

***Breaking Gender Stereotypes, Roles, and Expectations in the Elementary Classroom Using
Children's Literature***

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract:

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze gender stereotypes, roles, and expectations in society and use children's literature in the elementary classroom to break these expectations. The reality of society is constantly changing and positive role models are needed to encourage young children to be confident in themselves as they grow older. Starting in the elementary classrooms, teachers should present opportunities for children to learn how to grow and participate as active and respectful citizens. As positive role models, teachers should address many different social constructs, in this case, gender stereotypes, to their students and create a community within the classroom that is built on mutual respect and acceptance. Starting with gender stereotypes and breaking these expectations, students can grow to become active citizens for change and acceptance in their own communities and society as a whole. Using children's literature is a reliable way to introduce the topic of acceptance and help erase some gender stereotypes.

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Process Analysis Statement:

As a senior Ball State student studying to be an elementary teacher, I chose to write my thesis in terms of becoming the best teacher that I could be once I graduated. I have always loved the idea of using literature in the classroom to introduce or help students explore deeper into concepts and ideas. I wanted to use my thesis as an opportunity to learn how to address difficult situations, such as gender stereotypes that my students may face, and incorporate literature into this process. Teachers face multiple difficult decisions regarding their reactions and responses throughout the day and it was my goal to help myself and others understand how to approach gender stereotypes in the classroom. In my own classroom, I aim to provide a safe space for my students to explore and be true to themselves, and I should be knowledgeable in the difficulties and expectations they face as opposed to how they really feel. Using literature is one of the best ways to introduce and discuss difficult topics because the students can possibly connect with a character or characters in the story. This allows the student to understand the journey and the happy ending they could face.

As I was looking for the perfect books to analyze and discuss within my thesis, I discovered that there are thousands of children's books that cover gender expectations and stereotypes. I decided on the four specific books because I was able to specifically see how they could affect all genders in young children. Many children enjoy expressing themselves at a young age and clothing is one of the first things they are able to do so with. I chose two books that dealt with the decision of clothing expression and focused on both male and female children. These books introduce two children that wear clothing that are not typically seen on that specific gender. The books show how the children struggle with feeling judged but at the

end, they are confident in themselves. If a child that hears this story connects to a character, my hope is that they can come to the same conclusion as the main character.

I also chose books that would represent behaviors and attitudes of young children because many stereotypes are based on these different beliefs and ideas. For these two stories, I chose books that represented the male child, as research showed me that young boys struggle with stereotypes and personal image more than girls.

Overall, while researching and writing my thesis, I as a teacher, learned a lot about how to use literature in my classroom when it comes to discussing stereotypes. I know that stereotypes and personal opinions can be difficult to discuss with young children, especially if the parents or families have different views, but while researching, I understood how literature can introduce the topic and help students have their own thought processes and ideas. I enjoyed learning about the different types of stereotypes students of certain genders experience and the statistics behind it. I also learned that boys experience more discrimination than girls when it came to liking or disliking certain things and societies expectations based on how they act. By using different books in the classroom, teachers can help students, especially boys that feel left out, feel confident in themselves and their future.

Breaking Gender Stereotypes, Roles, and Expectations in the Elementary Classroom Using Children's Literature

In a world with seven billion people, stereotypes are often used to describe a group of people, from babies to seniors. While many stereotypes are based on culture, people are often judged based on their gender and how their gender correlates to their likes and dislikes. Society today is gradually changing gender expectations, but it is important to identify these stereotypes and change them at a young age. Adults such as parents and teachers should take the responsibility of breaking gender stereotypes, roles and expectations.

Gender Expectations, Stereotypes, and Roles Amongst Society

The more diverse a population is, the more stereotypes that are used in society. Whether it be race, ethnicity, language, gender, or another aspect that makes humans unique, stereotypes take on many forms. Gender stereotypes take three distinct forms – descriptive, proscriptive, and prescriptive. “Descriptive stereotypes describe how individuals of a particular gender are *typically* received. When an individual violates a descriptive gender stereotype, they are rarely penalized for doing so” (Sullivan, Moss, Lopez, Williams, 2018). This specific stereotypes are easily forgiven within society. “Negative proscriptive stereotypes designate undesirable behaviors that one sex should avoid more than others.” (Koenig, 2018). It is important to note that while all behaviors do receive backlash, even if they are not stereotypes, breaking prescriptive stereotypes and displaying proscriptive stereotypes are the less desirable in society. Displaying these characteristics and behaviors can cause reactions that are discriminatory.

Stereotypes can also be prescriptive, which means that the individual *should* act or like a certain thing based on their stereotypical traits or behaviors, or proscriptive, describing what individuals *should not* do or how they *should not* act. Prescriptive stereotypes can have positive and negative components to them. “Prescriptive stereotypes designate desirable behaviors that one sex is encouraged to display more than the other...and often involve characteristics that are undesirable in either sex, but are permitted in one sex, while being proscribed for the other” (Koenig, 2018). For example, if a female student comes to school wearing an outfit that is not popular amongst the female population and is typically worn by boys, these actions are typically dismissed, although not favorable. If a male student comes to school wearing an outfit that is not popular amongst the male population and is typically worn by boys, these actions are less forgivable and judged more harshly. “The prescriptive nature is assumed to stem from the high contact level of interdependence between men and women, which not only allows perceivers to create estimates of how men and women actually act, but also creates expectations for how they should act. (Koenig, 2018).” This early expectation continues to trickle down into youth, influencing how parents dress and treat their children. The children then act certain ways and display certain interests due to their upbringing and treatment. “Within the first years of life, children develop increasingly rigid beliefs about the behaviors, preferences, and traits associated with particular genders” (Sullivan, Moss, Lopez, Williams, 2018).

Once these behaviors and stereotypes are set in stone, they can “profoundly shape and individual’s goals and actions” (Sullivan, Moss, Lopez, Williams, 2018), such as adult preferences and career paths. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, 14% of women

around the world work in STEM related career options, while 73% of women work in health, education, and welfare. The more that stereotypes are pushed at young ages, the less that statistics such as these will change. “When we come across the same stereotypes again and again, they begin to feel natural” (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017). Without the purpose of breaking gender stereotypes, young children will not have the opportunity to make their own choices based on their inner preferences.

Gender Neutral

Although gender stereotypes and expectations occur for all genders, typical stereotypes are predominantly expressed in males of all ages. In a recent study conducted by Sullivan, Moss-Racusin, Lopez, and Williams, preschool children were rated as applicants for a particular preschool based on character traits. Half of the participants rated the traits based on typical character traits for boys and girls and the other half rated traits based on desirability. For young boys, descriptive characteristics such as certain behaviors were desired by these adults. A few of the traits are as listed: likes to play with tools, likes to pretend to be a soldier, loves to get dirty, has unbrushed hair, messy, adventurous, wears clothes that don't match, and sometimes hits others. Traits that were undesirable, or proscriptive, included: enjoys wearing skirts and dresses, loves pink, wears tutus, likes to play with dolls, and likes princesses.

As for girls, many of the traits were interchangeable between both genders. While most participants agreed that girls typically enjoy wearing skirts and dresses, like princesses, love pink, wear tutus and play with dolls, they provided only three proscriptive traits. These proscriptive traits are as follows: likes to pretend to be a soldier, dirty, and has unbrushed hair.

While the participants provided proscriptive traits for both genders, there is an obvious range of expectations between boys and girls. “This may suggest that adults are somewhat more tolerant of deviations from gender-stereotypical behavior from girls than they are from adult women or from younger boys” (Sullivan, Moss-Racusin, Lopez, Williams, 2018). This difference in expectations and tolerance between boys and girls can be confusing and harmful for young children. “Parents give little latitude for boys’ behaviors but encourage both feminine behavior as well as masculine occupations and interests for girls, even complaining that their daughters can be ‘too girly’ with pink princess paraphilia” (Koenig, 2018). In 2018, New York Magazine asked students of both genders, ranging from ages six to fourteen, what it meant to ‘be a boy’. Many of the students mentioned words such as ‘tough’ and ‘strong’, while some were more descriptive, saying to be a boy, one must “not cry” or “told to play sports” (New York Magazine, 2018). This is a great example of why teachers should continue to instill the idea that children can display any type of trait as they grow so they do not develop stereotypical traits and behaviors due to outside influence. “Assuming it is possible to influence students’ choices, teachers are important agents in combating gender-stereotyped ways of thinking and gender-related stereotyped education choices” (Gullberg, Andersson, Danielsson, Scantlebury, Hussénus, 2017).

Breaking Expectations and Stereotypes in the Classroom

“In today’s world where we come across gender inequalities frequently, the most efficient and permanent way to turn these stereotypes into positive and equalitarian expressions is the education systems” (Ocak Karabay, Güzeldere Aydin, Tunç, Kanbur, 2019). Students typically spend about 40 hours at school in a regular week, making the interactions

between students and their peers, as well as their teachers, extremely valuable. Outside of the classroom, these children are influenced by their family members and the treatment they personally receive and witness. Inside the classroom community, teachers must provide safety for the child to truly be themselves without judgement. This can be difficult based on other students' perspectives and thoughts, but if the teacher takes the time to establish a well-rounded and respectful community through insight and civic education, it can be done. "By creating learning environments where roles will satisfy the needs of modern life developed independently from gender stereotypes, ...teachers can help structuring perceptions of children on gender equality" (Ocak Karabay, Güzeldere Aydin, Tunç, Kanbur, 2019). There are many ways that a teacher can structure his or her classroom to be an open community based on personal development and understanding.

First, teachers should make sure that they do not reinforce children's stereotypical behaviors. This can be difficult due to the fact that "our views of a child's personality, and thereby our treatment of the child is based on our past experiences and on societal norms regarding gender, class, ethnicity, and age" (Gullber, Andersson, Danielsson, Scantlebury, Hussénus, 2017) as well as assumptions made about student behavior. Without purpose and determination, it is possible that teachers' unconscious beliefs can influence their pedagogical practice, which in turn, affects the children in possible negative ways. "Children learn the true meaning of gender roles and differences when they start going to school" (Ocak Karabay, Güzeldere Aydin, Tunç, Kanbur, 2019) because they are physically seeing the differences in the behaviors of their peers. By avoiding reinforcement of stereotypical behaviors and providing

opportunities for students express themselves as they truly are, teachers can change their own unconscious beliefs and practices in the future.

Second, it is critical for teachers “to provide opportunities for them to experience new things without gender stereotypes...or present them with related visuals (non-stereotypical tasks carried out by men and women)” (Ocak Karabay, Güzeldere Aydın, Tunç, Kanbur, 2019). In a recent study done in an elementary school, the students were asked to draw a firefighter, fighter pilot, and surgeon. Out of 66 pictures drawn, only five of the people were drawn as women. The teacher then brought in guests of each drawn profession and they revealed that each of the guests were women (Upworthy, 2016). By incorporating educational materials and activities that are enriched with diversity, teachers can help “improve a point of view related to gender equality in early childhood” (Ocak Karabay, Güzeldere Aydın, Tunç, Kanbur, 2019). Activities and experiences that include feedback and models is one of the best ways to introduce new topics and are the most effective in gender differentiation of children. For example, if a female teacher dresses up as a firefighter for the day, this modeling can help the female students make personal connections in their own classroom. In early education classrooms, teachers should provide and encourage students to play with any toy they choose to play with, regardless of their sex. The teacher should support the choices made by the students and encourage others to do so. By providing students with real situations and opportunities, they will create a deeper connection and begin to change their thinking. One of the best ways to introduce controversial ideas, especially when it comes to children, is literature.

Using Children’s Literature in the Classroom

“In the field of education, researchers have provided evidence that gender stereotyping is present in various forms of educational media, such as textbooks, preschool picture books, award-winning children’s literature, and educational television” (Sheldon, 2004). With this information, it is imperative that teachers and influential adults tackle gender stereotypes within these various forms of education media. Children’s literature is one of the most valuable resources a child can encounter throughout his or her growth and should be one of the first resources that are introduced to students without gender expectations and stereotypes. Students of all ages benefit from literature-based discussions and topic introduction. Not all students are introduced to information at the same age so it is important that teachers continue to provide opportunities for students of all ages to learn. Literature can provide students with personal connections, answers to their questions, and can fuel their brains with more questions and information. As students grow, they are able to make new connections and develop critical thinking skills in regards to the content. In order to make sure that certain books introduce brave topics, as well as break stereotypes and expectations, teachers and adults must read through the books and review the material. While some books may advocate for gender neutrality, they may not represent such ideas in the most positive and influential way.

One of the most debated topics in today’s society is clothing that children wear. Typically, boys are expected to wear pants and tops that are either neutral or ‘boy’ colors such as blue, red, and green. Girls on the other hand are typically seen wearing pants and tops, as well as dresses and skirts, that are neutral or ‘girl’ colors such as pink and purples. Due to the growing understanding of gender stereotypes and the need to step outside of the lines,

children are beginning to express their unconventional likes through their clothing. More and more boys are wearing pinks and purples, as well as skirts and dresses in public. In order to make children and adults more comfortable with the changes in society, children's literature that discusses clothing is becoming more popular. Many books introduce and follow a male character wearing a skirt or 'girly' patterns such as Casey in 'Sparkle Boy' by Lesléa Newman. In 'Sparkle Boy', Casey, a young boy around the age of three, loves his older sister's clothes and wants to wear skirts and shiny things like she does. Their parents are accepting of this and allow him to wear what he wants, but this just confuses and worries his older sister. Throughout the book, Casey's older sister learns how to break gender stereotypes and how to stand up for those who do so. This story can easily be introduced to young children, especially those in preschool or Kindergarten. These students are beginning to interact with other children and can be influenced at such a young age. These children have also been influenced by their parents until this moment and the ability to see other children wearing different types of clothes and hearing the idea of choices can be encouraging.

Another book that discusses clothing stereotypes is 'Mary Wears What She Wants' by Keith Negley. Based on the true story of Mary Edwards Walker, Negley introduces readers to a brave young girl that decides to wear a pantsuit instead of dresses to school. During the age that Mary lived, girls only wore dresses and the people around her made fun of her for wearing 'boy' clothing. Mary experiences bullying and backlash and contemplates wearing dresses again. With a supportive adult and determination, Mary continues to wear her pants and influences others to do the same. This story, especially because it was influenced by a real situation, can help students that are worried about wearing clothing they generally don't wear

become more comfortable. This is another story that can be read to younger children to help them understand that they can be comfortable with what they like and dislike, even if others do not agree. This story is also a great story for older children, around fourth and fifth grade, that may feel pressured by peers to act or dress a certain way. This story can help assure those that may want to wear or do other things outside of the norm in their peer group.

By incorporating both stories in the classroom, teachers can encourage students to break gender stereotypes and create a positive change just by wearing clothing that they like. While it may seem like a small change in behavior, it can lead students to become better citizens as they grow older. With encouragement from adults, children can grow to want to make changes for the better in society and become brave citizens for themselves and others around them. According to the National Council of Social Studies, Teachers are responsible for teaching young children how to become educated citizens. While many state standards do not address “Students may establish their educational and vocational choices during childhood: therefore, it is important for girls and boys to have an unlimited range of possibilities and equal opportunities to develop and explore their abilities and interests” (Gullberg, Andersson, Danielsson, Scantlebury, Hussénus, 2017).

Another common prescriptive stereotype is based on behavior. People of all ages are typically expected to act and portray their personalities a certain way in order to be accepted. For men, they are often thought of as tough and masculine, demonstrating an edgy persona that is hard to crack. For females, they are expected to be soft and delicate, bending to the will of anything due to their lack of strength. For young children, boys are often taught to stay strong and to not show any feelings. This can be very difficult for young children as they are

growing up because they are taught to bottle up their feelings, which can cause mental health problems in their nearby future. One book that a teacher or parent can use to help boys learn that it is okay to show their feelings and express their thoughts and emotions is *A Boy Like You* by Frank Murphy. This book demonstrates the common expectations of a boy such as playing sports, liking certain things, dressing in typical clothing, and behaving a certain way. The book stresses that each boy be unique and truly themselves because there is only one of them. When students find a character like them in a book, it encourages them to accept themselves and love themselves. Children entering intermediate and middle school would benefit from this type of story, as this age group tends to experience more peer pressure and bullying. Young boys may act a certain way to impress their peers and fit in with certain stereotypes and a story like this can help them and their peers understand why these stereotypes should be broken and ignored.

Children can also feel encouraged to be themselves and accept who they are in *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love. In this story, a young boy expresses his interest in mermaids, a typical female interest. While family is one of the biggest stereotype enforcers that children can encounter, the grandmother in this story encourages him to pursue his interests and even gives him jewelry for him to become a mermaid himself. "From birth, children are surrounded by information that communicates the beliefs and behaviors that are considered appropriate for each gender group" (Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, Ruble, 2009). With positive role models and adult figures, children can grow to disregard stereotypes and become strong individuals. Again, this story would be a great story to share with children in elementary school, intermediate, and middle school. Younger children do not often think about whether they are playing with 'girl'

toys or 'boy' toys. The older children get, the more aware they are of their peers, stereotypes, and expectations of behavior and likes or dislikes. This book can encourage these children that it is okay to like unique things.

Conclusion

In conclusion, without adult figures in children's lives that can encourage them to embrace themselves, no matter their interests, stereotypes will continue to remain a prominent decision maker everyday life. Because teachers see their students around eight hours a day, 180 days a year, it is vital that teachers take their role in a child's life seriously and do their best to support their personal growth. Teachers are responsible for providing students an understanding of citizenship and how to embrace diversity and identity, using the five social justice standards created by Teaching Tolerance. By incorporating these standards into daily discussions and lessons regarding all subjects, students can fully understand how to be a citizen in their own communities. Although these subjects can be difficult to discuss due to different family beliefs, students must be exposed to these ideas in order to accept themselves and others. The teacher should incorporate a classroom library with many types of books introducing and discussing diversity and identity, holding discussions when an opportunity arises, and continuing to teach students how to be active citizens in their own classroom and community.

By understanding the importance of diminishing stereotypes and how to do so, teachers can help students grow positively. Teachers can prove to be allies to students and show their support even during the most difficult discussions and discoveries. Using literature in the

classroom is the best way to incorporate these ideas and involve students in their own decision making and acceptance of others.

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