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## Examining female characters in children picture books: an international teachers' perspective

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### Abstract

Books have a great influence on children's self-esteem, behavior and thinking (Southard et al, 2014). Accordingly, when children picture books present stereotypical images of gender roles, children might be misled. Thus, the present study examines whether American males and females are equally portrayed in children's literature or not. The purpose of this research paper is to examine the Caldecott Medal and Honor winners of children books in the 1940's and the children picture books in 2000's as they could have the greatest influence on how children would perceive stereotypical issues related to gender roles. Thus, the researchers carried out a close analysis of how the characters are exhibited in those picture books based on their gender roles, and whether this perspective has changed over time. The rationale for choosing these books is that they were bestsellers that time and also because of their impact on kids. The results show that female characters were presented less and with less important and more stereotyped roles than males.

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## Introduction

Children's literature books are considered among the most significant sources that teach children concepts related to their life such as differences between males and females roles (Allen et al., 1993). According to Fox (1993), texts have an impact on us because they shape who we are as they are considered a mirror of our politics and values. Therefore, when children literature books provide children with stereotypical images of gender, children would be restricted to that image without understanding the different sex roles in their societies. Many studies on gender stereotypes came out in the 1970s due to the women's movement (Turner-Bowker, 1996). Studies conducted since the 1970s have shown that female characters were underrepresented and stereotyped. In this sense, Weitzman et al. (1972) state that "females were largely underrepresented in the titles, central roles, and illustrations. When females did appear in the books, their characterization reinforced traditional sex-role stereotypes, such as passivity and occupational limitations" (as cited in Meganck, 2010, p.5). Even though the underrepresentation of females in children's books started to shrink, the demeaning of their role is still present. Accordingly, Worland (2008) claims that "while sexism and female underrepresentation continue to decrease, they still exist" (as cited in Paynter, 2011, p.1). The importance of this study lies in the fact that the representation of gender issues in children's books mirror the social status and the image of American women. This paper underscores how women are represented in children picture books in the twentieth century, specifically from the 40's to 2000's. The research question is: are American males and females equally portrayed in children's literature when it comes to gender presentation and role?

## Review of related studies

Research has shown that there has been much more emphasis on male characters than that of females in children literature. It has been noticed through critically analyzing children's books that the roles of power and superiority are always related to male characters; while women are always associated with domestic and subordinate roles (Dionne, 2010). McCabe et al. (2011) support the same findings by saying: "Compared to females, males are represented nearly twice as often in titles and 1.6 times as often as central characters" (p.179). Women are underrepresented in every aspect in children's picture books including the titles, the illustrations and the roles, and they have traditional roles such as taking care of the house, the children, and their husbands. However, men have active roles; they are the ones who lead and save others, and women are just followers of them (Weitzman et al., 1972).

According to Clark et al.'s (2003) study, in which they carefully examined the Caldecott winners children's picture books through different decades from the 1930's to 1960's, "Female characters in Caldecott winners and runners-up have become increasingly visible and gender stereotyping has become decreasingly evident" (p. 439). However, their findings have revealed that female characters were more visible in the late 1930s and 1950s than that of the 1940s and

the 1960s. This study adds to the findings of the previous studies that have examined the role of females in children books.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the gender schema theory, which was originated by Sandra Bem in the late 1970s (Paynter, 2011). According to Bem (1981), this theory suggests that every society prescribes social roles to men and women, which they in turn expect their children to absorb these roles and be socialized with when they become adults. Thus, children learn those different social roles of men and women in their society, and then they start behaving according to what they learned about sex-typed role.

## Methodology

### Data collection

For the current project, seven children books, four from Caldecott Medal and Honor winners of children books published in the 1940s and three from 2000s, were examined and analyzed to see how female characters were represented in these children's literature books. These books are: *The little house*, *Many moons*, *White snow bright snow*, *Goodnight moon*, *Olivia*, *The problem with chicken*, and *Alice in wonderland*.

### Criteria for selection

The researchers chose to investigate Caldecott Medal and Honor winners of children books from the 1940s, since they were bestsellers in the 40s to the bestsellers from the 2000's. In addition, Caldecott winners have an extraordinary influence on children, "these books represent an elite group whose influence on authors, the industry, teachers, and parents is widespread" (McCabe et al., 2011, p. 203).

### Data analysis

Data was analyzed based on a Critical Multicultural Analysis approach (CMA), "critical multicultural analysis helps to analyze how power relations are exercised" (Botelho & Rudman YEAR, p. xiv). The reason for selecting CMA is that the researchers want to compare how female characters were represented in Caldecott Medal and Honor winners of children books in the 1940's and in the 2000's. Thus, the critical multicultural analysis is the best choice for this research because "CMA brings socioeconomic class into conversations about race, and gender, so we can better understand how these systems of oppression intersect" (Botelho & Rudman 2009, p. xiv). Accordingly, the researchers adopted the critical questions posed by Wooldridge (2001) to look at the following criteria in order to analyze their data:

1. Content: what assumptions does the text make about gender?
2. Events: what are the possible readings of the situations?

3. Characters: who is silenced and heard in the stories?
4. Illustrations: what ideological positions can you identify? Table 1 shows how the seven stories were coded.

Table 1: Coding of the data analysis

Personality traits	The little house 1942	Many moons 1943	White snow bright snow 1947	Good night moon 1947	Olivia 2000	The problem with chicken 2005	Alice in wonder-land 2008
Protagonist	0	1	0	0	1	1	1
Independent	1	0	0	0	1	1	1
Dominant	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
Active	1	0	0	0	1	1	1
Intelligent	1	0	0	0	1	1	1
Strong	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Sex object	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Competitive	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Ambitious	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
Sensitive	1	1	1	0	0	0	1

The above table shows how the analysis of data was coded in this study. The personal traits used for coding the data are adopted from Frank Taylor's (2008) study which aimed to examine gender stereotypes in children's literature books. The female traits found in each story are presented with number (1); however, if the female character does not have a trait, (0) is used to present this information. For example, Olivia is the protagonist, and she is independent, dominant, strong, active, intelligent, competitive and ambitious. All these positive adjectives are presented with (1). However, she is not sensitive and this is coded with (0).

### Children picture books of the 40s

*The little house* by Burton (1942) is about a little house that was built a long time ago by a man who wished that his grandchildren and his grand-grandchildren would come and visit this house. As a result, he made sure that the house was very well built in order to stay in a good condition for many years. The house was built in the countryside where it enjoyed nature alone away from the city. However, the house always wondered how the city would look like. After being alone for so many years, the countryside started to turn into a city where there were many houses, skyscrapers, and train stations, in addition to the cars and the automobiles and all the noise and pollution related to the city. The house became alone and sad because it did not enjoy the beauty and the tranquility of nature anymore. It continued to be sad until one great-granddaughter of the man who built it came across the house and recognized it. By then, she decided to take away from the city to the country where she thought the house would be happier. And she really did. She moved

the house to the country where it could enjoy nature and the birds' singing again.

The main focus of this story was on the house itself; however, the house was referred to as feminine, so the subject personal pronouns she and her were used to refer to the house. Since the main focus of this story is the house, there is not much focus on human characters here. There are only two characters represented: the man who built the house and his great-granddaughter. In fact, there is not much evidence from the events supporting our observation; however, it can be said that the man was just mentioned at the beginning of the story and illustrated with a picture. The great-granddaughter was mentioned three times near the end of the story, but she had a crucial role. She was the one who decided to move the house from the city to the country, and she really did that in order to make the house happy again by letting it live alone in the country and enjoy nature again. Accordingly, it can be said that even though the great-granddaughter was hardly mentioned and not a single picture of her, she was the one who thought and then decided what to do with the house, and she actually did.

*Many moons*, by Thurber (1943), talks about a little princess – Lenore – who becomes very ill – perhaps psychologically more than physically – and she wants the moon to be well again. Her father is ready to bring her whatever she wants to satisfy her and get well, so that he calls on all the wise men in his kingdom to help him get what his daughter requests. However, none of them can help him, saying that the moon is very big and far away and no one can ever get it, which made the king really angry and sad. The only one who can help the king in the palace is the jester who goes and speaks to the little princess, and from their talk he figured out that the princess sees the moon no bigger than her thumb and that it is made of gold. He asks the blacksmith to make her a moon that is no bigger than a thumb and made of gold. He then gives it to the princess, which makes her get well and very happy. However, the king is not happy because he is afraid that she will notice the moon at night and find out that the one she has is a fake one which might make her sick again. Another time, the king asks for help, but none of his wise men can do anything to hide the moon from the sight of his daughter. The jester is the one who can solve the problem for the second time as he finds out that Lenore thinks that when anything disappears or goes, another thing has to replace it like her teeth, flowers, and the unicorn horn.

There are five males shown in this story as opposed to only one female character who is the little princess Lenore. However, it could be said that all the males in the story were thinking about Lenore and how to make her happy by finding out ways to get her the moon. The king is the dominant character who is used to asking his wise men to get him whatever he requests; however, he is really busy thinking how to make his little one happy and healthy. Even though Lenore appears less than the other male characters in the story, it is for her sake that all the other men are thinking hard how to satisfy her. However, in one of the scenes when the king has a conversation with the Lord High Chamberlain, women are underrepresented. The chamberlain gave the king a list of all the things he brought to him including dancing women. In that scene, women are represented as

objects because he lists them with other nonhuman objects, and there is an illustration of two half naked women dancing for the king. It can be said that women are viewed as an entertainment object, which makes men happy, and enjoy their time as if women were just created to make men happy. All the characters that thought and tried to find ways to help the princess were males, but not a single woman in the story was shown to help in solving the problem. As if men are the only ones who can think and find out solutions for problems, but women are not wise enough to be capable of thinking and finding out solutions for any obstacles.

Tresselt's (1947) *White snow bright snow* mainly gives a beautiful description of how the snow starts to fall and cover the city, and how people react regarding that. It shows how men, women, children, and even some animals respond to that snowfall. The main characters focused on in this story are: a farmer, a postman, a policeman and his wife. It shows how those scurried to do their practical things when a snowstorm comes in contrast to the children who are so happy when it comes. Finally, the story shows how the farmer, the postman, the policeman and his wife become very happy when the snowstorm stops and the sunshine comes again.

This story represents males as the ones who go out and work; while females, although there is only one character – the policeman's wife, are the ones whose role is to stay home and take care of the house while the husband is out at work. Not just that, women here are represented as the ones who take care of the husband and serve him when he comes home tired or sick. For example, in one scene and illustration, the policeman's wife is shown in the kitchen, putting her husband's feet in a bowl of warm water and giving him medicine. Also, in another scene, she is shown sitting besides her husband's bed while he is sick, taking care of him and knitting him a sweater to protect him from the cold outside. Accordingly, women in this story are represented as followers of men who only have to take care of their husband and satisfy his needs.

Brown & Hurd's (1947) *Goodnight moon* is a bedtime children's story that describes a little bunny bedtime ritual who is saying good night to everything in his room. Why is not the gender of the little bunny in this story identified? Did the author of the story do that on purpose? However, the only female character in the book was a female rabbit. It was depicted as an old female sitting and knitting. It is obviously a stereotypical picture of females, even though the character has no role in the story.

### **Children picture books of the 2000s**

Falconer's (2000) *Olivia* talks about a female pig that is able to do everything. She is very active and does not like sleeping a lot. She loves playing out, wearing fashionable clothes, painting, and she is really interested in reading books. Every night she can read up to five books. She lives with her family: father, mother, her little brother, and a cat. Her little brother likes imitating her; however, sometimes she cannot stand him and screams to his face, so that he will get frightened and run away from her. She loves her mother

very much, and she is really obedient to her.

The main character in this story is Olivia who is shown to be a 'supergirl'. She is super because she is eager to do and try everything, and she can also do many amazing things. In fact, it can be said that a female here is presented as someone who is able to do whatever she desires without someone preventing her to do what she would like to, so Olivia likes to be independent from others. In addition, she is dominant in this story, which is not always the case for female characters. The interesting thing is that her brother – he boy – is the one who is following and tries to do what she does, so that that male here is the follower of the female, not vice versa. Finally, it can be said that Olivia is a children's story, which presents females as clever, active, dominant, and independent.

In the story *The problem with chickens* by McMillan & Gunnels (2005), some women come across different problems with the chicken they raise, but they eventually can come up with a clever solution for all those problems, and have eggs to use for baking. That implicitly suggests that women are the ones who are supposed to cook and take care of the house and that is their only role in life. However, men are not supposed to perform such duties, and the story is going to be less powerful if those women are replaced by men.

*Walt Disney's Alice in Wonderland* by Scieszka, Blair & Carroll (2008). This story is about a young girl – Alice – who follows a rabbit and enters his hole. This hole leads Alice to the wonderland where she enjoys seeing and experiencing unusual adventures. In this story, Alice is represented as a female heroine who manages to overcome all the obstacles and dangerous events she encounters in her adventures. Also, she learns to be a woman who rebels against all the ideas about marriage and female suppression, and who does not need the presence of a male hero to protect her from any danger or to love and marry. Having such a protagonist character can be inspiring and empowering for little girls' ideas about their self-image as females in their own societies.

### **Findings**

The analysis shows that there was a discrimination against female characters in the past. This aligns with Weitzman et al.'s claim (1972) that females are portrayed as passive and with few skills. As seen from the collection of stories that were analyzed in this research, in the 40s, the main characters were males. For instance, in the *Goodnight moon* by Brown & Hurd (1947), the main character is a male bunny and not a female. The only female in the story is shown as a female rabbit that just sits and knits, indicating that knitting can only be performed by women. In *White snow, bright snow* by Tresselt (1947), the female characters are the ones whose roles are to stay home and take care of the house while the husband is out at work. In addition, women are represented as the ones who take care of the husband and serve him when he comes home tired or sick. The power was given to males, meaning that females were underrepresented and even if a female was a main character, her role was limited to housekeeping, cooking and taking care of children. Male

characters are given the power as it can be seen in *Many moons*, by Thurber (1943), in which male characters were represented as smart, wise and decision makers. On the other hand, as time goes, it seems that the stereotypical image of females has decreased. This can be seen in the stories analyzed in this research paper. For example, *Olivia* by Falconer (2000), *The problem with chickens* by McMillan, & Gunnels and Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* by Scieszka, Blair & Carroll in 2005 and 2008, respectively, the females have more powerful roles in stories, even though they are sometimes depicted in an stereotypical image. Looking at table 1, we can see that female characters in the 2000s are represented as more independent, active, and intelligent than in the 40s. The findings of the study support the gender schema theory that claims that children are impacted by gender choices at an early age (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). Therefore, when children are provided with books that stereotype and underestimate the roles and skills women have, this makes them "be gender schematic (or gender polarizing) themselves without even realizing it" (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017, p. 2).

## Conclusion

Reading picture books to children is not just entertainment but also an essential educational tool that can enormously influence children's points of views in aspects related to their gender roles. That would impact how they perceive their identities and gender roles in their societies.

According to the seven stories we analyzed, although female characters started taking equal roles in stories written for children, female characters are still underrepresented. By examining the seven children picture books, children's literature contributed to the gender bias against females throughout history. Children's books were discussed in many articles and for many decades regarding portraying gender roles in a traditional manner. Female characters were presented less and with less important and more stereotyped roles than males, which created a negative image of women. Even though the underrepresentation and the stereotypical image decreased, male characters are still having a more dominant representation in children's literature. Therefore, educators and caregivers need to exercise critical analysis to be aware of any hidden messages in the books they want to use. Therefore, there should be cooperation among teachers and book publishers. This cooperation can be done through ongoing communication between the two groups: teachers and book publishers. Until this communication takes place, teachers still need to be trained on how to critically choose children's books for their students. Experienced instructors and scholars can organize such training through offering workshops that highlight strategies and techniques that teachers can employ to select books for their students.

## Limitations of the study

Based on the findings of the study, analyzing seven children's picture books is not enough to shed light on the representation of females in children's books. Thus, for further research, researchers should look for more

children picture books to see if underrepresentation and stereotypical image of female characters still exist.

Other award-winners could be examined for gender parity. Additionally, only books that were published in the United States of America were considered for analysis in this paper. Therefore, to know more about gender equity, books published in other countries should also be considered for analysis.

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