends a hearing school, achieves good grades, excels in sports, is popular, and feels more affiliated with the hearing world. The only thing he cannot do is hear, which has not impeded his progress. Sam’s choice of role models is consistent with other boys his age and, clearly, he associates with the hearing world as opposed to the deaf culture.

**Implications**

> Young boys on the street play a game of pick-up hockey, each one donning the guise of his favourite player. For those sixty minutes, with every bang on pass, blistering slap shot, and amazing save, each player becomes the Gretzky, Hayley Wickenheiser, and Rocket Richard of their dreams...

We believe hero worship has been a part of the human psyche since time began. It is in our nature to look up to others, covet what they have, to want to be like them. The desire to imagine ourselves in the roles of imaginary and real heroes begins in childhood and carries on as we supplant our childhood heroes with mentors and those we admire. Today, not only do we have the past from which to choose our heroes; we have the here and now, the future and that which we find on television, movies, videos, and Internet.

These experiences have implications for teachers and the children we see on a daily basis. We are a part of our students’ lives and as such are instrumental in their moral development as well as their academic successes. We can deliver lessons on the heroic attributes we see as positive, such as: strength, determination, loyalty, honesty, and kindness (to name a few). We can examine the lives of people who possess these characteristics and provide our students with positive role models after which to pattern their lives. As well, we can help our children develop higher-level cognitive skills, such as analyzing, comparing, contrasting, and evaluating, when examining the lives of potential role models.

Many programs in our schools today are based on a reactionary response to social problems such as bullying, child abuse, the dangers of smoking, peer pressure, and racism. At times this list of social ills seems endless. We would like to see a shift in thinking, which encompasses the rationale for these programs, but focuses teaching positive and affirmative lessons as opposed to ones based on deficits and problems (Luckner & Stewart, 2003). One thought, for example, would be to incorporate the bully prevention program with the teaching of positive role models. In our minds they go hand in hand. We can teach children what to look for in their heroes enabling them to become heroes to others. Lehman (1928) (cited in Benes and Steinbrink, 1998) states;

> the notion that everyone has the potential to become a hero should be a central theme in any classroom discussion on heroes: the flip side, however, is that most people never rise to the challenge—or they are incapable of heroic acts, or they make mediocre choices. (para. 11).
Children need to understand they have the power to choose their path. Direct teaching about positive role models “allow students to recognize heroic people and actions and then to go one step beyond: to explore their own characters and behaviours for signs of courage, leadership, and sincerity” (Benes & Steinbrink, 1998, para. 2). Educators should be encouraged to include lessons on role models in their curriculum. As well, society has a role in providing positive role models for its children taken from a wide variety of sources.

A person may have a multitude of heroes reflecting their diversity or they may only have one coveted role model. Some role models will be forgotten over time; others last through the centuries. They inspire, encourage and at times, devastate. We leave you with an 8-year-old’s explanation of his role model.

Spiderman is my role model because he is brave. And he fights bad guys. I want to be like him because he is friendly. He is a happy person to me. And he is really kind to people. And he is smart so bad guys can’t find him. And Spiderman is really cool. He is a good friend to people and a good person to people and he is nice. He swings on buildings … that’s why he is my role model.

In the future, Thinesan may swing from buildings. Sam might become a professional basketball player. Eve could follow in her grandfather’s footsteps and do great things thereby inspiring those who follow her. And Shivani may one day be Kara Lang’s teammate on the Olympic team. Who’s to say? If we encourage our students to dream and be inspired by those they admire, their potential is endless.

Reflections one year later…

When the study of students’ role models began, we did not know what to expect from our action research. It was exciting, challenging and gratifying, working in a quarter. Action research is important and valuable in that it provided flexibility within our group to do research in our classes, itinerant class, or with small groups. However, gathering and putting our research from theory into practice demanded constant energy and concentration from everyone.

In the initial stages of our research project, we talked about bullying and the relevance of this topic in our schools and society as a whole. After numerous late nights over pots of tea and Timbits, this topic eventually morphed into a discussion of how a child picks role models and whether these choices are influenced by the age, gender, or culture of the child.

We have realized our time spent on this subject was worthwhile. It has become second nature for us to include role models into our conversations with students and with other teachers (when they let us).

We continue to be aware of the need for positive role models and we are more cognizant of incorporating role models into the curriculum. Whether it is in an elementary classroom, a computer classroom or working with deaf and hard of hearing students in high school, we find teachable moments to include role models.
About the Authors

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