

Keeping Gender Neutral in the Elementary Classroom through Newbery Award Winning Literature.



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From Doctor Dolittle to Despereaux: Keeping Gender Neutral in the Elementary Classroom through Newbery Award Winning Literature

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Published: 2008-07-28

Abstract

Elementary classrooms are full of children's literature. The classroom libraries hold stories of adventure, fantasy, and mystery and are the home of many beloved characters from the past and present. Children read these stories and relate to these characters every day. The roles that these characters hold and the behaviors that they have, often serve as the model for children to personify. The problem is that most male characters have typical masculine traits such as being the hero of a situation and saving the damsel in distress. And female characters often have the typical female traits such as being the one who is weak and in need of help from the male. Children who read about these characters begin to think that this is normal behavior and that it isn't acceptable to stray from the roles that these characters represent. For my comprehensive essay, I examine gender roles in children's literature and the implications that these gender roles have on students and instruction in the elementary classroom. Children relate to story characters as they read books and begin to develop gender schemas at a young age. These characters and plot lines of a story help shape a child's view of gender in society and help to shape their own developing gender role. I observed the changes in gender throughout history, looking at other gender studies done in 1971, 1985, and 1998. Through the research of these

previous studies, I found that gender roles in children's literature reflect societal roles of the time period in which they were published. I concentrated my research on the Newbery award winning books, because they are the symbol of quality children's literature. They are found in almost every classroom and school library and they are the books that teachers rely on to be examples of the best children's literature each year. By looking at the winners over time, I was able to see that the gender roles have evolved since the award began in 1922. Because a study has not been done since 1998, I looked at the past ten years (1998-2008) to see what roles and issues were significant in these recent titles. While male and female characters were represented equally, relevant topics such as single parent homes and cancer occurred in the recent winners. This essay also addresses learners and learning, the learning environment, curriculum, and assessment in the classroom in terms of gender roles in literature and what implications there are in the field. Teachers have opportunities to expose their students to gender neutral characters and plot lines by putting books in their classroom that have both traditional and progressive gender roles. Children will be able to decide what their gender role is in society by being exposed to progressive roles in the classroom.

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