

The Influence of Children's Literature on Gender Role Perceptions: A Reexamination

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This project reexamined young children's gender attitudes regarding occupational roles. The results of this study suggested that young children's attitudes, while still generally stereotypic, were more flexible regarding occupational roles. The reading of carefully selected books and book related activities positively influenced gender attitudes.

KEY WORDS: gender attitudes; children's literature; gender equity.

INTRODUCTION

Gender schema theory (Bem, 1983; Martin & Halverson, 1981) and social cognitive theory (Bussy & Bandura, 1992) would suggest that children, during the early childhood years, are developing their thinking and attitudes about the differences between males and females. At this age, children are constructing their gender schema, that is, an organized pattern of behavior which they use to sort information about the world with regard to gender. They are beginning to develop a concept about what it means to be male or female as they observe how society classifies people and the roles they play by gender. They are developing attitudes about the gender appropriateness of toys, activities, and occupational roles. Gender stereotypic thinking may limit children's choices, interests, and abilities.

A potential resource for influencing young children's thinking regarding gender roles is the classroom use of children's literature. Reading books and engaging in classroom activities that do not stereotype roles and occupations by gender, may challenge young children's gender role thinking. Children's gender schemas could

change to incorporate a wider range of possible occupations and roles assigned to males and females in society.

PRIOR RESEARCH

Much has been written on the topic of examining children's literature for gender stereotyping and on how children's literature may be used in the classroom to influence children's gender attitudes (Allen, Allen, & Sigler, 1993; Dellmann-Jenkins, Florjancic, & Swadener, 1993; Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; Martinez & Nash, 1993; O'Connor, 1989; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1985). Research has pursued the question of whether young children's gender-stereotypic views can be modified through the use of carefully selected children's literature.

In an experimental study (Scott & Feldman-Summers, 1979), had one group of early elementary school children read literature where female main characters were portrayed in traditional male roles. Two other groups were not exposed to this literature. When compared, those exposed to stories with female main characters in nonstereotypic roles, showed a significant increase in their perceptions about the ability of girls to engage in the same nonstereotypic activities as portrayed by the female story characters.

Research studies with younger preschool children have also indicated some success in regard to the influence of children's literature. Flerx, Fidler, and Rogers (1976) found that the presentation of egalitarian literature (30 minutes per day for 5 days) with characters in nonstereotypic roles reduced the stereotypic thinking of

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4- to 5-year-old children. Changes in their thinking were evident on the posttest measure where children made judgments about sex-role standards for children and parents regarding play, work, recreational activities, intelligence, and affect/expressiveness. In another study (Ashton, 1983), preschool children exposed to nonstereotypic children's books chose a nonstereotypic toy significantly more often than children exposed to gender-stereotypic books.

While the research has been generally positive, the effects were sometimes short term or had limited generalizability. For example, the Flerx, Fidler, and Rogers (1976) research with preschoolers found that the initial reduction of stereotypic thinking was not evident on a 1-week follow-up measure. A related study found that the nonstereotypic thinking did not generalize to behaviors or occupational roles that were not portrayed in the books read (Scott & Feldman-Summers, 1979).

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY

Prior research suggests that, while not an easy task, it may be possible to influence gender attitudes through the use of children's literature and related activities. Research also suggests that the reading intervention must be sustained, focused, and intensive in order to effect change. Given the societal changes regarding gender awareness and the increased availability of various occupational roles for both men and women, a reexamination of the influence of children's literature seemed timely. Also, given the limited generalizability of the original studies, it seemed important to investigate whether the change in gender attitudes may generalize to a wider number of occupational roles than those portrayed in the books used.

Thus, the purpose of this study was twofold: (1) to reexamine young children's gender attitudes and thinking regarding occupational roles, and (2) to assess whether the classroom reading of selected children's books and planned book-related activities would positively influence children's gender thinking and attitudes regarding occupational roles. In order to investigate generalizability, the occupational roles included (but were not limited to) those portrayed in the selected children's books.

Participants

Participating in the study were 74 (34 boys and 40 girls) children (preschool through first grade) ranging in age from 55 to 95 months (mean age = 76 months). Children were enrolled in three classrooms with experienced teachers in three different schools in a large met-

ropolitan area. One school was an urban school with an African-American population (99%) where a large percentage of students (80%) qualified for the Federal free lunch program. The second school was a suburban school with a population predominantly Caucasian (3% minority) and a socioeconomic status ranging from low-middle to middle (median household income \$19,907). The third school was a suburban school with a predominantly Caucasian population (2% minority) and a socioeconomic status ranging from middle to high (median income \$49,576). Less than 2% qualified for the free lunch program.

Inventory and Procedure

The inventory used for this study was created by the authors and based on their earlier research (Trepanier-Street, Romatowski, & McNair, 1990). Occupations used in the inventory were selected on the basis of familiarity of the role to young children (as evidenced on a pilot test) and on approximately equivalent male- and female-dominated careers. The inventory included 14 occupational roles: pilot, nurse, police officer, doctor, teacher, dancer, carpenter, mechanic, secretary, cook, cashier, firefighter, ambulance driver, and hairdresser/hair stylist. Methodology used for this inventory was similar to that used in other research by the authors (Trepanier & Kropp, 1986; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1990) and by others (Edelbrock & Sugawara, 1978; Signorella & Liben, 1978). The gender role inventory consisted of the examiner naming an occupational role and asking each child individually whether the occupational role was for men, for women or for both men and women.

Intervention

The intervention component of the project consisted of the reading (across a 2-month period) of six selected children's books focusing on nonstereotypic gender roles and activities and the implementation of book-related activities. The intervention activities were conducted by the classroom teachers who had participated in a prior training session at the university.

The six books used in the study were carefully selected by the researchers. The books selected described children and adults involved in nonstereotypic gender activities and situations (e.g., a working mother and a caregiver father). A wide variety of occupations including but not limited to those used in the inventory were portrayed. Books chosen had age-appropriate text and illustrations. A complete listing of the books can be found in the references. While the same books were used at each site, the book-related activities were chosen by the classroom teacher. At one site, children dictated

charts which listed things their mommies and daddies liked to do. These served as discussion springboards. Guest speakers were invited to share their careers with children and answer their questions. At another site, a wall mural was created by the children depicting themselves in various careers. Their choices were discussed by the class. Individual picture books were created by the children with the titles "Our Pictures About Daddies at Work" and "Our Pictures About Mommies at Work." Each page in the book included a dictation by the child. Examples of children's stereotypic and nonstereotypic dictations are: "A daddy can wash all the dirty clothes at the laundromat." "This daddy works driving a bus." and "This mommy is building a car." and "The mommy wears earrings and bakes cookies." Role playing various roles and giving both boys and girls the opportunity to experience various careers was yet another activity offered to the children. Other examples included retelling of stories using puppets, various artistic expressions, whole class books, etc. It should be underscored that each book read was followed by several book-related activities.

RESULTS

The children's responses to the pretest and posttest gender role inventory were examined. Tables I, II, and III summarize the responses. Pretest data suggest that children often saw occupations as appropriate "for both men and women." These frequencies ranged from 34% to 68% and were higher than what might be predicted from previous research. If an occupation was deemed not appropriate for both men and women, the response was in the direction of the stereotype (e.g., pilot and mechanic for men, dancer and nurse for women). While the frequency on the pretest of "for both" responses may be high, there was an increase in the "for both" responses on the posttest. The response of "for both" on the posttest ranged from 63% to 92%.

The data were examined to determine whether there was a change in the frequency of nonstereotypic responses after the intervention. The frequencies of "for both" or nonstereotypic responses were summed across the 14 occupational roles on the pretest and also summed across the posttest. The total number of "for both" responses on the pretest was 512 (49.4% of the total). The total number of "for both" responses on the posttest was 812 (78.4% of the total).

An analysis of the data was also conducted to determine if there was a relationship between the type of response, i.e., "for both" (nonstereotypic) or "not for both" (all other responses), and the time of testing

Table I. Responses to Pretest and Posttest for Total Group

Occupation	Pretest			Posttest		
	M	F	B	M	F	B
Pilot	36 (49%)	2 (3%)	36 (49%)	17 (23%)	0 (0%)	57 (77%)
Nurse	5 (7%)	31 (42%)	37 (50%)	2 (3%)	12 (16%)	60 (81%)
Police Officer	22 (30%)	5 (7%)	47 (63%)	7 (9%)	4 (6%)	63 (85%)
Doctor	24 (32%)	11 (15%)	39 (53%)	9 (12%)	1 (1%)	64 (87%)
Teacher	7 (9%)	17 (23%)	50 (68%)	0 (0%)	6 (8%)	68 (92%)
Dancer	6 (8%)	24 (32%)	41 (56%)	2 (3%)	25 (34%)	47 (63%)
Carpenter	43 (58%)	3 (4%)	26 (35%)	21 (28%)	1 (1%)	52 (71%)
Mechanic	40 (54%)	6 (8%)	27 (37%)	22 (30%)	3 (4%)	49 (66%)
Secretary	16 (22%)	23 (31%)	35 (47%)	9 (12%)	6 (8%)	59 (80%)
Cook	5 (7%)	28 (38%)	41 (55%)	3 (4%)	5 (7%)	66 (89%)
Cashier	18 (24%)	17 (23%)	38 (52%)	9 (12%)	5 (7%)	60 (81%)
Fire Fighter	45 (61%)	4 (5%)	25 (34%)	18 (24%)	3 (4%)	53 (72%)
Ambulance Driver	27 (36%)	8 (11%)	39 (53%)	14 (19%)	0 (0%)	60 (81%)
Hair Stylist	8 (11%)	34 (46%)	31 (42%)	5 (7%)	15 (20%)	54 (73%)

M = Men, F = Women, B = Both Men and Women. No response not included, thus, numbers may not equal 100%.

(pretest or posttest). The chi-square statistic suggests a highly significant relationship, $[X^2(1, N = 74) = 188.30, p < .001]$ between response type and time of testing.

The data were further analyzed to determine if there were differences between boys and girls with respect to the intervention. Again the total number of nonstereotypic "for both" responses were summed across the 14 roles. The total number of "for both" responses for boys was 260 (54.6%) pretest and 386 (81.1%) posttest. The total number of "for both" responses for girls was 252 (45%) pretest and 426 (76.1%) posttest. Analyses of the data investigating the relationship between type of response and time of testing indicates a highly significant relationship for both boys $[X^2(1, N = 34) = 76.46, p < .001]$ and for girls $[X^2(1, N = 40) = 113.15, p < .001]$.

DISCUSSION

Prior gender theory and research (Bem, 1983; Bussy & Bandura, 1992; Martin & Halverson, 1981)

Table II. Responses to Pretest and Posttest for Boys

Occupation	Pretest			Posttest		
	M	F	B	M	F	B
Pilot	19 (56%)	0 (0%)	15 (44%)	7 (21%)	0 (0%)	27 (79%)
Nurse	1 (3%)	13 (38%)	20 (59%)	1 (3%)	5 (15%)	28 (82%)
Police Officer	9 (26%)	1 (3%)	24 (71%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	32 (94%)
Doctor	11 (32%)	2 (6%)	21 (62%)	3 (9%)	0 (0%)	31 (91%)
Teacher	4 (12%)	6 (18%)	24 (70%)	0 (0%)	3 (9%)	31 (91%)
Dancer	3 (9%)	11 (32%)	18 (53%)	1 (3%)	10 (29%)	23 (68%)
Carpenter	19 (56%)	1 (3%)	13 (38%)	8 (24%)	0 (0%)	26 (76%)
Mechanic	18 (53%)	2 (6%)	14 (41%)	11 (32%)	1 (3%)	22 (65%)
Secretary	5 (15%)	10 (29%)	19 (56%)	4 (12%)	4 (12%)	26 (76%)
Cook	4 (12%)	11 (32%)	19 (56%)	1 (3%)	3 (9%)	30 (88%)
Cashier	6 (18%)	7 (20%)	20 (59%)	4 (12%)	2 (6%)	28 (82%)
Fire Fighter	19 (56%)	0 (0%)	15 (44%)	6 (18%)	0 (0%)	28 (82%)
Ambulance Driver	13 (38%)	2 (6%)	19 (56%)	6 (18%)	0 (0%)	28 (82%)
Hair Stylist	4 (12%)	11 (32%)	19 (56%)	3 (9%)	5 (15%)	26 (76%)

M = Men, F = Women, B = Both Men and Women. No response not included, thus, numbers may not equal 100%.

suggests that children during the early childhood years have a gender-stereotypic view about the occupational roles assigned to males and females. The results of this study suggest that young children's attitudes, while still generally stereotypic, are beginning to be more flexible regarding occupational roles for men and women. Even prior to the intervention, occupations traditionally viewed as appropriate for only one gender were seen as suitable for both genders. This suggests that efforts in school, in the home, and in society to encourage a more gender-equitable view may be having some impact upon the thinking of young children.

The results of this study also suggest that a valuable resource for influencing children's gender attitudes is the reading of carefully selected books and the use of book-related activities. While conclusions are limited due to

Table III. Responses to Pretest and Posttest for Girls

Occupation	Pretest			Posttest		
	M	F	B	M	F	B
Pilot	17 (43%)	2 (5%)	21 (53%)	10 (25%)	0 (0%)	30 (75%)
Nurse	4 (10%)	18 (45%)	17 (43%)	1 (3%)	7 (18%)	32 (80%)
Police Officer	13 (33%)	4 (10%)	23 (58%)	6 (15%)	3 (8%)	31 (78%)
Doctor	13 (33%)	9 (23%)	18 (45%)	6 (15%)	1 (3%)	33 (83%)
Teacher	3 (8%)	11 (28%)	26 (65%)	0 (0%)	3 (8%)	37 (93%)
Dancer	3 (8%)	13 (33%)	23 (58%)	1 (3%)	15 (38%)	24 (60%)
Carpenter	24 (60%)	2 (5%)	13 (33%)	13 (33%)	1 (3%)	26 (65%)
Mechanic	22 (55%)	4 (10%)	13 (33%)	11 (28%)	2 (5%)	27 (68%)
Secretary	11 (28%)	13 (33%)	16 (40%)	5 (13%)	2 (5%)	33 (83%)
Cook	1 (3%)	17 (43%)	22 (55%)	2 (5%)	2 (5%)	36 (90%)
Cashier	12 (30%)	10 (25%)	18 (45%)	5 (13%)	3 (8%)	32 (80%)
Fire Fighter	26 (65%)	4 (10%)	10 (25%)	12 (30%)	3 (8%)	25 (63%)
Ambulance Driver	14 (35%)	6 (15%)	20 (50%)	8 (20%)	0 (0%)	32 (80%)
Hair Stylist	4 (10%)	23 (58%)	12 (30%)	2 (5%)	10 (25%)	28 (70%)

M = Men, F = Women, B = Both Men and Women. No response not included, thus, numbers may not equal 100%.

the single group design, there is some evidence from this study that children's literature can positively influence gender attitudes. After the reading of nonstereotypic literature, more children judged the occupations as appropriate "for both men and women." This was true for both boys and girls. The change in gender attitude seemed to generalize beyond the occupational roles portrayed in the books read in the study.

This study supports prior research findings (Ashton, 1983; Flerx, Fiddler, & Rogers, 1976; Scott & Feldman-Summer, 1979) that the use of children's literature and related book activities can positively change children's gender attitudes. However, additional research using experimental designs and long-term follow-up measures is necessary to further determine the extent of influence and the long-term effects of intervention.

IMPLICATIONS

Because young children are in the process of developing their gender schemas, it seems that children's thinking is particularly amenable to environmental influences. It is critical then that teachers, caregivers, and other school personnel develop programs and utilize curricular activities that will encourage a more gender-equitable view of the world. If we want children to view a variety of occupations, activities, and roles as options — options not limited because of gender-stereotypic views — it is important that in the early years they be exposed to nonstereotypic models. A valuable resource for exposing children to such nonstereotypic models is high-quality children's books. The use of children's literature and related classroom activities may be a powerful medium for influencing children's gender attitudes.

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