Disney Princess Series: More than Your Average Fairy Tales

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People find no surprise from the fact that equality in children's literature is far from where it should be considering that men and women hold relatively equal positions in today's society. Although some improvements have been made, children are still receiving mixed messages about their appropriate roles in society and what they are supposed to believe about the opposite sex. Children's fairy tales have been popular for their lighthearted plot lines and dream-like qualities. My research shows that these fairy tales leave children with unrealistic ideas of gender roles and life; boys portray a macho and heroic role while girls dream that one day their Prince Charming will find them. I have drafted a teaching unit built around these fairy tales to help children understand the difference between fallacy and reality in terms of gender.

Introduction

Children's literature can be dated back hundreds of years but has only been fully recognized as a specific genre since around the mid- to late 18th century. It has been derived from folklore passed down from generation to generation. In the twentieth and twenty-first century, children's literature has become more diverse, including picture books and other multimedia texts. Previously, because children were more independent and somewhat part of the working class, literature reflected their independence and the world's harsh realities. Starting in the early 1900s, children became more protected and the literature they were exposed to was more fantasy-like in nature. During the 1960s, thanks in part to the hippie revolution, fantastical tales dominated.

Fairy tales began in European countries by women who felt oppressed by the social responsibilities of being high-class citizens. The folktales that women would tell over tea were then transmitted to some famous storytellers, including the Brothers Grimm in Germany and Charles Perrault in France. The Brothers Grimm generally wanted to transmit their collected stories in the most accurate manor without any fantastical characters or ideas (Forsythe 38). Charles Perrault, however, can be seen as the creator of the fairy godmother and other magical characters seen in fairy tales like Cinderella (Forsythe 32). While whimsical in nature, the original Disney Princess series has contributed to children's unrealistic views of gender and fantasy situations.

A common pattern throughout children's literature has been that the content of the stories reflects the current societal times. While this is true when it comes to storyline, the gender stereotypes in children's literature do not reflect the current times. My research on gender stereotypes has dated back to approximately the 1960s and 70s when women began gaining more rights. During the 1960s, women gained a lot of strength in the workplace that stemmed from

several laws, including the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Presidential Executive Order of 1967 ("Women's History in America" 16). Making sure that women and men are portrayed equally is the main concern for most people since teaching children from a young age to accept varied gender roles is important for future equality and acceptance.

Carole Brugeilles is a sociologist who specializes in demographic studies. She, along with Sylvie and Isabelle Cromer, has written "Male and Female Characters in Illustrated Children's Books or How Children's Literature Contributes to the Construction of Gender." These authors have found that women typically are given more minor roles with more physical traits. Girls are also given roles that have very little to do with real life situations and "social status that are generic" (241). Boys, on the other hand, are given dominant roles that are "gratifying," even though they too are very stereotypical of the gender (241). Their research has shown that boys are presented as more adventurous and superior whereas girls are submissive and docile.

> Through my research, I have found that discovery occurs at every point of the day. Research shouldn't only be conducted when an assignment is given, but on a regular basis.

In "Gender Role Stereotypes in Children's Literature: an Update," Carole M. Kortenhaus and Jack Demarest study the improvement of gender stereotypes in children's literature. They noted in their article an interesting theory presented by M. R. Key in "The Role of Male and Female in Children's Books: Dispelling all Doubt": "boys do, girls are." This means that in most children's literature girls are given more physical traits whereas boys are given more active roles. Interestingly, Kortenhaus and Demarest discovered that young girls are more often attributed to being beautiful whereas older women are typically seen as hags and witches. Stemming from this idea comes some interesting theories from Leslee F. Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm in their article "We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales." They found that authors who try to re-write traditional fairy tales only creating more problems since most children can see through the "fractured fairy tales and do not identify with their one-dimensional protagonists" (41). The authors point out that the only powerful women found in fairy tales are ugly and, more often than not, evil. In comparison, the older women who are powerful tend to have some sort of magical power that makes them non-human.

Jacqueline Rose states, "If children's fiction builds an image of the child with the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp" (2). Rose, along with Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, believes that the personality traits that emerge from our children today are being created by the authors of these books. Teaching our children to be open and honest about who they are innately is important, but when we give them literature that does not represent the same ideals we are contradicting ourselves. Children emulate what they read, so by understanding what they are reading they will better understand the behaviors. By making children aware of the incongruities between literature and real life, we have the power to change society for the better.

Through my research, I have found that discovery occurs at every point of the day. Research shouldn't only be conducted when an assignment is given, but on a regular basis. Richard Larson, in his article, "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing," presents this idea and further argues that, while research is important, teaching the research paper as solely something that should be done as part of a course hinders students' abilities to conduct research in their daily lives. I suggest that we start introducing research earlier in a child's school career so that discovery becomes a part of a student's life. Using the Disney Princess series is an easy way to introduce research and analysis because the books are familiar to students. It is also a fun way to present research without inflicting much pressure on the young student.

Methodology

I have read and analyzed five of the stories from the Disney Princess Collection: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*. I extracted information regarding the different behaviors of different genders as well as the different words used to describe males and females. I used Frank Taylor's Coding Frame from "Content Analysis and Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books" as a template for my own Coding Frame based off of the trait categories encountered in my research (309).

| Coding Frame: Female Gender Stereotypes		Coding Frame: Male Gender Stereotypes	
Submissive	Jealousy	Dominant	Independent
Homemaker	Emotional	Handsome	Dependent
Magical	Intelligent	Assertive	Messy
Weak	Timid	Strong	Brave
Brave	Passive	Insensitive	Active
Cooperative	Sensitive	Competitive	Sensitive
Evil	Attractive	Aggressive	Achievement

I also used Carole Brugeilles et al's theory from "Male and Female Character in Illustrated Children's Books or How Children's Literature Contributes to the Construction of Gender" as well as Angela M. and Mark A. Gooden's theory from "Gender Representation in Notable Children's Picture Books: 1995-1999" to analyze the Princess books.

Results

Female Gender Stereotypes
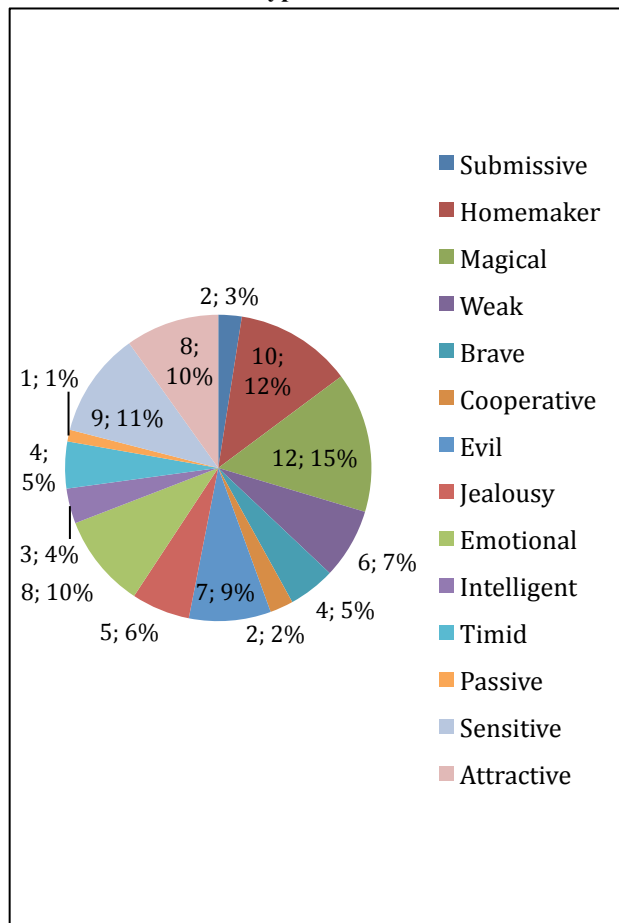
Male Gender Stereotypes
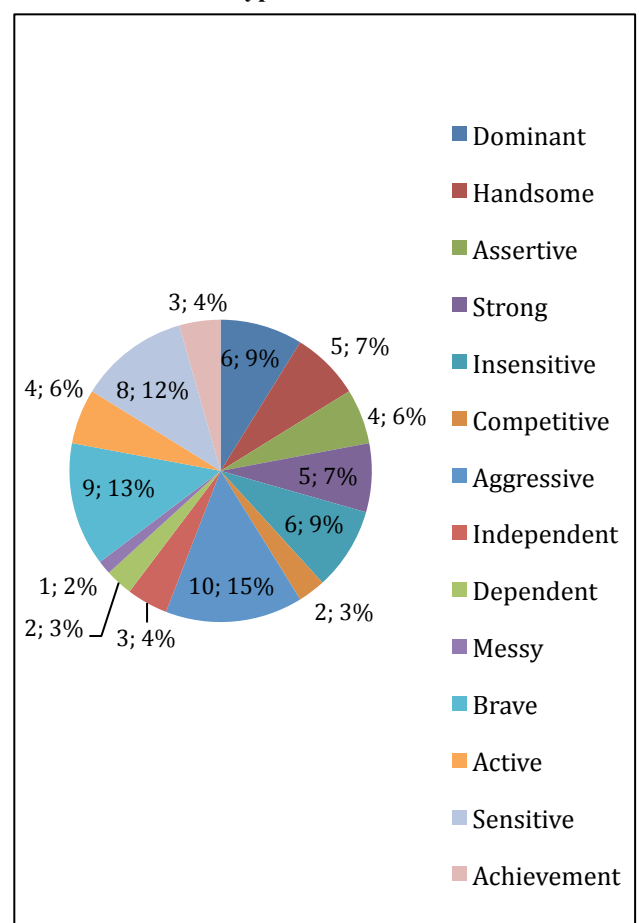
When it comes to female gender stereotypes, there is mainly an excess of women portrayed as magical (15%), homemakers (12%), and sensitive (11%). For male gender stereotypes the most prevalent traits are insensitivity (15%), bravery (13%), and sensitivity (12%). I find this fact strange because of the fact that insensitivity is only two percent higher than sensitivity. This means that even though there is a significant amount of insensitivity seen in the different Disney Princess books there is also a fairly equal amount of sensitivity. The least relevant female traits are being submissive (3%), cooperative (2%), and passive (1%). The least relevant male traits are competitive (3%), dependent (3%), and messiness (2%).

Contribution to the Conversation

Genre: Superintendent Letter

Dear Superintendent Blocker,

In "Gender Role Stereotypes in Children's Literature: an Update," Carole M. Kortenhaus and Jack Demarest study the improvement of gender stereotypes in children's literature. They noted in their article an interesting theory made by M. R. Key in "The Role of Male and Female in Children's Books: Dispelling all Doubt": "boys do, girls are" (221). This means that in most children's literature girls are given more physical traits whereas boys are given more active roles. An interesting discovery by Kortenhaus and Demarest is that young girls are more often attributed to being beautiful whereas older women more often are seen as hags and witches. Stemming from this idea comes some interesting theories from Leslee F. Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm. They found that while authors try to re-write traditional fairy tales they are only creating more of a problem because most children can see through the "fractured fairy tales and do not identify with their one-dimensional protagonists" (41). The authors point out that the only powerful women found in fairy tales are ugly and, more often than not, evil. By comparison, the older women who are powerful tend to have some sort of magical power that makes them non-human.

According to Angela M. Gooden and Mark A. Gooden many gender stereotyping issues in children's literature has led to unwanted social behaviors and stereotyping. In their article entitled, "Gender Representation in Notable Children's Picture Books: 1995-1999," psychologist V. Shaw is referenced for his ideas on gender stereotyping in his 1988 article "Sexual Harassment and Gender Bias." He states:

> Children are not passive observers. As they develop, children look for structure in their lives and are driven by an internal need to fit this structure. They observe the world and try to develop sets of rules that they can apply to a wide variety of situations. A child's knowledge of his own gender and its implications is known as gender identity. As children acquire gender identities they also acquire stereotypical ideas about what it means to be a boy or girl (90).

Children yearn to be accepted. When they see in books that the behaviors of the characters either lead to acceptance or rejection, they take on the roles that lead to acceptance rather than taking on the not so popular rejected roles. Children need to learn that even though they may not always be accepted by their peers, it is okay to be who you feel comfortable being. That is why I am proposing that students have a weeklong unit learning about gender stereotyping and how to point out certain stereotypes in popular children's books. I have chosen the Disney Princess series because the books are very familiar to students no matter what age group. The basic stories serve as an easy way for students to identify different behaviors and characteristics common to males and females. In my research, I have found that the stereotypes of males and females tend to be very apparent which will help students identify different stereotypical traits much faster than some other not so apparent traits that they may encounter in different books. The most common female stereotypical traits found in the Disney Princess series are women being magical (15%),

homemakers (12%), sensitive (11%) and attractive (10%). The most common stereotypical male traits that I discovered are insensitivity (15%), bravery (13%), and sensitivity (12%). I find this fact strange because of the fact that insensitivity is only two percent higher than sensitivity. While there is apparent insensitivity seen by the male characters, there is a fairly equal amount of sensitivity shown by females.

This unit will also introduce students to a very small portion of the research process: taking information and dissecting meaning out of that information. Teaching analysis and how to research needs to start much earlier than high school. Research needs to be incorporated into everyday life because each day is about discovery and making new conclusions about life. I urge you to use my lesson plan and incorporate it into the late elementary school/early middle school curriculum in order to prepare students for analysis and research tasks in the future as well as to help students learn the importance of unnecessary gender stereotyping and the need to be who you are.

In terms of cost, this unit would be very low budget. The only supplies that would be necessary would be the *Inspector Gadget* movie as well as a copy of each Disney Princess book used for general reference throughout the week. Especially in these hard economic times, it is necessary to use resources that are already available to us and to create programs that are very low budget.

Rationale

This letter aims to convince the superintendent of Orange County that teaching students early on how to analyze and conduct research is important to the development of a student. It is also important for the superintendent to know the behavioral effects that gender stereotyping have on the children. This letter intends to relay the urgency of the incorporation of curriculum that helps students think critically and contradict specific stereotypes found in the Disney Princess books. I also touch on the cost effectiveness of the unit because the cost of a program is something that is always on the mind of the superintendent of a major school district.

Genre: Lesson Plan

WEEKLY LESSON PLANS	
Name: Gender stereotyping and the Research Process	
Monday	
Instructional Strategy	Introduce students to the idea that discovery is something that is done every day and not just a task that is done when a research paper is assigned. I will ask students how they learn new things and construct a list that will be re-evaluated at the end of the week. I will ask students what research means to them and how they have been told to research previously
Materials	
Homework	Take a supervised walk with a friend or a parent and write a journal entry about something new that you learned or a discovery that you made while on your walk.
Tuesday	
Instructional Strategy	How do professionals conduct research? I will put on *Inspector Gadget* to show students how research is done in the professional world. After watching the movie we will discuss certain tasks that were performed by *Inspector Gadget* that led to the formation of new ideas.
Materials	*Inspector Gadget*, Worksheet
Homework	Pick one of the Disney Princess books (ie. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, or *Sleeping Beauty*). Read the story and write down the descriptive behaviors and words used to describe males and females. Use the **worksheet** given in class as a helpful guide in your research.
Wednesday	
Instructional Strategy	Introduction to Gender Stereotyping. Break up into groups based on which books children picked and have them discuss the different behaviors and words used to describe boys and girls. Come back together as a class and come up with a definition together of what a stereotype is.

	Discuss the discoveries made from the group discussion about the different Princess Books.
Materials	The five Disney Princess Books: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*.
Homework	Sit down with your friends or parents and discuss different gender stereotypes that exist in today's society. Write a journal entry outlining the different stereotypes discussed.
Thursday	
Instructional Strategy	Breaking the tradition. Talk about different jobs and behaviors that can be held by a man and a woman. In class assignment: have students write a short essay on how they as boys and girls want to be perceived by society.
Materials	Present **pie charts** in the **results** section to discuss the different stereotypes found in the Disney Princess books in order to set up the re-characterization project.
Homework	Using the Princess book that you previously read, re-characterize the boys and girls roles in a more gender neutral way. Recreate the story the way you think it should be told. Due Monday.
Friday	
Instructional Strategy	Tying it all together. Write a reflection in your journal about what you learned this week about gender stereotyping and the research process. Discuss as a group the student's new views on research and the discovery process. Student worksheet about gender stereotyping.
Materials	
Homework	Work on your re-creation of the Disney Princess story you were assigned.

Rationale

This lesson plan is a guide for teachers who wish to teach their students about gender stereotyping and the research process early in a student's school career. I chose to write a lesson plan because it is the easiest way to help students comprehend the ideas that I am presenting them with. This lesson plan is geared toward a 5th or 6th grade classroom and helps students get their feet wet in the research and gender stereotyping world. This is a teacher- and student-friendly lesson plan because these topics can get pretty detailed. Teachers can also use this as a template and tweak where they want based on the individual class or time span. This lesson plan is also designed to get the parents involved with the students' learning in order to get parental support and to open up the lines of communication at home.

Genre: Worksheet
Gender Stereotyping Worksheet

1. What words are used to describe girls/women in society/school?
2. What words are used to describe boys/men in society/school?
3. What are your favorite activities to do in your free time?
4. What activities are performed by boys in the specific Disney Princess book that you were assigned?
   a. What specific behaviors characterize the role of Prince Charming?
5. What activities are performed by girls in the specific Disney Princess book that you were assigned?
   a. What behaviors are specific to the Princesses? Fairy Godmother? Aunts? Evil Stepmother?
6. How do you feel about the different roles and words given to boys and girls in society and in the Princess books?
   Rationale:
   This worksheet will be used as a guide when they are reading their Disney Princess story. It is also used to get a feel for what boys and girls think of when they reflect on boys' and girls' roles in society. This worksheet will also serve as a research tool if further classroom research is needed. Asking how the students feel about gender stereotyping gives researchers a good feel for how gender stereotyping affects children.

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