The Appearance of Gender in Award-winning Children's Books

By Maureen Archer

Gender is the first label that a person gets in their life. Not a second after they are born are they categorized as male or female. They do not know it, but this label will follow them and style their actions and beliefs throughout their lives. Children's books are the main topic that the author discussed in his article, specifically those that won a Caldecott medal.

Sexism has become a problem in children's literature according to Anne Drolett Creany, the author of this article. She looked at a variety of children's books, which are geared to the age where children really define their gender identity, and found a few problems. She found that in most stories from the sixties there were three boys to every girl. Also, the majority of girls that were in the stories were wearing aprons and role playing the stereotypical roles of women such as a homemaker, nurse, or teacher. They were also quick to help the males in the stories, as if the role of a female is only to assist the male.

The stories did get a little better in the 80s and 90s. The males still out-numbered the females, but only slightly. Female characters also started to become independent figures and grow out of the traditional roles that dominated them in the 50s and 60s. Though many of the books switched gears, Creany still found that many of the Caldecott medal books still focused on a male main character and gave the females an insignificant part.

The article shows an important point, that children are learning about these roles and attempting to define themselves at this time in their lives. If their books give them an incorrect idea of the roles then they will not fully develop into the individual they could be.

Children, Television and Gender Roles

This article, written by Elena Beasley, discusses the impact that television shows have on society. Television presents a particular image to the public and that image is absorbed and thought to be the way that people are supposed to look, talk, and act in real life. Unfortunately the television is not as good of a role model as we think and it showcases people doing things and acting and looking certain ways that are unattainable, or unrespectable in society.

As in the last article, Beasley found that male characters outnumber the female leads 3:1. She proposes that children have significantly shorter attention spans and that they enjoy commercials because they are shorter. The commercials do not depict women in a very positive light. They are typically shown as a housewife or a nurse, and very much so dependent on a male. Children are absorbing that information, and though there is nothing wrong with those careers for women, there is a problem with the negative undertone that the commercials showcase. Children see this and think that it is how they are to act, and they emulate these behaviors and act stereotypically.

The article goes through many different studies that have been done on this topic. They touch on a lot of the same ideas, but one thing that most of them seem to be missing is that the family also influences a child and their actions. Parents are the primary role models for young children and young girls want to grow up to be just like their mommy just as young boys want to be their dad.
Television promotes a "distorted view of society" and teaches children ideas and attitudes that are not appropriate for real life.

**Gender Equity & Visual Literacy: Schools Can Help Change Perceptions**

Richard A. Couch wrote this article and it focuses on how schools can help to promote equality and change the ideas that a lot of students have in their heads. Women are still outnumbered by males in the workforce and still make less money for the same amount of work. African American women, or any woman of color for that matter, have an even worse disadvantage because they have two barriers to overcome.

The article suggests various ideas that can help the schools close the gender gap and promote equality. Some of these ideas are to start early and get the idea of equality into the student's heads while they are still figuring gender roles and societal roles out for the first time. Another is to encourage boys and girls at an even pace. Tell each of them about the different careers available, not just the ones that are stereotypical of their sex.

Girls are greatly outnumbered in high school science and math courses. Those are typically "boy" classes while more creative art and language arts classes are dominantly filled up with girls. A good way to break through this barrier is to include males and females in the lessons that the teachers present. For instance, the article suggested that when explaining a math problem use a female in the example instead of a male. Another good idea was to use female role models who have made it in non-traditional careers to come in and discuss them with young women who could want to do that with their own lives.

Another topic that Couch presented was that in children's books they create characters who are so beautiful and handsome that children believe they can never live up to it. They are shown princes and princesses and want to be just like them, though they are unrealistic role models.

**Gender in Children's Literature**

Gender bias is extremely evident in children's literature. The males always outnumber the females and are seen as the rough, tough, adventurous, fighting, prince, heroic character while females are the sweet, beautiful princess, helpless, motherly, cleanly, damsel in distress. Though these roles are fun for story books they do not represent real life and give children a skewed perception on what their role should be in society.

A problem with this is that if females do not have strong characters to relate to in stories then how do they learn to become strong and independent women themselves. These stories are presented at an age where they are trying to identify with being male or female and need to discover their place in society.

The article suggests that when teachers choose the books that they will present in the classroom they should pick titles that have strong male and female characters and that represent both sexes in a bright light. Another, slightly more difficult, criteria is that they choose books that do not show either gender stereotypically, but show them doing different things and interacting.
Teachers can hold discussions about the stories or things that happened in their lives with their classes to stimulate the idea of equality. The best way for a teacher to help students create a good identity of themselves is to talk with them and find out their thoughts on things and help to shape them in a way that fits society today. Gender roles have changed significantly over the years and many of the classic stories that we read and love show the traditional mindset and if teachers do not address this and explain the changes then students could get confused and define themselves by an outdated mindset.

Disney Perpetuates Gender Stereotypes

Disney movies are extremely popular and children for generations have grown up watching and learning from the classic Disney movies like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, Pinocchio, and many more. Though the films are magical and fun they do show gender stereotypes and present an idea for young children that the roles of men and women are different than what they are in society today.

Cinderella is the example that the article uses and it could not be any more perfect to describe this situation. Cinderella is a beautiful woman who cleans her house and does all of the chores that her evil stepmother (another gender bias) tells her to do. She is dependent on finding a man to come and sweep her off of her feet and save her from this terrible life. Prince Charming is of course the man to do it. He is handsome and everything that a girl could want in a guy. He is nothing short of perfect.

Cinderella is forced to rely on a man to help her have a good life, even though she is smart, determined, and a wonderful girl, she cannot break out of her stereotypical lifestyle. The evil stepmother is a character that Disney likes to use often. The woman is typically the villain: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 101 Dalmatians, Cinderella, ect. Women are constantly portrayed as helpless creatures who ly around waiting for a man to save them from whatever predicament they got themselves into. Children need to learn that girls can be heroes and boys can help around the house. If children learn the modern roles when they are young then they will define themselves by those values and grow into adults who have the confidence and mindset to have a career in anything they want and to break out of the traditional stereotypical gender roles from our past.

My Two Cents

I think that gender stereotypes are a problem that society faces often. It is difficult for children, and even teenagers, and young adults, to come to terms with the differences between males and females. We are exposed to so many things in our lives that shape the way we think and act that a lot of the time we do not even realize the impact most of those things have on us.

I think it is important to teach children the modern principles of the differences of gender. Being a young woman I think it is very important for young girls to embrace the female inside of them and learn the roles that we play in society. It is important for them to be able to see what women have accomplished and all of the barriers that we have overcome in the last 50, and even 20 years.
It is also important for young boys to realize their roles in society and for boys and girls to respect the differences in the roles and each other. One of the articles talked about having less competition in the classroom and I think that is an important point because boys are genetically better at some things while girls are better at others. If there is a competitive tone to the classroom then students who are struggling will see themselves as inferior to those of the other sex who are accelerating and doing well. I think it is important for students to feel that boys and girls are equals and not discriminate between the two.

The media was touched on in most of the articles that I summarized for this paper. One discussed television and its effects on children's perceptions of gender and the stereotypes that they are exposed to at young ages. These images are put into their heads, and though they might hibernate for a few more years, they are still dominating ideas that create problems for them later in life. For instance, the models that they use in commercials, which one of the articles said young children learn the most from, are so "perfect" that no normal person could ever live up to that. These ideas are planted in a child's head when they are so young that they think it is normal for people to look like that.

Disney movies were the topic of another article and I agree and disagree with the points that they made. It is true that they make the characters beautiful and that the female character is always the damsel in distress waiting for her handsome heroic prince to save her from her awful life which falls perfectly into the stereotypical gender roles from the 50s and 60s that we are still trying to break down. Though Cinderella, the example movie, was made at a time when these roles were dominant, even newer Disney movies like Hercules and The Incredibles put their characters into the traditional stereotypical gender roles.

For most of the literature and media that we see today it is still predominantly males that are the main characters. That is one thing that I think was so breakthrough with HBO's show Sex and the City. Though the theme was a little risqué the show was still about four women. They were the main characters and there was a role reversal from the traditional mindset because these women had the power and the men in the show were just guests in their lives. There are also many children's books that have come out in the last ten years that have a female as the main character.

I think it is important for boys and girls to have strong role models, whether it be their parents, a favorite character from a story, or from the movies and television. They need to have a modern idea of the roles that males and females play in society and grow into people who will achieve those roles as strong and independent individuals.

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