A Gender Analysis of NCSS Notable Trade Books for the Intermediate Grades

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This study provides a gender analysis of National Council for the Social Studies Notable Trade book selections suitable for the intermediate grades from the years 2006-2008. The study examines the number of male versus female characters and the presence, or absence of, gender stereotypes relative to character personalities, occupations, and behaviors. Results indicate a significant difference in the number of male and female characters, with many more male characters represented. Males frequently performed stereotypical jobs or roles with none of the books depicting males in lower status jobs than females. Some female main characters were portrayed in stereotypical jobs or roles while others were able to cross traditional gender lines and demonstrate strong personalities. Of the 17 predetermined behaviors exhibited by characters throughout these books, six of them showed significant differences between males and females. Males were more likely to engage in physical activity, participate in sports, fight in battles or demonstrate aggressive behaviors, pursue worthy causes such as heroism, and earn a living. Females were more likely to perform domestic chores.

Key Words: gender, picture books, National Council for the Social Studies, gender stereotypes, Notable Trade books

Introduction

For the past 39 years the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), in cooperation with the Children’s Book Council, has selected Notable Social Studies Trade Books for children and young adults. Considered to be the very best in current social studies literature for students in grades Kindergarten-12, books are evaluated by a committee of 12 reviewers according to seven selection criteria. Each book must demonstrate originality and uniqueness, high literary quality, reader-friendly format and illustrations, insight into human relationships, diversity, and cultural experiences, suitability for students in grades Kindergarten-12, and citations or bibliography. Books are nominated for consideration by children’s book publishers and must represent one or more of the broad subject categories of the social studies, including history, biography, civic ideals and practices, contemporary concerns, economics, and geography (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010a). Reviewers link each book to the thematic strands from National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010b).

Notable Trade Book selection committee members - selected for their expertise in children’s literature and the social studies - serve a 3-year term. Each reviewer evaluates approximately 125 books per year with each book being assessed by three reviewers. Literature is evaluated on a scale of 1-3, with 3 being the highest rating. Books receiving high ratings from all three reviewers are chosen as Notable Trade books for that year. When there is a lack of consensus among reviewers, books still can be selected if they represent a unique perspective or reviewers make a strong case for inclusion. The annotated list of Notable Trade Books is
Gender and Children’s Literature

Literature teaches gender norms and gender identity, and research indicates that gender bias in books can be harmful to young people (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Peterson & Lach, 1990; Schau & Scott, 1984; Scott, 1986; Tognoli, Pullen, & Leiber, 1994). Sexism in literature increases biased attitudes and behaviors (Schau & Scott, 1984), affects toy selections (Ashton, 1978), enhances boys’ feelings of entitlement, and lowers girls’ occupational ambitions and self-worth (Tognoli, Pullen, & Lieber, 1994). According to notable children’s author Mem Fox, “Everything we read, from sexist advertisements and women’s magazines to romance novels and children’s books, constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men” (1993, p. 84).

Gender inequalities and stereotypes are present in the subject matter, character portrayals, language, and illustrations of children’s books (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993). While most studies have been done with picture books (e.g. Davis & McDaniel, 1999; Frawley, 2008; Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Turner-Bowker, 1996), researchers also have evaluated bias present in Newbery Award winning chapter books (Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, & Clements, 1998). Studies consistently indicate that there are significantly more male than female characters in children’s books (e.g. Davis & McDaniel, 1999; Turner-Bowker, 1996). Males are included in children’s literature titles twice as often as females, and some titles with females actually are about male characters (Ernst, 1995). In picture books, illustrations contain significantly more images of males than females (Davis & McDaniel, 1999), and females who are in illustrations often are performing domestic chores (Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001).

Although gender balance in children’s book characters has improved over the last 15 years, there remain significant differences between the number of male and female characters (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006; Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001). While earlier studies suggest that both male and female authors under-represented female characters (Tognoli, Pullen, & Leiber, 1994; Heintz, 1987; Kolbe & LaVoie, 1981), a more recent study found that it is male authors who tend to write stories primarily about male characters, perpetuating the under-representation of females (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006).

Studies also indicated that both male and female characters were represented and described in stereotypical ways. Females were commonly described as “beautiful, frightened, worthy, sweet, weak, and scared” (Turner-Bowker, 1996, p. 475). Male characters were depicted in traditional roles such as earning a living and driving a car (Poarch & Monk-Turner, 2001) and described as “big, horrible, fierce, great, terrible, furious, brave, and proud” (Turner-Bowker, 1996, p. 475). Male characters rarely were portrayed as fathers who helped to care for their children (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). Both men and women continued to hold traditional jobs and over two-thirds of those who held jobs outside the home were men. Female characters held a narrower range of jobs and exhibited more nurturing behaviors (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006).
Gender and National Council for the Social Studies Picture Book Winners

In an analysis of NCSS Notable Trade picture book winners from 2006-2008, gender inequities were evident in the number of male and female characters. More books with male main characters were selected as winners than those with female main characters. Males typically held stereotypical jobs and never held lower status jobs than females. Females held a very narrow range of jobs and did not participate in jobs requiring adventure or risk-taking. In books with only female main characters, some females were able to cross-traditional gender lines and demonstrate qualities such as independence and self-determination. Male characters were involved in stereotypical behaviors such as sports, heroism, battles, and earning a living, while females often were seen doing domestic chores and expressing emotion. Male characters, in contrast, were never shown performing domestic chores and rarely demonstrated emotions or affection. Overall findings from this study indicated that gender inequities and stereotypes remain in social studies trade books and the imbalance likely originates at the publication level (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010).

Purpose

Children’s literature teaches gender norms and sexism in books affects children’s attitudes and behaviors (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Peterson & Lach, 1990; Schau & Scott, 1984; Scott, 1986; Tognoli, Pullen, & Leiber, 1994). Given these findings and the gender inequities and stereotypes found in the widely read NCSS Notable picture book winners (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010), the same concerns have surfaced with respect to NCSS Notable trade books for the intermediate grades. This study provides a gender analysis of the very best in social studies intermediate grade literature from the years 2006-2008. The purpose was to establish whether books selected as NCSS Notable Trade Book winners for the intermediate grades exhibit gender balance and/or gender stereotypes. The study replicated the analysis completed on NCSS picture book winners (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010) and examined the number of male and female characters and the presence or absence of gender stereotypes relative to characters’ personalities, occupations, and behaviors.

Method

All trade books in this study were NCSS Notable Trade Book winners in the years 2006-2008. The total number of books selected as social studies trade book winners was 116 in 2006, 134 in 2007, and 88 in 2008. Of those totals, 70 books were deemed to be suitable for primary grade readers and were evaluated in the 2010 study (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010). The current study evaluates both picture books and chapter books that reviewers determined to be appropriate for intermediate grade readers. Thirty-two books were evaluated for 2006, 38 books for 2007, and 31 books for 2008, for a total of 101 books. Sixty-nine of these books were picture books and 32 were chapter books.

Based on expertise with children and children’s literature, reviewers made the distinction as to whether each book is most appropriate for the primary grades (P), the intermediate grades (I), the middle school grades (M), or the high school grades (H), or a combination of levels. It was the task of the reviewer who wrote a particular book’s annotation to determine the appropriate level for that book. This is an inherent weakness in the system used by NCSS and the Children’s Book Council, in that it is possible that multiple reviewers could have varying opinions as to the most suitable level(s) for each book. For the purposes of this study, books that
were evaluated for primary grade readers (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010) were not included, even if reviewers found them suitable for both primary and intermediate grades.

Books were read and coded for: (1) the number of male and female main characters in text and illustrations (with main characters defined as those characters portrayed as central to the story), (2) the personality and occupational roles of characters (with each trait coded as ‘never true or usually not true,’ ‘occasionally true,’ ‘often true or usually true,’ or ‘always or almost always true’), and which categories of behaviors were demonstrated by characters of each gender (e.g. sports, reading, domestic chores). (See Appendix A). The behavioral categories list was original to the 2010 study, while the list of personality characteristics and occupational roles was gleaned from those traits found to be significant in a previous study (Diekman & Murnen, 2004).

Inter-rater reliability was established in the 2010 study by selecting seven out of the 70 books using a random number table. The principal investigator and one other researcher evaluated each of the seven books and the results were compared. Inter-rater reliability was high (Holsti C. R. = 91.7), with coders in agreement on 211 out of 230 data points (Holsti, 1969). This estimate of reliability was considered sufficient to support the aims and data analysis of the 2010 study and this current study. The principal researcher evaluated all of the literature in this study.

Results and Discussion

Number of Male and Female Main Characters

The 101 books in this study first were analyzed to determine the number of male and female main characters in the collection as a whole. A repeated measures t-test found a significant difference in the number of male and female main characters (male = 11.35, female = 4.20, t(101) = 2.661, p < .05). There was also a difference in the number of books with representatives of only one gender; 32 books had only male main characters, while just 8 books had only female main characters (binomial p < .05). Books with only male main characters included selections such as Bushnell’s Submarine: The Best Kept Secret of the American Revolution (Lefkowitz, 2006), Delivering Justice: W. W. Law and the Fight for Civil Rights (Haskins, 2005), and Julio’s Magic (Dorros, 2005), the story of a young boy from Mexico and his dear friend, the woodcarver.

Table 1: Number of Male and Female Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average number of male and female main characters</td>
<td>11.35</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of books with characters of only one gender</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of biographies by gender</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of historical fiction selections by gender</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
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This three year collection included 11 biographies and 8 historical fiction selections based solely on the lives of men. Only 4 biographies and 2 historical fiction selections based solely on the lives of women were included (binomial \( p < .05 \)). Biographies of women included *Celia Cruz: Queen of Salsa* (Chambers, 2005), *Marvelous Mattie: How Margaret E. Knight Became an Inventor* (McCully, 2006), *Patience Wright: America’s First Sculptor and Revolutionary Spy* (Shea, 2007), and *Marie Curie* (Krull, 2007). Table 1 summarizes the average number of male and female characters, the number of books with only one gender, and the number of biographies and historical fiction selections by gender.

### Occupations and Roles

In books with both male and female main characters, females frequently performed stereotypically feminine jobs or roles (39.6% of books were rated as having females who always or almost always demonstrated stereotypical jobs). The majority of females did not have a range of jobs (53.7% of books portrayed females who did not hold a range of jobs). In addition, women did not hold adventurous jobs, such as explorers or big game hunters. Books with...
characters showed females in non-traditional roles. These female characters were able to cross-traditional gender lines and were portrayed as non-sexist. For example, *Marie Curie* (Krull, 2007), tells the story of the scientist who discovered radioactivity. Figure 1 shows the frequency of females in stereotypical jobs.

In these same books, male characters typically performed stereotypically male jobs or roles (81.1% of books portray males as always or almost always having stereotypical male jobs or roles). The evidence indicated that males never held lower status jobs than females (100% of books with both males and female characters lacked male characters in lower status jobs than females). Figure 2 shows the frequency of males in stereotypical jobs.

**Figure 2: Frequency of Males in Stereotypical Jobs or Roles in Books with Both Male and Female Characters**

![Bar chart showing the frequency of males in stereotypical jobs or roles in books with both male and female characters.](chart)

In books with only male main characters, male roles and jobs were consistent with historical context (73.9% of books portrayed males with roles consistent with historical context). In comparison, in books with only female main characters, the relationship of roles to historical context was less consistent (28.6% of books portrayed females in traditional roles, while 71.4% of books portrayed women as individuals who were able to cross traditional gender lines). For example, in *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story of Iraq* (Winter, 2005), Alia Muhammad Baker and her friends risk everything to move the books out of the library in Basra, Iraq, before it is destroyed in the war.

*Personality Characteristics*
In an analysis of personality characteristics, the data on books with only male main characters suggests that males defend their own beliefs (96.7% of books rated ‘always or almost always’), have strong personalities (93.1% of books rated ‘always or almost always’), and demonstrate leadership abilities (86.7% of books ranked ‘always or almost always’). Characters such as John Muir, environmentalist (Lasky, 2006); Gordon Parks, first black photographer for Life magazine (Parr, 2006); and a young boy named Moses, who helped his family secure a piece of land during the westward movement (Scillian, 2007), stand up for what they believe in and demonstrate leadership. Likewise, in books with only female characters, women are independent (87.5% of books ranked ‘always or almost always’), and have strong personalities (87.5% of books rated ‘always or almost always’). One example is Patience Wright, a wax sculptor and Revolutionary War spy, who hid messages in the sculptures she sent from England to America (Shea, 2007).

Books with both male and female characters showed similar trends in personality characteristics to those found in books with only male and only female main characters. In these books, both men and women defended their beliefs (72% of books rated ‘always or almost always’), and had strong personalities (78% of books ranked ‘always or almost always’). These trends are supported by data indicating that male personality characteristics are consistent with historical context (87.5% of books ranked ‘always or almost always’ and portray stereotypical male personality traits. In contrast, female personality characteristics portray a range of behaviors including both traditional female stereotypes consistent with historical context (100% of books rated ‘occasionally’) and behaviors, which suggest more independent thinking. In Desperate Journey (Murphy, 2006), for example, a young girl travels the Erie Canal with her family and cargo to save them from debt and disaster. She demonstrates incredible bravery and leadership throughout the journey.

What Characters Do in Books

Characters participated in a range of behaviors in these trade books. Of the 17 predetermined behaviors, 6 of them showed significant differences between male and female characters. Significant differences were indicated in participating in sports ($X^2 (1) = 6.36, p < .05$), engaging in physical activity ($X^2 (1) = 6.18, p < .05$), pursuing a worthy cause ($X^2 (1) = 4.60, p < .05$), earning a living ($X^2 (1) = 8.50, p < .05$), performing domestic chores ($X^2 (1) = 16.40, p < .05$), and fighting in battles ($X^2 (1) = 29.4, p < .05$). Males were much more likely than females to engage in ‘sports activities,’ ‘participate in physical activities,’ ‘pursue worthy causes such as heroism,’ ‘earn a living,’ and ‘fight in battles or demonstrate aggressive behaviors.’ Books such as Seeing the Elephant: A Story of the Civil War (Hughes, 2007), Twelve Rounds to Glory: The Story of Muhammad Ali (Smith, 2007), and Down the Colorado: John Wesley Powell, the One-Armed Explorer (Ray, 2007), include male characters who are historic sports figures or who demonstrate aggressive behaviors or heroism. Females were much more likely to ‘perform domestic chores.’ Selections by NCSS such as The Buffalo Soldier (Garland, 2006), Brendan Buckley’s Universe and Everything in it (Frazier, 2007), and Across the Blue Pacific: A World War II Story (Borden, 2006), all portray females in domestic roles while males are pursuing worthy causes and fighting battles. Thus, all significant differences in the behaviors of characters fell within traditional gender lines. Table 2 highlights the behaviors of male and female characters.
Table 2: What Characters Do in Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Males were more likely to:</th>
<th>Females were more likely to:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participate in sports</td>
<td>Perform domestic chores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in physical activity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pursue a worthy cause</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Earn a living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fight in battles</td>
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Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a gender balance and/or gender stereotype present in NCSS Notable Trade book winners for the intermediate grades from the years 2006-2008. Results indicate gender inequities in the number of male and female main characters. In the collection as a whole, more books with male main characters were selected as winners than books with female main characters. These findings are consistent with those from the analysis of NCSS Notable picture book winners (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010), although the differences in the number of male and female characters were more pronounced in the intermediate grade books. As a result, school and community libraries basing their selections on NCSS Notable Trade book winners will likely purchase books highlighting the contributions of males and under-representing the contributions of females.

Gender stereotypes also were routinely found in characters’ occupations, personalities, and behaviors. Males were involved in stereotypical activities such as sports, battles, heroism, and earning a living, while females were portrayed in domestic roles. It is noteworthy, however, that there was not a significant difference between male and female characters in their expression of emotion or affection or in their use of television/computer, especially since these differences were significant in the picture book winners from these same years (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010).

In books with both male and female characters, males were portrayed in stereotypical jobs or roles more often than females. It is particularly notable that, in these books, males never held lower status jobs than females (100% of books with both males and female characters lacked male characters in lower status jobs than females). This was true in both the current study and in the analysis of primary grade books (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010).

Females were, at times, able to cross-traditional gender boundaries in both roles and personality characteristics, and these findings are consistent with previous studies (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010; Diekman & Murnen, 2004). In the current study of intermediate grade books, females were portrayed in non-sexist roles more frequently than in the primary grade books, which is encouraging. The ability to cross-traditional gender lines was more evident in books with only female main characters. It appears that authors who choose to write specifically about the lives of women tend to highlight those who are able to break the mold of the traditional female.
As stated previously (Chick, Slekar, & Charles, 2010), much of the gender imbalance found in these studies likely originates at the publication level. Individual authors and publishers may have no awareness of gender imbalance and stereotypes in children’s literature, nor the incentive to strive for gender equity in the books they write and publish. Yet, according to noted children’s author, Mem Fox,

> We who write children’s books, and we who teach through literature, need to be sure we are opening the doors to full human potential, not closing them. We have the power to change ‘gender-appropriate’ behavior and attitudes, yet many of us seem blind to the opportunity (1993, p. 84).

**Figure 3: Semantic Gender and Character Analysis Grid**

![Figure 3: Semantic Gender and Character Analysis Grid](image)

Until such time when authors and publishers endeavor to achieve gender equity and provide positive, non-traditional gender models, it is clearly up to organizations like NCSS and the Children’s Book Council to consider bias in the evaluation of individual books and the collection as a whole. In this case, however, one challenge lies with the historical context of many of these books. It may be unrealistic to expect perfect gender balance in historical
literature, and to attempt it could result in a modified and confused historical record. Clearly, it is important for intermediate grade students to participate in classroom discussions pertaining to historical context and the ways that gender roles have changed over time. The bigger challenge lies in the primary grades, where young children may model book characters without the ability to understand the difference between “then” and “now.”

Teachers, librarians, and parents must make children’s literature selections that portray the full range of human potential. They must ensure that elementary grade children hear and read about women and men who do not live under gender constraints. In addition, children must be taught to be alert to gender bias and to analyze its impact on characters in children’s literature. Figure 3 provides teachers with a semantic gender and character analysis grid that children might use to analyze characters’ personalities, occupations and roles, and behaviors, in order to detect gender bias or the presence of positive gender role models in the books they read.

References


Author Bios

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Appendix A

Gender and Children’s Literature Data Collection Form

Title of Book: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Genre: Biography, Realistic Fiction, Fiction, Historical Fiction, Reference, Non-fiction, Fairy Tale/Folktale, Information

Number of Male Main Characters:

Number of Female Main Characters:

1. Never true or usually not true
2. Occasionally true
3. Often true or usually true
4. Always or almost always true

Personality Characteristics (male AND female characters in book)

1. ___Both female and male characters defend their own beliefs.
2. ___Female characters are independent.
3. ___Female characters act assertively.
4. ___Only male characters have strong personalities.
5. ___Males, not females, are forceful.
6. ___Both female and male characters have leadership abilities.
7. ___Males, but not females, are dominant.
8. ___Female characters are willing to take a stand.
9. ___Only male characters are aggressive.
10. ___Male and female personality characteristics are consistent with historical context.

Personality Characteristics (male only characters in book)

1. ___Male characters defend their own beliefs.
2. ___Male characters have strong personalities.
3. ___Male characters have leadership abilities.
4. ___Males are forceful.
5. ___Males are aggressive.
6. ___Males personality characteristics are consistent with historical context.

Personality Characteristics (female only characters in book)
1. ___Female characters defend their own beliefs.
2. ___Female characters are independent.
3. ___Female characters act assertively.
4. ___Female characters have strong personalities.
5. ___Females are forceful.
6. ___Females have leadership abilities.
7. ___Females are willing to take a stand.
8. ___Females are aggressive.
9. ___Female personality characteristics are consistent with historical context.

Domestic Roles
1. ___Only male characters take care of the yard.
2. ___Male and female domestic roles are consistent with historical context.

Occupational Roles (male and female characters in book)
1. ___Female characters have only stereotypical feminine jobs or roles.
2. ___Male characters have only stereotypical male jobs or roles.
3. ___Female characters have a range of jobs, including some traditionally held by men.
4. ___Some male characters have lower status jobs than female characters. For example, some males are nurses rather than doctors, secretaries rather than bosses.
5. ___Women as well as men have adventurous jobs, such as explorers or big game hunters.
6. ___Male and female occupational roles are consistent with historical context.

Occupational Roles (male only characters in book)
1. ___Male characters have only stereotypical male jobs or roles.
2. ___Men have adventurous jobs, such as explorers or big game hunters.
3. ___Male occupational roles are consistent with historical context.
4. ___Some male characters hold lower status jobs, such as nurses and secretaries.

Occupational Roles (female only characters in book)
1. ___Female characters have only stereotypical feminine jobs or roles.
2. ___Female characters have a range of jobs, including some traditionally held by men.
3. ___Women have adventurous jobs, such as explorers or big game hunters.
4. ___Female occupational roles are consistent with historical context.

Interests and Activities
1. ___Both boys and girls play with traditionally feminine toys.
2. ___Females participate in activities that are active, such as sports and exploration.
3. ___Females are equally adventurous and/or able at games and technical jobs.
4. ___Male and female interests are consistent with historical context.

Attitudes
1. ___Gender is a primary method of categorization, and/or the basis of widespread generalization (i.e. Boys do this, but girls do that.)
2. ___Females are described in their own right rather than male appendages (i.e. “the clever wife,” “the wise daughter”)

3. ___Male and female members of a partnership are presented as equal.

What Characters Do in Books
Choose as many as apply. Write F and/or M before each action represented.

___family life
___travel (car, boat, bus, etc.)
___reading
___sports
___physical activity (swimming, hiking, fishing, dancing, etc.)
___shopping
___attending a concert, circus, church
___playing games
___the arts (painting, playing a musical instrument, etc.)
___pursuit of a worthy cause (heroics, bravery, protesting, etc.)
___eating/drinking
___public service
___TV/radio/computer
___affection/demonstration of grief or emotion
___earning a living
___domestic chores
___fighting in battle/physical aggression