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PERSONALITY AND BEHAVIOR TRAITS IN BASAL READERS

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The reading of stories provides a way of living vicariously in a multitude of social and emotional situations. A reader can identify with the problems encountered by characters in stories but greater consequence results from identification with the characters. Children and adolescents, who identify with another individual whose personal and vocational life they hope to emulate, may function at significantly higher levels than those who have no ideal.

Data from past research has indicated that "cultural attitudes and values are conveyed through the content of stories" (Blom, 1968). This study was generated to determine whether males and females in basal reading textbooks have the same treatment concerning personality traits and representation. A conceptual scheme of characteristics, i.e., the sex role assignment and the personality behaviors was constructed.

Validated traits, inherent in the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF, Cattell, 1970) were used in the scheme for personality behaviors. Each behavior trait in Cattell's questionnaire was suitable for use in the analysis of the behaviors in basal reading stories. Because human males and females were not used, the personality traits were used, not as a questionnaire, but as personality behaviors to analyze male and female characters. Each main character was assigned the predominant personality behaviors which the character appeared to demonstrate. The main characters were classified according to their sex role assignment and had his/her predominant personality behaviors tallied. Supportive characters were tallied by sex, the number of occurrences of males and females, and by occupation.

Six basal reading series were analyzed: *Sheldon Reading Series*, Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1973; *The Bookmark Reading Program*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974; *Harper and Row Basic Reading*, Harper and Row, 1972; *The Holt Basic Reading System*, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1973; *The Young America Basic Reading Program*, Lyons and Carnahan, 1974; and *Macmillan Reading Program*, The Macmillan Company, 1974. Each of the reading series consisted of approximately twelve reading levels. A total of 516 stories from the six basal reading series was analyzed.

Analysis of Sex Role Assignment

The sex role assignment was examined in all basal reading series according to total main and supportive characters, analysis of sex role assignment in each basal series, and the analysis of sex role assignment by grade level.

A total of 792 main characters were portrayed in 516 stories randomly selected for analysis. In thirty-four stories no main characters were portrayed but several characters shared supportive roles equally. An overall frequency and percentage distribution indicated that main male characters outnumbered main female characters at a ratio of 2.6 to 1. A total of 1,484 supportive characters were portrayed in the basal reading series. Female supportive characters were outnumbered by male supportive characters 1.9:1. When main and supportive characters were totaled, there was an overall average of 2.3 males to 1 female. The comparisons of the total occurrences of male and female supportive characters were comparable to the male and female main characters. This analysis indicated that males and females do not occur equally in basal reading series.

Each basal reading series illustrated the main male character as the dominant personality over the main female character with ratios beginning at 2.9:1 for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich and diminishing to 2.2:1 for Macmillan. For supportive characters the ratio for male and female characters narrowed although not noticeably.

All companies were combined by grade levels beginning with the preprimer level and concluding with the sixth grade level. This analysis gave a horizontal description to indicate whether or not there was a grade level trend among companies concerning the treatment of males and females. At the preprimer level male main characters outnumbered female main characters 1.7:1. With the exception of the second grade level, the ratios increased for each successive level. However, since total male main characters outnumbered total female main characters 2.6:1, the ratio from the preprimer level through fourth level would indicate a decrease in the ratio of males to females in basal reading series. The contrast among grade levels for main characters indicated that only the preprimer level with a critical ratio of 2.42 was significant at the .05 level but all other levels from one to six were significant at the .01 level. As the grade level increased, the critical ratio increased with the exception of grade one which had a high critical ratio of 4.50.

Portrayal of supportive males and females for each grade level indicated some inconsistencies in the grade level ascent for supportive characters. No pattern became evident even though there was a minimal increase of supportive male characters. Critical ratios of sex role assignment for supportive characters in each grade level indicated a trend similar to that of main characters.

Analysis of Personality Behaviors

Since main male characters outnumbered main female characters 2.6:1, it would appear logical that the personality traits exhibited by main males and main females should continue at a ratio of 2.6:1. However, twelve behaviors had a closer balance between males and females indicating that both sexes exhibit similar personality behaviors. The twelve personality traits were experimenting, shrewd, venturesome, expedient, emotionally stable, undisciplined self-conflict, imaginative, more intelligent, self-sufficient, reserved, assertive and sober.

The results of the analysis of personality behaviors indicated that males in current basal reading series were portrayed more frequently as emotionally stable, venturesome, and experimenting in significantly higher numbers than females who were depicted as shy, conservative, and easily affected by feelings ("female" behaviors).

The Allyn and Bacon series demonstrated that males were more assertive, emotionally stable, self-sufficient, and relaxed than were females. In the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich series, males demonstrated more intelligent behavior and portrayed imaginative rather than practical personalities in this series. Two personality traits significant in the Harper and Row series were happy-go-lucky and tough-minded. The Holt, Rinehart and Winston series demonstrated males vs. females as emotionally stable. No significant differences were noted in the Lyons and Carnahan and Macmillan series.

In the six basal reading programs, nine personalities from a total of ninety-six pairs were significant. All basal reading programs treated males and females equally with the exception of the nine significant personalities which were "male" behaviors. The male behaviors were: assertive, emotionally stable (two occurrences), self-sufficient, relaxed, more intelligent, imaginative, tough-minded and happy-go-lucky.

The basal reading programs were combined so each grade level could be examined to determine whether a grade level trend existed. The analysis indicated that males and females behaved in similar manners in the preprimer, first and third grade books. One personality trait, forthrightness, was typically male for the fourth grade books. Two traits, venturesome and forthrightness, were "male behaviors" for fifth grade books. Sixth grade books portrayed three personality traits, emotionally stable, controlled, and relaxed as male traits.

In the primary grades all of the textbooks indicated an equality concerning the personalities of males and females. Only one personality from a total of fifty-one indicated that males were forthright while females were not. A small increase was noted for the intermediate grades with males being venturesome, shrewd, emotionally stable, controlled and relaxed.

Occupations and Role Models

The occupation indicated in the total of 516 stories included main and supportive adult characters. Some of the listed occupations were actually role models but were included with occupations. Most occupational or role model observations occurred separately for men and women. In eleven instances men and women shared the same occupation or role model. In the traditionally male breadwinner role, two females in two different stories (in first and fifth grade books) were shown as working mothers or the heads of their families. In the traditional role of homemaker, there was one occasion, in a first grade book, in which a man character was portrayed in a homemaker role. He was drying dishes as the mother washed them. A total of 137 males were portrayed in 85 occupations or role models while 174 females were portrayed in 27 occupations or roles.

Biographical personalities and folk fantasy stories indicated that males were again over-represented. Analyzed were 39 biographies of which 34 were male-oriented and 5 were female-oriented. In fantasy stories there were 47 male stories, 8 female, and 21 male/female combinations.

Conclusions

The analysis of sex role assignment and personality traits produced data which led to the following conclusions:

- a. None of the basal reading series or grade levels have begun to demonstrate equality concerning the number of occurrences of male and female characters.
- b. The basal reading series were statistically but not numerically equating the behaviors of males and females within their textbooks. Although females were significantly under-represented as characters, the behaviors applied to males and females were egalitarian with both sexes portraying each of the thirty-two personalities equally.
- c. The personalities of males and females by grade levels were depicted as statistically equal despite the increase in over-representation of "male" behaviors.
- d. The majority of stories in basal reading series portrayed males as the dominant sex.
- e. Sex stereotyping, dependent upon the personalities and behaviors exhibited by males and females, was not prevalent in each reading series since each sex was treated equally eliminating any prejudices or biases favoring either sex. There was no trend of sex stereotyping from grade to grade despite the occurrences of five stereotypical "male" personalities.
- f. Males and females were not treated equally among series concerning the diversity and number of occupations and the role model images which were presented in basal reading series.
- g. All basal reading series were egalitarian concerning personality traits indicating no trend from one basal reading program to another.

Since children are exposed to textbooks during their formative years, they will perpetuate the role models and personality traits which textbooks portray. An equality between males and females must be exhibited in basal reading series to provide boys and girls the exposure of observing vicariously a variety of opportunities to fulfill their human potentials. Because of an over-representation of males in textbooks, girls may begin to believe and internalize the idea that the male role in society is more important than the female role.

Role models in textbooks must be variable and change with society rather than remain stereotypical or traditional. Otherwise, the role models depicted in basal reading series will constrict or repress self-development of children. Narrowly defined role models will contribute to a negative self-image and emotional dependence, damaging to boys and girls.

Inspirational and aspirational material is available in biographies. An increased number of women portrayed in aspirational roles must be presented so girls will know that many professions are open to women.

Writers of textbook stories must portray women on an equal basis and offer boys and girls equally positive role images of physical, emotional and intellectual potential. Undoubtedly, the attitudes of writers are influenced by society which has exerted a powerful control on its members by placing certain restrictions on each of the sexes.

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