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# **Relationships Among Need Achievement Themes and Ethnic and Gender Identities in Elementary Literature Series**

**Kathleen E. Eyia  
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Educators agree that students succeed when reading materials are suitable to their backgrounds and contain ideas that are motivating. Interest in achievement motivation dates back to at least 1910, but until the pioneering work of Atkinson and McClelland, little progress was made in developing achievement motive theory emphasizing both clinical and experimental models (Heckhausen, 1967). McClelland, Atkinson, Clark and Lowell (1953; 1976) formulated the theory of achievement motivation through the use of the Thematic Apperception Test (Murray, 1938) measuring individual differences in the motive to enter an achievement situation. McClelland (1961) defines *n*-Ach (need achievement) motivation as competition with a standard of excellence. The individual strives to do something well or to accomplish a goal for personal satisfaction, for intrinsic rewards. Achievement motivation theory emphasizes the importance and measurement of individual differences in assessing people's interactions with their environment. The strength of *n*-Ach is measured by a score devised by coding the thought content of imaginative stories.

Adapting McClelland's scoring procedure for the examination of the achievement motive in adolescent high-interest, low-level fiction, Bader (1981) reported a great deal of variability with regard to presence of need achievement motive in materials intended for poor readers. Bader found that most stories focused on middle class, white, male characters. In another comprehensive study focusing on adult remedial readers, Kruch (1992) found that out of 120 stories, 72 contained need achievement. Kruch established that the most common protagonist was a white, young adult male with a middle-socioeconomic status.

Reading materials should coincide with learners' backgrounds and interests to activate prior knowledge and motivate further learning (Bond, Tinker, Wasson and Wasson, 1989; Goodman, 1986; Harris, 1970; Smith, 1973; Vacca and Vacca, 1989; Veatch, 1966). Many reading authorities agree that children need strong positive role models for the development of self esteem. Limited ethnic and gender roles in literacy materials may be a true disadvantage for learners. Though stereotyping and bias have been a concern for many years, recently Gollnick, Sadker and Sadker (1982) suggested that when females and minorities are omitted from textbooks, a hidden curriculum is created. This hidden curriculum teaches children that minorities and females are less important and less significant in our society than are Caucasians and males. Treatments of *n*-Ach, ethnic identity, and gender roles, are crucial factors to consider when selecting literature series for elementary grades.

The purpose of this study was to examine a sample of widely used elementary literacy materials to determine the extent to which they include the *n*-Ach motive across gender and ethnic groups. For this study, three widely used literature series were selected. In each series, 80 percent of

the stories were analyzed for grades 2, 3, and 4 according to McClelland et al. (1953; 1976) procedures for scoring. The investigators achieved interrater scoring reliability of .9+ in one week, the time stated by McClelland for acquiring proficiency. In addition to scores for *n*-Ach, the stories were also categorized by identification of the protagonist's ethnic group and whether the gender role was traditional or nontraditional. The data analysis used the Pearson correlation coefficient with the conventional 0.05 level of significance set for testing the relationships.

### **Scoring for *n*-Achievement**

According to McClelland et al. (1953; 1976), in analyzing need achievement there first must be some indication of an achievement goal. The goal of some individual in the story is to be successful in terms of competition with a standard of excellence. The individual may fail to achieve the goal but it is still identified as an achievement goal if there is concern over competition with a standard of excellence. A standard of excellence may imply that there is competitive activity where winning or doing as well or better than someone else is the primary concern. This desire to win need not be explicitly stated as long as there is effective concern for goal attainment and a desire to achieve the goal thoroughly and with great care (standard of excellence).

There need be no explicit statement of concern over the outcome that a good job is desired when a person is working on a new invention or unique accomplishment because of the implied desire for success. The other exception would be in the attainment of a long-term goal (being a success in life). In both cases competing with a standard of excellence is inferred due to feelings of failure experienced if the goal is not reached.

## Gender and ethnic bias

Ethnic identity was scored by identifying the ethnic background of the protagonist. The categories selected for categorization were Caucasian, African, Native American, Hispanic, Asian American, and "other." Protagonists' portrayals in traditional and nontraditional gender roles were examined. Many times boys are portrayed as exhibiting one set of values, behaviors, and roles, and girls as exhibiting another and different set of attributes and characteristics (Gollnick et al., 1982; Sadker and Sadker, 1982). Boys and girls have been portrayed in reading texts as follows:

### Boys

*ingenious*

*creative*

*brave*

*persevering*

*achieving*

*adventurous*

*curious*

*autonomous*

*athletic*

*self-respecting*

*problem solver*

### Girls

*dependent*

*passive*

*incompetent*

*fearful*

*victims*

*docile*

*concerned with domesticities*

*objects of scorn and ridicule*

*aimless*

*concerned with*

*physical appearance*

In the present study, each story was scored as a traditional male or female role if the major characteristics of the protagonist followed these attributes. The story was scored nontraditional if the protagonist differed from this list. The story would be scored as a nontraditional role if one attribute which the story was built around differed greatly, even though the others were more traditionally characteristic. For example, an adventurous, athletic, brave

boy who took up knitting while home sick, and then pursued this hobby (much to the ridicule of his peers), would be scored nontraditional. An athletic girl going out for the boys' basketball team would also be scored as a nontraditional gender role.

## Methodology

Three publishers of children's literature series were selected: Silver, Burdett and Ginn (1991); Holt, Rinehart and Winston (1989); and Houghton Mifflin (1989). Between 21 to 25 stories were analyzed in each grade level for each publisher. This constituted over 70 percent of the total selections available for each grade.

A gridded chart was used to analyze the variables of *n*-Ach, ethnic identity, and male and female roles. The publisher, grade level and title of each story was recorded vertically with the variables along the top of the grid running horizontally. Data were statistically analyzed to determine frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and the Pearson correlation coefficient. Chi-square was used for categorical data. Several crosstabs were used to test for the presence of *n*-Ach and its relationship with ethnic identity and gender roles.

## Results

A statistically significant difference was found among series in relation to the presence of need achievement ( $p < .05$ ). Silver Burdett and Ginn had *n*-Ach in 80 percent of their stories for grade two, and 72 percent for grade three. Holt, Rinehart and Winston had *n*-Ach in 32 percent of their stories for grade two, and 44 percent for grade three. Houghton Mifflin had *n*-Ach in 61.9 percent of their stories for grade two and 76.2 percent for grade three. All series showed similar findings for grade four although they were

not statistically significant. In all three series a statistically significant correlation was found between *n*-Ach and the male role ( $p < .01$ ). This indicated that whenever there was a nontraditional male role there also existed a need achievement motive. Although there were too few stories regarding female roles for statistical analysis, the findings revealed a similar trend toward *n*-Ach and nontraditional female roles. There were very few stories overall in which there existed nontraditional female roles. When there was a nontraditional female role, however, there was always a need achievement motive. A significant correlation existed between male role and ethnic identity in all publishers ( $p < .05$ ). When there was a nontraditional male role, 88.9 percent of these males were white.

A statistically significant relationship was found between *n*-Ach and ethnic group for Houghton Mifflin ( $p < .001$ ). In this series, *n*-Ach was more prevalent in nonwhite stories. Though there were not statistically significant findings for the other series, Silver, Burdett and Ginn had an even distribution of need achievement motive in both white and nonwhite stories. Holt, Rinehart and Winston had more *n*-Ach in stories which involved white characters rather than nonwhite characters. A great variety of ethnic backgrounds were represented in the Silver, Burdett and Ginn series, and it appeared that these stories contained *n*-Ach. The other two series seemed to have less *n*-Ach in nonwhite stories.

## Conclusions

Literature series do differ in the presence of the need achievement motive. If educators feel that it is crucial that children's literature contain *n*-Ach, then it is essential that educators analyze instructional materials for this element. McClelland (1961) states that once *n*-Ach scoring is

learned, it can be done in about the time it takes to read a story.

In our diverse culture major characters who exemplify achievement motive should be role models with whom all children can identify. The presence of a female or an African American in a story is not sufficient. We should consider the values they represent.

This study indicates that when there are nontraditional male and female roles portrayed in elementary literature series, *n*-Ach tends to be present. The majority of these role models, however, tend to be Caucasian. It is important for children to understand the complexity and the diversity that exists within groups to cope effectively in our ever-changing society. One way that this can be done is by reading literature in which characters are depicted as multidimensional human beings. It is vital that educators confront sex-role stereotypes and the lack of female and minority role models in textbooks. Motivational role models should be available to every student. Teachers, as influential instructional decision makers, need to educate themselves (through the use of exercises and activities) to help them be more aware of bias, as well as the need achievement motive in textbooks.

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