Pretty Princesses and Brave Knights - The Presentation of Gender in Children’s Picture Books

Näytä kaikki kuvailutiedot

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Children’s picture books include some of the first media a child will be presented with and thus will be an important factor in the development of their gendered identity. Previous studies have found a marked discrepancy between the presentation of male and female characters. Depictions have often been extremely stereotypical and female characters have routinely been erased from stories. Popular English language picture books from the Helsinki Metropolitan Public Library were studied. These books are meant for children of preschool age, or around three to five years old. These books feature some text and images on every page. This thesis studies both, however the focus is strongly on text.

This thesis is divided into two sections. The first section deals with a larger sample of randomly picked books from the Pasila Public Library in Helsinki. From this data set the numbers of male, female, and neutral characters were counted in three different categories; a neutral gender referred to a character with indeterminate gender. These three categories were protagonists, named characters, and illustrated characters. The greatest disparity existed with protagonists, almost two thirds of which were male. Named characters were most equal; nonetheless in each category males were more represented. The career or role of the character in the text was also studied. A far greater variability in male roles was found. A large part of female characters were mothers despite there being more male characters overall. Additionally, female careers were often limited to nurturing and teaching roles while male characters were far more diverse and included several prestigious and powerful careers.

The second part of the thesis deals with 11 of the most checked out books from the public library in 2014. An in-depth analysis of verbs was performed. These verbs were divided into seven categories; activity, existence/relationship, communication, aspect, occurrence, mental, and causative verbs. Most probably due to the simple language of children’s books, no causative verbs were found in the data. Verbs of aspect and occurrence were also rare enough that no further conclusions could be drawn from them. In all categories, male characters were featured in overabundance. When compared to the prevalence of the characters in the data, approximately 40% female, this conclusion remained for all but communication verbs. Relative to prevalence, female characters talk slightly more than male characters, though this is a difference of only a few percent. In all other categories women were associated with less than a third of verbs; this disparity was highest for mental verbs. Female association dropped as verbs became more descriptive of internal processes such as thought; this is most likely due to the lack of female protagonists.

The gendered differences within verb categories were finally looked at. Here, too, stereotypical differences were found. In all but communication verbs, women and girls were associated with fewer unique verbs. Male characters had verbs which were evocative of action, agency, and power. Female characters were often described in situations where they were not in power.

Additionally, a case study was performed on two books titled I love my mummy and I love my daddy. These books were compared and contrasted, showing a clear example of gendered stereotyping. The mother was described existing solely for her child while the father was shown to have his own opinions and ideas. Additionally, the mother was described in nurturing, gentle activities with her child. In contrast, the father was shown playing and having fun with it.

In practically all aspects of picture books, female characters are devalued and erased. They do not exist in as large numbers as men, nor are they shown in a diverse array of roles. Even when compared with prevalence, male characters are spoken about far more often. These gendered differences help to normalize stereotypical gender roles for young readers and to trivialize the presence of women and girls.