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Just what influence does children's literature, sexist or not, have upon socialization of children?

# Teachers' Read-Aloud Preferences: Perpetuating Sex-Role Stereotypes

by Nancy J. Smith, M. Jean Greenlaw and Carolyn Scott

A major goal of reading programs is to prepare readers who not only can read but who do read. One recommended strategy that facilitates learners' ability to read, as well as the choice to read, is the teacher reading aloud to them. Teachers realize the role this can have in developing students' schemata. Vocabulary is enhanced, concepts are broadened, and a model of fluency is presented. It can influence students' decisions to read by introducing them to interesting and exciting literature and by creating positive, pleasurable associations for the act of reading and for books.

These listeners are also learning some other lessons from the teachers' selections of read-aloud material that are part of the hidden curriculum. Without ever directly stating what is important, interesting, valued, or acceptable, those messages are sent to children indirectly by the content in the books that teachers choose to read aloud to them. A study of Kansas and Texas teachers' read-aloud choices reported in this article indicates a very strong message is being sent to boys and girls about what is important, interesting, valued, and acceptable in terms of sex roles. This message seems to be part of a sexist curriculum that is inserting sex-bias into the socialization process of young people.

Just what influence does children's literature, sexist or not, have upon the socialization of children? The term socialization is used to identify the process by which a person slowly develops a set of values and attitudes, likes and dis-

likes, goals and purposes, patterns of response and concept of self. This image of self is arrived at through a gradual, complicated process which continues throughout life. It takes place largely through the learning of a role which consists of the three aspects: duties, status, and temperament (Racism and Sexism Center for Educators, 1976).

The importance of books as potential socializing agents has been attested to by numerous researchers (Weitzman, et al, 1972; Kummel, 1970; Zimet, 1968). Child, Potter, and Levine (1946) state:

It is assumed that in reading a story, a child goes through symbolically, or rehearses the episode that is being described. The same principles, then are expected to govern the effect of the reading on the child as would govern the effect of actually going through such an incident in real life (p.3).

An examination of the study of Kansas and Texas teachers' read-aloud habits conducted by the authors will demonstrate the important role this teaching strategy has in children's acquisition of attitudes towards sex roles in their socialization processes. Quantitative and qualitative aspects of teachers' read-aloud habits will be considered.

A total of 254 elementary teachers were asked to list their favorite books to read aloud to children. The teachers represent an average of 12.3 years of teaching experience with a median of three years' experience and a total of 3,119 years. The average number of times they reported reading aloud was 4.3 per week. The amount of time spent per read aloud was 20 minutes. Two mathematical manipulations with these data suggest the potential magnitude of their read-aloud selections upon children's socialization. If these teachers had average classes of 25 students for a total of 3,119 combined years, then nearly 78,000 students have been exposed to these teachers read-aloud preferences. Second, if these teachers read aloud 20 minutes 4.3 times for a school year of 36 weeks, then a child will have listened to teachers' read-aloud preferences 361 hours from kindergarten through sixth grade. It is to be hoped that any instructional experience that students engage in almost daily for 20 minutes will yield results.

In addition to improving reading ability and desire to read, this teaching practice is probably influencing the listeners' socialization process through its messages about sex roles. This message is communicated in several ways. These teachers listed 631 favorite books for reading aloud. Of the total number, 43 percent have male protagonists, 21 percent have female protagonists, 13 percent have a male and female protagonist, and the remaining percentage had a neuter protagonist or none (Table 1). This means that more than double the time the children are hearing about a male protagonist. Is a hidden message communicated by this imbalance?

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**Table 1**  
**Gender of protagonists in Selections Included in Teachers' Read-Aloud Preferences**

male	female	both	neuter or none
43	21	13	23



How do the roles depicted in the teachers' read-aloud preferences characterize people by gender? An examination of the gender characterizations in the most popular titles overall and by grade level at the primary level yields alarming results. From a simple count of the protagonists in the top ten titles listed by teachers, it can be seen that a serious imbalance exists (Table 2). Eight of the books have male protagonists, one has a female protagonist, and one has both. Worse than the quantitative imbalance is the qualitative aspect of these books. The adult women in these selections are characterized as mothers or homemakers only. Certainly it is desirable that images of women as mothers and homemakers be presented to children, but that should not be the only role that characterizes them. Of further concern, are the personalities of some of these characters. In **The Mouse and the Motorcycle**, the mothers of the boy and the mouse are somewhat neurotic as are the mothers and the grandmother in **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**. The aunts in **James and the Giant Peach** are cruel, selfish, cranky old women. In **Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh**, the mother is brave on behalf of her children, but without the assistance of the entire male animal population she could seemingly not solve a problem. Are these stereotypic female characters the images teachers should choose to present to children?

It is essential that one point be made clear. It is realistic to characterize women in these roles and with these personalities. It is the cumulative effect on children's socialization processes of having these characterizations dominate the images of women presented through teachers' read-aloud choices that is extremely problematic. The most admirable female characters in the top ten titles are animals, Charlotte and Mrs. Frisby. It must also be noted that this group includes no female protagonist of the elementary child's age for the girls to identify with and even the girl in **Charlotte's Web** has a fate similar to Jo in **Little Women**; she finally pursues the traditional, appropriate activities and interests for a young girl.

**Table 2**  
**Books Most Frequently Read Aloud**  
**K-6**

Charlotte's Web	male & female
Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing	male
The Mouse and the Motorcycle	male
James and the Giant Peach	male
Summer of the Monkeys	male
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	male
Where the Red Fern Grows	male
Where the Wild Things Are	male
Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day	male
Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh	female

Minorities are depicted only in negative images in these selections. The black savages in **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** are miniature, ignorant, happy-to-be creatures. The old people in **Charlie** are made to look ridiculous, also. People with disabilities have neither positive or negative images included in these selections; they are excluded.

A review of the preferred titles listed by primary teach-

ers produced similar results (Table 3). We separated these grade levels for review because of the importance of the years in the socialization process. The top ten kindergarten selections include eight male protagonists, one female protagonist, and one with both. The first grade top ten list includes ten male protagonists and one selection with both (lists include more than ten in case of ties). The second grade list has seven titles with male protagonists, three females, and one with both. And finally, the third grade list has selections with eight male protagonists, two with females, and two with both. The overall impact of these findings in the primary grades is that these teachers' students are more likely to hear different titles, 73 percent of which have male protagonists, 20 percent of which have female protagonists, and 7 percent of which have both male and female protagonists. Again, it is the cumulative dominance of male images that is the problem, not necessarily the appropriateness of individual titles.

**Table 3**  
**Books Most Frequently Read Aloud In the Primary**  
**Grades**

**Kindergarten**

- Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible,  
No Good, Very Bad Day
- Charlotte's Web
- Curious George
- Clown of God
- Corduroy
- The Giving Tree
- Katy No-Pocket
- Little Bear
- Snowy Day

**First Grade**

- Charlotte's Web
- Where the Wild Things Are
- Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good,  
Very Bad Day
- Curious George
- The Giving Tree
- How the Grinch Stole Christmas
- Millions of Cats
- The Night Before Christmas
- The Snowy Day
- Winnie the Pooh
- The Tale of Peter Rabbit

**Second Grade**

- Charlotte's Web
- The Mouse and the Motorcycle
- Ramona the Pest
- Where the Wild Things Are
- Amelia Bedelia
- Miss Nelson Is Missing
- Ribs
- Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
- Curious George
- Henry Huggins
- The Three Billy Goats Gruff



**Third Grade**

Charlotte's Web  
 The Mouse and the Motorcycle  
 The Little House on the Prairie  
 James and the Giant Peach  
 Charlie and the Chocolate Factory  
 Stuart Little  
 Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing  
 Boxcar Children  
 Did You Carry the Flag Today, Charlie?  
 Encyclopedia Brown  
 Ramona Quimby, Age 8  
 Henry Huggins

The message from these selections to boys and girls is that girls do not do interesting, exciting things and that only boys do. It is easy to understand why it is acceptable knowledge that girls will read what boys like, but boys will not read "girls' stories." The message further tells children that boys should be active and aggressive, not passive and reflective. This message may also be contributing to the phenomena of boys stereotyping sex roles more than girls and having more difficulty modifying their perceptions even in the light of evidence to the contrary. According to Ornstein and Levin (1982), perhaps the worst effect of sex-stereotyped curriculum materials has been to make children—especially boys—feel that sex discrimination is a natural process that everybody follows. A delightful exception to this stereotyping of boys must be mentioned. **Did You Carry the Flag Today, Charlie?** was included on the third grade list only, but it is a wonderful book to read beginning in kindergarten. Charlie is a male character allowed a fuller range of human emotions and experiences.

Additional evidence of this limited and rigid male stereotype is found in the analysis of selections listed in several references of recommended sex-fair books for children. These are books which, according to the references, show males and females in both stereotyped and non-stereotyped roles. The data in Table 4 lists the titles of five published and two unpublished sources which were checked for inclusion of any of the total 631 titles. Only 65 or 10 percent of the teachers' read-aloud preferences are included in these sources. (This does not imply that all the others are sexist.) Included in these 65 selections are 14 with male protagonists and 34 with female protagonists (Table 5). This suggests several possible interpretations.

**Table 4**  
**Bibliographies of Sex-Fair Books**

**Published**

Girls Are People Too, Newman  
 A Guide to Non-sexist Children's Books, Adell  
 and Klein  
 Books for Today's Children, Bracken and Wigutoff  
 Freestyle Reading: A Non-sexist Bibliography, Grover  
 MSDAC Resources Catalog

**Unpublished**

Sex Roles Reading List  
 An Annotated Primary Level Book List, Knight

More sex-fair books are written with female protagonists and/or it is more socially acceptable for females to be portrayed in a wider range of roles than it is for males. Either interpretation is evidence of the need to reconsider the inhibiting message presented to boys.

**Table 5**  
**Gender of the Protagonists in Selections Included in Bibliographies of Sex-Fair Books**

male	female	both	neuter
14	34	5	2

The study found that teachers in Kansas and Texas have read-aloud preferences that include twice as many books with male protagonists as female protagonists; the most popular preferences include very few female protagonists; the images of the female characters in the most popular books are narrowly defined and frequently negative; and the images of boys are positive but limited to the traditional male stereotype. The most important conclusion the authors have drawn is that teachers are probably unaware of the degree of sex-bias in their read-aloud preferences, but they are contributing to the perpetuation of sex role stereotyping that has been part of the socialization process for all of us for too long. Another concern needs to be added to the concerns for fostering children's reading growth through reading aloud. In addition to developing their reading ability and desire to read, teachers need to actively and consciously select books to read aloud that present a more balanced characterization of sex roles. A commitment to preparing every young person to be capable of determining the quality of their own lives requires that educators not inhibit them in any way based on their gender.

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