

Sixty Years of representation of female and male protagonists in children's stories pre- and post-millennium.

Introduction

Gender bias can be seen in children's stories in pre and post millennium literature. "Gender bias can be found in the content, language, and illustrations of many children's books." (Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993, cited in Singh 1998). This bias can be seen in the extent to which a gender is represented as the main protagonist and how that gender is depicted in children's books. Gender representation in children's stories holds a clear imbalance with children's literature having more male protagonists (Grauerholz & Pescosolido 1989, Zanzabro, G. (2017). Gender representation in children's literature can impact children's attitudes and perception of gender stereotypes in society therefore having equality in gender representation in children's stories is important.

The study completed by Casey et al. (2021) suggests that over the last sixty years between 1960 and 2020, male protagonists remain overrepresented in children's stories despite an increase in a higher proportion of children's stories now featuring females. In this current study the researcher aims to analyse comparisons in a rural Welsh primary school to compare results from the original study completed in America to rural West Wales.

The aim of this current study was to examine representation of female and male protagonists in children's stories pre- and post-millennium and make a comparison with Casey et al.'s (2021) study.

Method

Type of research design:

Questionnaire.

Copy of Questionnaire below (also see Appendix for full size copy);

(Do not write your name on this form in order that all responses received will remain anonymous)

Please answer the following questions:

1. Age:

2. Gender: (circle one of the following)

Female

Male

Other

Prefer not to say

3. What is your favourite book?

If you do not have a favourite book, is there a book you are currently reading?
Please give the title and, if you can remember, the name of the author.

4. Which book do you remember most from when you were younger?

Please give the title and, if you can remember, the name of the author.

Research variables:

The first research variable was the year of the children's book publication, whether pre or post millennium.

The second research variable was the gender of the main protagonist, whether male or female.

Procedure:

The study took place at a rural Welsh Primary School with Year 5 and 6 children (9-11 years old) in both the English and Welsh teaching stream. The data was collected through a pre prepared questionnaire with standardised questions. A copy of the questionnaire is attached in the Appendix.

The questionnaire was introduced to the children during an afternoon English lesson and then individually completed in a group setting. Instructions were given to the group as a whole to

answer any queries about the questionnaire, and individual completion helped ensure no bias through peer influence. The pupils were asked not to include their names as the questionnaire was anonymous for ethical reasons, it was also written on the top of the form so that it was clear. It was also important to this study that using an anonymous questionnaire would allow more accurate data to be collected as it allowed the student to give the data more freely without the fear of being judged. For ethical reasons, multiple responses to Question 2 (Gender) were listed for inclusivity.

The following questions included on the questionnaire; 1-Age, 2-Gender, 3-What is your favourite book? If you do not have a favourite book, is there a book you are currently reading? 4-Which book do you remember most from when you were younger? My questions were designed this way to collect data on female and male protagonists in children's stories. Question 3 and 4 were important as they provided the title of the book and that was the data needed. With the title of the book it made the author easier to find, often the students knew the title of the book but not the author. As long as the title of the book was known it made it easier to find further information through using the internet. Because the data could be accessed on the internet, this allowed the two research variables, the required data, year of publication and gender of the main protagonist to be collected.

Questions 3 and 4 were designed to generate a number of responses so that a wide variety of children's stories were collected so that duplications were avoided. Each title mentioned was only recorded once to ensure maximum data collection from a small sample size. The way that Questions 3 and 4 were worded allowed us to have alternatives in case the same title was listed more than once. To eliminate bias by the researcher a selection process of systematically going down the list until the next available title appeared was used.

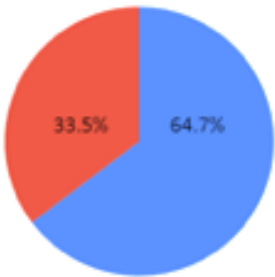
Results

Fig 1: A table showing representation of female and male protagonists in children’s stories pre- and post-millennium. (N=34)

Pre-millennium (N= 17)		Post-millennium (N= 17)	
♀ Female	♂ Male	♀ Female	♂ Male
6	11	7	10

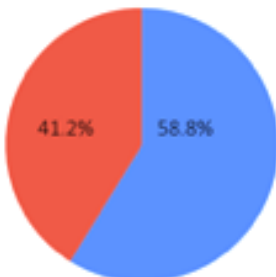
Fig 2: Pie charts showing representation of female and male protagonists in children’s stories pre- and post-millennium. (N=34)

Pie chart showing representation of female & male protagonists in children’s stories pre-millennium. (N=17)



Key:
■ Male
■ Female

Pie chart showing representation of female & male protagonists in children’s stories post-millennium. (N=17)



Key:
■ Male
■ Female

Treatment of Results

As seen from the table and pie charts above, it can be seen in both pre and post millennium children's stories that there is a higher percentage of male protagonists compared to females. However it can be seen that there is a slight increase with post millennium children's stories having a female protagonist as the percentage has increased from 33.5% in the pre millennium data to 41.2% in the post millennium data. This could suggest that gender representation of female and male protagonists in children's stories has improved over the last sixty years. This said the data collected was from a very small sample size of 34 students, if there was a larger sample size it would give a much better indication as to whether this is the case.

Discussion

The implications of this research shows that equal gender representation in children's literature is biased towards male protagonists. This study's results are in keeping with Casey et al.'s findings, with female protagonists becoming more common over time but still below parity. Gender bias will impact children's attitudes and perception of gender stereotypes in society (Grauerholz & Pescosolido 1989, Zanzfaro 2017) therefore having equality in gender representation in children's stories is important.

This study could have been improved by collecting a larger data sample to create confidence in the findings. Also, the data collected was not a representative sample. There is bias within the results as the data collected was based on rural Welsh 9-11 years olds therefore there is bias in culture and age. This could be improved by including both primary and secondary schools in the sample size. In addition to this, having a research team to collect results from around the United Kingdom will allow the data results to reflect the country as a whole.

For future research it would be important to use a large sample size, therefore a better comparison with Casey et al. could be made. Further research could also include a larger sample size age range too! It would also be interesting to look into a variety of book genres and see what genre favours which gender protagonist. In addition to this, looking at a culturally diverse range or nationality of the main protagonists as researched by Huyck & Park 2019, could be interesting for future research.

In the original study by Casey et al. (2021) it was noted that in the last sixty years up to 2020, protagonists in children's stories were significantly more likely to be male, for both human and non-human protagonists. This can be shown in the results of this current study as it follows the same trend (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The implication of this study's results are similar in those in the original study by Casey et al. (2021). This study was completed in order to observe change in gender representation in children's stories over the last sixty years. It can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2 that there is a slight increase in the percentage of female protagonists in children's stories which suggests an improvement in equality of gender representation in

children's stories. However as noted above the data collected for this study was from a very small sample.

Conclusion

Both Casey et al. 's study and this study found that children's literature to have predominantly more male protagonists than female, over the last sixty years. However, it can still be seen in both studies that there is predisposition for male protagonists being more popular.

References

Casey, K., Novick, K., & Lourenco, S. F. (2021). Sixty years of gender representation in children's books: Conditions associated with overrepresentation of male versus female protagonists. *Plos One*.16: 12.)

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Grauerholz, E. & Pescosolido, B. A. (1989) 'Gender Representation In Children's Literature: 1900-1984'. *Gender & Society*. 3(1). Pp. 113–125. [Accessed: 25th May 2022].

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Zanfabro, G. (2017) Gender Matters: What Is at Stake in Dealing with Children's Literature? <http://journals.openedition.org/trans/1440> [Accessed: 25th May 2022].

Appendix

Copy of Questionnaire used in study;

(Do not write your name on this form in order that all responses received will remain anonymous)

Please answer the following questions:

1. Age:

2. Gender: (circle one of the following)

Female Male Other Prefer not to say

3. What is your favourite book?

If you do not have a favourite book, is there a book you are currently reading?

Please give the title and, if you can remember, the name of the author.

4. Which book do you remember most from when you were younger?

Please give the title and, if you can remember, the name of the author.

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