An Exploration of How Female Characters are Portrayed in Levelled Texts

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Declaration:

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research and work. Wherever contributions of others are included, every measure was taken to ensure that it was clearly indicated. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other institution of education. The work was done under the guidance of Angela Morris at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin.

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Abstract

This documentary analysis examines how female characters are portrayed in levelled texts. Using the principals of both grounded theory and discourse analysis the texts of a sample of ten books from the PM series used in schools for 3rd class were examined. Stereotypical portrayals of female characters were depicted as acceptable ways of creating female characters, and in most cases female characters who broke against the mould of what women should be were depicted as archetypal villains for going against the tide. The texts for the most part reflected the 'normal' life in western societies, however, they were not inclusive and representative of all females.

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"We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back."

- Malala Yousafzai (2013).

If there is one thing that I have taken from the classroom, is that children are very much so clued in to what is happening around them in today's society in Ireland. I met one little girl on my first placement, when I was really nervous about being in a classroom, and I found that I in fact recognised a lot of similarities between this girl and myself at that age. She was a bright, avid reader, who was always full of questions, and who was not afraid to rock the boat and be someone who expressed who they are. We were reading *The Boy in the Stripped Pyjamas* as a class novel, and she asked me a question that brought me right back to when I was that age myself, she asked "Miss, why are all the adventurous, brave characters always boys, when we have so many brave women in the world?". That was a question that I knew I did not have the answer to, because it was something I had asked myself from her age growing up. It was from that moment, that I knew I wanted to examine how female characters were portrayed in children's literature.

At a time when, as a country we have been making new waves, in making Ireland a more inclusive, and equal place for everyone to live, I wonder have we ignored a huge part of children's lives, a place of wonder where their imaginations grow, and they learn to recognise who they are themselves by relating to the characters, or in ignoring the types of people, that are being represented in the texts that they are reading in school? Can they recognise themselves in the literature? Faas, Smith and Darmody (2018) examined what role principals in Ireland have in creating an inclusive learning environment, in their study

they highlighted that the school leaders have to understand the implications and challenges involved in running a diverse school context. As teachers, we try our best to ensure that all children "irrespective of gender, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic background or special educational need" (Shevlin et al, 2009) are included in the school community. I believe, that one way that we can help this to happen is by presenting resources, and materials that reflect the children and their own identities. The aim of the primary school curriculum in Ireland is to celebrate "the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development" (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 6). Therefore, the resources and materials that are being used in class should reflect this approach, and it is that reason why many of the levelled texts and books that are being used in classrooms portray the everyday lives of children; in school, their hobbies, their families and their friendships.

Levelled texts are a huge part of literacy development in primary school classrooms in Ireland, and it is because of this that it is important that they are examined fully to ensure they adhere to the aim of representing all children's individual uniqueness. There have been many studies examining female characters in children's literature (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus and Young, 2006.; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido & Tope, 2011, and Louie 2012) however, still in 2018, nothing seems to have been or is being done about changing how women are represented in the books that are in circulation in primary schools in Ireland, and that they are representing all ethnicities, abilities, and also those who do not fit into the stereotypical constructions of femininity. The aim of this research, was to examine how both stereotypical and non-stereotypical female characters are represented in levelled readers for children in primary schools in

Ireland. To study the entirety of the reading scheme, was not possible due to the small scale of this project, therefore a small sample of levelled readers from the PM series was examined. Levelled texts are used both in the main classroom and as part of the reading recovery programme on a daily basis, and because of this they must be held under enquiry to ensure that they are of high quality not only in terms of being a learning aid, but the messages that are interpreted within them. This study is attempting to investigate the variety of female characters in this series, and if they are representative and inclusive of all children.

In the following study, you will find the following chapters presented. In the next chapter you will find a review of the literature that was a guiding role in the study prior to data collection. The following areas of literature were reviewed; a theoretical background in gender studies, the societal views of gender and how gender roles are perceived, and the representation of female characters in children's media and literature.

You will then find the methodology chapter in which the methods used throughout the duration of this study are discussed and the rationale for choosing them. Also, in this chapter, the development of the rubric, sample selection, limitation and ethical considerations, and my own positionality within the study are stated and discussed.

The chapter following methodology is where the main findings, and analysis of the data are presented and discussed, and connections to the literature were made. Finally, the concluding chapter, where the researcher's final thoughts and recommendations for literature going forward are brought together to conclude the study.

<center>**Literature Review**</center>

Introduction:

     A body of literature based on the area of gender stereotypes and the underrepresentation of female character's in children's levelled texts, as well as picture books gave me a base to begin this research. This chapter describes the search process that was carried out while sourcing/identifying the literature that was relevant to the topic. It also looks at theories around gender stereotyping and pre-existing research-based studies related to the research question "How are female characters represented in children's levelled texts?". The order in which the review of the literature is presented is; a theoretical background on gender development, an insight into how gender roles are presented, and representation of female characters across multiple media sources.

Theoretical Background:

     Gender Schema Theory:

     This theory originated with Dr. Susan Bem in the early 1980's, in Cornell University in the US. According to Bem (1981) gender schema is a cognitive structure that aids a person to organise their individual perceptions of gender. Bem (1981) stated that what the gender schema theory proposed, was that sex-typing comes from "gender-based schematic processing, from generalised readiness to process information, on the basis of sex-linked associations that constitute the gender schema" (Bem, 1981, p. 355). Sex-typing is the schematic process in which it is determined if a person is ready to accept their sex/gender and where they situate themselves in their gender (Bem, 1981). She believes that children process information regarding sex-roles on a continuous basis, as they experience their daily life. She states that the child can take on the new information

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they collect and attach it to pre-existing schemas of gender-based associations on what it is to be 'male' and 'female' (Bem, 1981). Because of this, the implication is that media/literature and external influences of what it is to be either gender helps children to create schemas that may potentially make it more difficult on their own development.

Social Cognitive Theory:

Bem's 1981 paper reflects ideas similar to those of Bandura's 1992 Social Cognitive Theory and a child's ability to construct their gender identity. In their 2004 paper Bandura and Bussey discuss how humans develop in three stages of gender identification;

- **gender identity:** requires the ability to label oneself a 'boy' or 'girl' and others as 'boys', 'girls', 'man' and 'woman'.

- **gender stability:** the ability to recognise that gender remains constant overtime.

- **gender consistency:** the child knows that gender is invariant despite changes in experiences.

(Bandura &Bussey, 2004, p. 677-678).

From this, social cognitive theory suggests that children develop their own gender identification by first acting the way they think they should act according to the expectations of their gender, that is derived from external influences e.g. parents, peers etc. They then later begin to behave in a way that they feel is right to them as an individual, regardless as to what society is telling them to behave, act and count. Gender development must address the causal gap between gender identity and gendered style behaviour, mentioned in Bandura and Bussey (2004). They explain how individuals categorise

themselves to be either male or female, leading to gender stereotyped behaviour, however they state that though "many choose to follow the gender stereotypes, others act in opposition to it" (Bandura and Bussey, 2004, p. 697).

Cognitive Perspective on Gender Development:

In her chapter of '*The Developmental Social Psychology of Gender'* Carol L. Martin (2012) discusses how cognitive perspectives, based on Piaget's stages of cognitive development, the children develop their recognition of gender simultaneously whilst they are developing their Piagetian cognitive stages. This can be found in early literature on gender stereotypes by psychologists such as Lippmann (1922). Lippmann (as cited in Martin, 2012) said stereotypes are like 'pictures in our heads' (Lippmann, as cited in Martin, 2012, p.92). Martin (2012) states that categorizing brings clarity to the environment that the children are in, in terms of their external, and internal influences. Kohlberg (as cited in Martin, 2012) used Piaget's ideas as a basis for developing a new gender development theory. He argued that children rather than developing their own sense of gender identity, are behaving to and wanting to adhere to the social norms of gender stereotypes. Martin (2012) discusses how Kohlberg (as cited in Martin, 2012) stated that children develop their own sense of identity by what they observe from others, this enables them to remember gendered behaviour and act according to what they observed at a more concrete definite level. She noted how a child's motivation, and specifically attention to role models relate directly to how they develop an understanding of a gender in society. For example; seeing their mother only act in motherly roles, and same with grandmothers, and characters in books and TV programmes – the child will

develop the understanding that women are to be mothers in society and doing otherwise would go against societal norms.

Feminist Theory:

Judith Butler (1988) spoke about how the expressive model of gender, in which a child displays their personal traits and attributes to show who they are in terms of gender, does not pose as a comprehensive theory about what gender is, or the manner in which it is constructed, and that it does not prescribe a 'feminist political programme' (Butler, 1988, p.529). However, she argues that, it is mainly political interests that create the social phenomena of gender itself. Gayatri Spivak (as cited in Butler, 1988) stated how feminists need to rely on an 'operational essentialism' - a false set of concepts and how they need to be universal in order to advance positive views of feminism. She also stated that knowing 'women' as a category is not as expressive as we would like it to be but that we can use for strategic purposes, to get to a position we need to be in by being able to comfortably express ourselves via emotion. Butler (1988) expresses that nothing about 'femaleness' is waiting to be expressed, but it is all about showing the diverse experiences of being a woman that needs to be expressed with caution in the language we use.

Butler (1990) discusses what can be meant by 'identity' and the grounds on which the presumptions that identities are self-determined. More importantly that the assumptions made are what informs discourse on gender identities. This impacts on where the place of expressive feminism is in society. Butler (1990) outlines how discussion on identity should not come as a precursor to 'gender identity', they should develop in unison. Essentially, this means that one cannot know oneself truly until one has accepted their gender, they are one in the same. She explains how identity is seen as a normative ideal

rather than a descriptive feature of a person's experience. Butler (1990) also discussed how the social actions within a given cultural field can take away the very power that a person needs in order to discover their own personal gender identity.

Intersectional Feminism:

In feminist theory, intersectionality has become a leading way to conceptualise the relations between systems that cause oppression under which our identities are constructed and where we are located in the social hierarchy of power and privilege (Carastathis, 2014). In her paper, she discusses what oppression is, she states that it is not a single process that can be originated from gender alone. According to Carasthathis (2014) intersectionality theory has been celebrated as being the "most important contribution that women's studies has made so far" (p. 304). In her 2014 paper, on Intersectional Feminism, Yuval-Davis discussed the different kinds of divisions in society, she stated while all social divisions share some features and are constructed by each other they cannot be reducible to each other (p.200). She also discusses the intersections between; gender, disability, sexuality and ethnicity. Carasthathis (2014) critiqued intersectionality and its goal of 'inclusion', and questions whether intersectionality could transform feminism into combining other combinations of oppressed women.

Gender Role Perceptions:

Children Influenced by Gender Role Perceptions:

Research on gender stereotyping has been under continuous study since the 1960's/70's. According to Peterson and Lach (1990) the research incessantly portrayed female characters in children's books as being: passive, dependent, and more incapable than the male characters in the books. They examined the effects that gender stereotypes

have on children's cognitive development of their gender schemas. Trepanier – Street and Romatowski (1993) examined how children's attitudes towards occupational roles, influenced them initially, were further reinforced in the books they were reading.

Richter and Smith (2006) in their chapter of *Men and Fatherhood in South Africa* stated that historically men have fulfilled many roles as part of their duty of fatherhood as the "breadwinners" and "protectors of women and children" (p.155) In their study they discussed how the changing view of fathering has emerged with data that the men are welcoming fatherhood, and that the fathers are changing from the stereotypical father to a father who is interested in engagement with caring for the children (p.156). Cuddy, Fiske and Glick (2004) discussed the expectations that society holds for women who are working, they stated that research found that women who have children are taken less seriously in the corporate world due to their natural maternal instinct, due to this they are less likely to break through the glass ceiling as those in posts higher up are more likely to favour men for higher positions that require more commitment.

Different Levels of Independence between Males and Females:

Brown, Mackett, Gong, Kitazawa and Paskins (2008) examined the level of independence experienced by boys and girls, and whether they display different levels of independence when they are travelling somewhere. In their findings they stated that boys were likely to travel by foot, or bicycle, whereas in contrast the girls were more inclined to depend on travelling by public transport or car. They also looked at whom the children travelled with, Brown et al. (2008) found that the boys mostly travelled alone, and girls were more likely to travel with a parent or guardian. They discussed the gender differences, that girls were viewed as being weaker, and less independent. They

highlighted the importance of independence in a child's mobility patterns, not only in terms of exercise levels, but stated that "being able to move around without adults increases a child's independence in a number of ways" (p. 399). They stated that, if more attention is given to the different patterns of behaviour between boys and girls that there could be some facilities put in place in order to take them into action.

Children's Understanding of Gender Roles:

Our sense of identity, specifically gender identity, is developed during childhood (McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescolidio and Tope, 2011). According to these authors, by preschool a child will have developed a sense of what they identify to be their gender as this is formed with the help of peers, parents and teachers, to categorize all people into being male or female depending on their traits e.g. whether they are docile, pleasant, pretty or angry, handsome and strong. McCabe et al. (2011) stated that children can also form their understanding of gender identity from the books that they read, they said "books contribute to how children understand what is expected of women and men and shape how they think of their place in the social structure" (McCabe et al., 2011, p.199). The paper states how children can see women as less significant / interesting characters as they are usually portrayed in a secondary role. They note because of the pre-existing schema and prior experience to reading, even when there is a female character in a central role, the children view them as a secondary character. McCabe et al (2011) note that exposure to egalitarian literature that show female characters in non-traditional roles can change a schema, it will not happen after reading one book, children need to also gain their understanding and comprehension of gender from what they experience in their own lives. McCabe et al (2011) found that though gender is a social creation, it is a key source in

reproducing and legitimating gender systems and gender inequalities. They discussed the disparities in children's books, and as a result suggested that female characters "are less important than their male counterparts" (McCabe et al, 2011, p.218).

In their 2010 study Fodor and Balogh examined how people feel about "the appropriate position of women and men in society" (p.290). They stated how a conservative turn in gender role attitudes has been blamed for the decline in the level of the female workforce – equally in a declining number in the sharing of the household labour, along with the decline in the amount of women in parliament. Their data (2010) showed that men and women hold and express different opinions on where a woman's place or where a man's place is in society and that they're influenced by the societal views that are presented to them.

Children's Perceptions of Toys and Play:

Lever (1978) discussed in her study that historically boys have been linked to playing sports – specifically team games and engaging in more physically demanding and rougher games. Equally, she noted that it was the view of society that the emphasis at the time of the study was on competitive field games, and team games were to be "served as a training ground for future soldiers" (P. 480). She made a comparative observation that although there had always been an interest for women and girls in their participation in sports that they were engaging in the more creative sports such as competitive gymnastics and dance, and that there was no "connection and development of females engaging in team sports" (p. 480).

This is reflected in a report by Pike and Jennings (2005) when they stated that when children were exposed to commercials in which toys were portrayed in such a way

that affiliates them with certain genders they learned the "gender appropriateness of toys modelled behaviour, which may affect their toy preference and nature of play" (Pike and Jennings, 2005, p.84/85). In the overall findings of this report, Pike and Jennings (2005) discussed that the gender of the child who modelled the toys in the advertisements had an effect on who would play with them and how. This discussed how the research suggested that fathers are less likely to support their sons for playing with toys that are viewed as being for girls, but that girls are supported equally for playing with toys that are for 'boys' as they are when playing with 'girls' toys.

Gender Differences in Expressed Emotions through Language and Behaviours:

In 1999, Tepper and Cassidy carried out an examination of children's picture books in a different area of gender stereotyping – gender differences in emotional language, how a person expresses their emotions through the use of language. They stated how they found it unusual that this area of gender stereotyping-based research had not been looked at before, as emotion is one of the first things people develop to a level in which they understand how to express e.g. crying. They state how children identify with the characters as role models, as they are developing their own gender identities, they take notice of what emotions are being expressed by the different characters. As a result of this, children learn that certain emotions are not seen to be appropriate to express when identifying with a certain gender.

They stated how there is a cultural stereotype that females are viewed as being more emotional than males. They note that "male characters would more often be associated with emotional words considered for males – meaning; angry, proud etc, while

female characters would more often be associated with emotional words considered appropriate for females" – meaning; shy, scared etc. (Tepper & Cassidy, 1999, p. 270). Izard (as cited in Tepper & Cassidy, 1999) stated how boys are more likely to disregard emotions such as fear, than girls are. He highlights how female characters express emotions such as love, fear and shyness, but male characters express emotions such as anger and bravery. As a result of this, boys and girls do not find themselves being able to express emotions that are not 'socially expected'.

The Representation of Female Characters in Children's Media and Literature:

Televised Gender Roles:

According to Gaye Leigh Green (1997) the significance of gender roles can depend on two important factors; whether the children can tell the difference between what reality is and what is fantasy on television. Kaplan (as cited in Green, 1997), states that children under the age of eight cannot distinguish between what is real and what is performed. The second factor of importance, according to Green (1997) is whether the perception of gender is important in young children.

Green (1997) noted that when she observed children's television to examine how female characters/ roles are portrayed she found them to be quite repetitive. She presented her findings from what she observed in children's TV shows by categorizing female roles into seven categories:

1. The Infant: This representation usually depicts a character who is craving love and affection.

2. The Shrew: A character that is mean and enjoys tormenting others.

3. The Eccentric: A female character who is given a central role but only to portray a weird/odd character.

4. The Maternal: Another option for females to be given a central role, but as the mother. Sometimes the only female character at all.

5. The Frump: A character whose size is big in stature, and has a hard time keeping up with the male characters, physically.

6. The Vamp: The portrayal of a female character, no matter of their age as being a vision of unattainable beauty.

7. The Twin: Another chance of a female being a central role in a show, but only to be associated as a twin of a male character.

(Green, 1997,

p. 27-30).

As a result of what is portrayed in these children's TV shows, it leads to us asking questions such as "where the brave girls are?" "where are the adventurous girls?".

Representation of Female Characters in Children's Books:

In 2006 Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus and Young carried out an updated study investigating gendered stereotypes and under-representation of female characters in 200 popular children's picture books. They discussed whether sexism that was portrayed in the picture books mattered or not, in their results they spoke about the issue being common sense, that gender bias and sexism in books matters to everyone, parents too, whether they are feminist or not. Hamilton et al. (2006) stated that "stereotyped portrayals of the sexes and underrepresentation of female characters contribute negatively to children's

development, limit their career aspirations, frame their attitudes about their future roles as parents, and even influence their personality characteristics." (Hamilton et al, 2006., p. 757)

Frohreich (2009) examined the characterisation of the wicked witch, she stated how women who are portrayed in these negative roles, do not present themselves having feminine traits. She stated how women who display 'masculine' features and behaviours, are stigmatised and persecuted and were always seen to be "monstrous and evil". She posed a question in her study, asking if the women that are portrayed in the role of the 'wicked witch' is because they pose "a threat to gender binary" (p. 143). She states as fact that women who do not act within the limitations of gender binary will always be portrayed in a negative light.

Female Characters in Children's Fairy Tales:

In her 2012 journal article, Patricia Louie examined the truth about how gender is represented in fairy tales. She states how the images that are portrayed of female characters in the stories become all too familiar and lead the way for how we form perceptions of gender roles in society (Louie, 2012). The images that she found were that female characters were always docile, timid, and shy. She investigated what influence these images of women and girls may have on the formation of a child's gender identity and highlighted how these portrayals could have a negative influence on girls. She noted how the image of beauty has such a central role in the character's role (Louie, 2012). She states how beauty is akin to being graceful and innocent, whereas the wicked characters are aggressive and envious; they are portrayed to be ugly. Understanding that this has a

deeper meaning, she states how children could evaluate this as 'beauty = good' and 'ugly = bad' (Louie, 2012).

Conclusion:

In this section, I have examined both the key theories and pre-existing research that has acted as both an aid and has helped to inform my own study. Bem's (1981) and Bandura and Bussey's (2004) works highlighted that gender identity is formed via systematic development. Many studies such as Peterson and Lach's (1990) paper examined the influence that the stereotypical portrayals of gender in society had on how children perceive gender, and what kind of behaviour is expected of them in society. Studies such as Green's (1997), Brown et al.'s (2008) and Louie's (2012) outlined the importance that society should hold in both understanding and allowing children of each gender the independence in their early stages of gender and identity development, so that children can determine who they are, and not who society thinks they should be according to what is portrayed in media and literature.

In the next section, I will discuss the development of the research and the chosen methodology.

Methodology:

Introduction:

There are different ways of viewing the world of research – these are known as educational research paradigms. A paradigm is a 'framework containing the basic assumptions, ways of thinking and methodology that are commonly acknowledged by members of a scientific community (www.dictionary.com, 2017). This piece of research will take the form of documentary analysis. Therefore, this chapter will outline; the chosen methods of analysis and the researcher's rationale in choosing them, the process taken in order to select and access the documents to analyse, the limitations and ethical considerations that were faced during the process, and the researcher's personal positionality within the topic area.

For the purpose of this study, a series of levelled guided readers were examined – guided readers are used across schools on both a national and international level in order to improve a student's level of reflective thought, and critical interaction with what they are reading from a young age. Swaine (2010) stated in her study that although "guided conversations around text did support pupils in viewing texts from a more critical and reflective stance" (P.135).

Method:

Documentary analysis has been defined as being a systematic, objective, and analytical approach to draw on conclusion from pre-existing literature (Cohen, L.; Mannion, L.; Morrison, L., 2011). The analysis for this research project will be informed by grounded theory and discourse analysis, in a pragmatic view.

Grounded Theory:

Grounded theory as a methodology explicitly involved the generation of a theory whilst doing social research as two separate parts of the same study. Grounded theory studies share some similarities with other methods of research such as qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory was initially presented by Glaser and Straus in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). In this book their main purpose was to offer the rationale for theory that was grounded, through the interaction with data collected during a research project such as this (Glaser & Straus, as cited in Strauss and Corbin, 1998). According to Cohen et al. (2011) the main idea within grounded theory is that the theory itself is discovered at the end of the research. They state that it already exists within the data, and that it is the researcher who needs to examine the data and find it.

Discourse Analysis:

The term discourse analysis has come to be used in a vast range of meanings – as a theory and method it is a systematic introduction to research as a body of research of theories for social science (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) stated that it brings three different approaches together;

- Discourse Theory: aims at an understanding of the social phenomena. Discourse theory is suitable as a social field and theoretical foundation for different social constructionist approaches to discourse analysis (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). The overall idea of discourse theory, according to Jorgensen and Philips (2002), is that "social phenomena are never finished" (p.24) so they can never truly be fixed.

- Critical Discourse: many philosophers, such as Foucault, have been known to attach social problems to critical discourse analysis (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002).

They stated that critical discourse analysis known as CDA – provides researchers with theories to carry out empirical bodies of research, such as this one, on the relation between "discourse and social and cultural developments in social domains" (p.60).

- Discursive Psychology: Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) draw on the "poststructuralist" understanding of oneself as a discursive subject but only in a form that has been modified into being the way it is.

Coding:

After my initial reading of the books, they were then coded using a mixture of open coding and axial coding;

➢ Open Coding: Open coding is sweeping through the data and marking sections of text by highlighting and underlining.

➢ Axial Coding: Once the researcher has a large number of coded sections they are then separated in to reoccurring themes.

(Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 2)

Sample:

I initially planned on examining a selection of books from a school library, however, I identified that this could constitute a biased selection, and not a true representation of the books that are available in most schools and predicted that because of this it would result in the books that were in one particular school being examined, leading to results being too limited. It was this that led me to the conclusion to examine levelled guided readers, once again, this presented the researcher with some barriers – I had wanted to examine the levelled readers that were available to me in the library of an

Institution of Education, however, the selection there was too small to be a valid sample. I finally settled on analysing a reading scheme that is used in the school, in which I completed my final teaching placement – PM reading scheme. I chose to examine the following books:

a) *The Night Walk – Rose Inserra*

b) *My Two Families – Michele Gordon*

c) *A Fair Swap – Jenny Giles*

d) *Spanish Omelet – Jackie Tidey*

e) *Car Trouble – Kathryn Sutherland*

f) *Nelson is Kidnapped – Beverley Randell*

g) *Solo Flyer – Jackie Tidey*

h) *The Surf Carnival – Anette Smith*

i) *Cool Moves – Chris McTrusty*

j) *Owls in the Garden – Andrew Kelly*

PM Series:

The PM Series is a series of books that are shaped to support children learning to read well. They are encouraged to use a variety of skills and processes and when the children are learning to read they are supported with materials that have been crafted to their needs. The PM series that was analysed in this study carry thirty different reading levels, which work in correlation to the Reading Recovery levels 1-30. According to the European Centre for Reading Recovery (2013) over half of the schools that were implementing the Reading Recovery program in Ireland in 2013 were DEIS schools, and the girls participating in the initiative were outnumbered by boys at a ratio of three to two.

As part of the Reading Recovery program, participating children receive an additional 30 minutes a day of a one to one basis literacy intervention (European Centre for Reading Recovery, 2013, p.4). Levelled texts are used for both children participating in the Reading Recovery program and children in the main classroom therefore, it is vital that the texts they are exposed to are of high quality both in terms of being a learning tool and in portraying a diverse world view that is reflective of the lives of their audiences.

Limitations and Ethics:

A possible limitation for this research project that I had predicted and experienced was my lack of access to the range of levelled guided readers, and also how long I would be able to have them for analysis, due to them being in circulation within the school. There were few ethical concerns, as I did not intend to work with any vulnerable people and the books in which I analysed are available to the general public. I however, did need to be mindful in my conclusions and findings from the data analysis – that it is not a reflection of the school in which the books are being used but merely a reflection on how female characters are represented in a sample of guided readers from the PM series.

Positionality:

To include a statement of the positionality of the researcher is, to acknowledge that my personal background may affect the findings of this project. I am a working class, cisgender, Irish woman. I have done, and always will consider myself a feminist. I have spent some time advocating for women's rights and I believe that everyone should be treated equally regardless of what gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality they identify with. Because of this, I am fully aware of the striking level of patriarchy that is surrounding us in today's Irish society, and the disadvantages that women are experiencing because of

that. In my own personal life, I try to treat men and women equally and quite often find myself in conversations that challenge our system, in which women are expected to accept that men are considered to be more advantaged than women.

Conclusion:

In this section, I have explained the role levelled texts have in primary school classrooms and outlined both the methods and reasons for selecting the data sample. I have explained the coding used to break down the data recorded. The book titles, and authors have been listed, the limitations and the ethical considerations of study have been acknowledged. I have made a statement of positionality. I would now like to present the results of my analysis and discuss the implications the findings have to the readers of the levelled texts.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion:

Introduction:

This chapter examines how inclusive the books are for their female audiences, and whether or not the children would be able to find female characters in the books, that are an equal or accurate representation of women in modern society. It identifies the main areas that may affect the female readers' own self-identity and understanding others around them. Of the ten books that were analysed, it was surprising to me to find that all but four books; *Nelson is Kidnapped, A Fair Swap, Spanish Omelet* and *Solo Flyer* had female protagonists. All of the books analysed featured characters of both genders. The question remains on whether the authors and illustrators' gender did or did not have an impact on the plot, characters or visual representations, for example; *Car Trouble* was written by a woman, and *Cool Moves* was written by a man, however, both created archetypal female characters who broke the stereotypes.

The female protagonists, for the most part, were depicted in a manner that was stereotypical of what is expected of women in terms of how to; look, behave, and speak (Trepanier & Romatowski, 1993). However, each displayed some traits that were according to the literature non-stereotypical behaviour for women.

Main Findings:

➢ The men and women in some of the books were shown in a variety of non-stereotypical roles, however, when they displayed behaviour that was alien to the expectations of stereotypical behaviour it was done so in a negative light.

➢ For the most part, traditional familial roles were depicted, women were shown to take on the role of the maternal role.

- Occupations were stereotypical in the majority of the books and were analysed on two levels: gender specific jobs and careers.

- The gender expectations of the characters were a prominent underlining issue for most of the books.

- How boys and girls play differently, and what that says about how society expects them to behave.

- Language that was used between the different genders varied and was broken down into; how the characters were described, and strong/soft actions used for specific genders.

Occupations:

Within the sample, there were a limited number of occupations mentioned for either female or male characters. However, the level of importance shown to each gender as workers is very different. In both *Spanish Omelet* and *Cool Moves*, the plots begin in a similar way in relation to the parents both having to make the decision to cancel their plans with their children to go to work. However, as a reader, I was quite surprised about the repercussions that emerged as a result of one of the parents making the same decision to go to work. In *Cool Moves* the protagonist's mother has to cancel plans to go to work, as does the father in *Spanish Omelet* however, the mother in *Cool Moves'* decision was depicted in a much more negative light, almost as though she is abandoning her daughter (who is in a wheelchair) to fend for herself for the day as she goes to work. As a woman, who is soon to embark on a professional career, it is quite infuriating as to why, in 2018, children are still being exposed to sexist notions – that women cannot be both successful in a career, and also be good, caring, responsible parents. In both the aforementioned titles,

the parents chose to go to work over spending time with their children, which of course sometimes needs to be done, but both children had two completely different days because of the cancellation. However, the negative portrayal of the mother in this situation, almost villainises her, and leads to one question – is it possible in today's society to allow women to be both good mothers and to be successful having careers? It leaves the reader to make assumptions that perhaps all the misfortune would not have happened to Melody the protagonist in *Cool* Moves, had her mother stayed at home. According to the literature presented by, Cuddy, Fiske and Glick (2004) stated that, women cannot be both successful and caring mothers due to societal notions, their study found that "the working mother fared poorly compared to the childless working woman. She was stereotyped as less competent and more-warm than the woman without a child, and was less likely to be requested, promoted, and trained." (p. 711).

This relates back to another issue that arose in the data, in the book *A Fair Swap*, the notion presented that a woman's place is in the home. As a reader, of the series you are left with an impression that there is an assumption that a woman's place indeed is in the home. In *Solo Flyer* and *A Fair Swap* there is an obvious link to the place of the woman being that inside the home. In *A Fair Swap* the story is based around the protagonist and his wife swapping their roles in the marriage, as the initial impression was that the household work was connected to having an easy life. As the story unfolds, and many things began to fall apart for the man, it is settled in the end that it can only be the woman, who can take care of the home. Similarly, in *Solo Flyer*, when the protagonist's father is called into work on short notice, he makes an immediate assumption that the lady who lives upstairs will be home and happy to stay at home and take care of his son, and as it

went there were no issues with her assuming the position of the maternal influence. According to the literature, children develop their gender role perceptions at a young age, when they are most impressionable, they could begin to make the assumptions that the household cannot be run adequately whilst simultaneously being out in the working field. In their study, Fodor and Balogh (2010) found that as a result of the influence of society's gendered norms on the place women have in society, this is leading to a decline in the level of women in the workforce. However, they also touched on the influence of society's gender roles set by society as a reason for declining numbers of splitting the household chores.

Society's Expectations of Gender:

In today's society, we have certain roles that are for women and ones that are for men. The expectations of how females and males are expected to behave and carry certain traits due to their gender. In the majority of the books, the female characters take on the role of the maternal characters. In *My Two Families* and *The Night Walk*, there are some very strong maternal roles presented in them. In *My Two Families,* the protagonist is met with having to fill in a family tree as part of her homework for school, her mother told her to make two as she has to include her biological parents. The storyline pushes the message of the importance that mothers have in our lives, as other children in the class express their love and gratefulness for their mothers, this resulted in the protagonist discussing her two families, and returning home and expressing her gratitude to her mother for adopting her. Similarly, in *The Night Walk*, the protagonist has two strong maternal characters in her life; she has her mother and grandmother. As the story unfolds our protagonist has expressed her upset and anxiety about not being able to have a birthday

party due to her home being too small to host a slumber-party, similar to the other story the protagonist expresses her luck for having the matriarchs that she has in her life to save her party. These kinds of circumstances, are allowing children, and readers to relate to them when we think of our own mothers. However, it reminds me that this portrayal is very positive because the women are behaving in a way that is akin to what society expects of women. As Martin (2012) discussed, seeing female characters act in roles that are specifically aimed at maternal characters – they will develop their understanding that, this is the place for women in society.

In *Owls in the Garden*, as readers we are met with many scenarios in which the female characters are not taken as seriously as the male characters in the book. In the book the protagonist Katie and her friends are degraded by her brother Martin for being girls, he stated that they would be too afraid to camp out in the yard. He antagonized them by making up a fictional 'Ghost Owl' and stated that the Owl "swoops down at night and eats little girls". It is at this point that his mother orders him to stop, but he carries on until the father tells him to stop badgering his sister and his friends. This stood out to me, as a common point in many families, and certainly in my own. The threat of 'wait until your father gets home', this relates back to the sentiments of McCabe et al. (2011) in that women are there as a secondary character, but why is it that mothers are taken less seriously as disciplinarians? What message does this send to children who come from one parent households with a mother, for children who come from two parent households in which the parents co-parent completely, will they stop taking their mothers seriously as disciplinarians? It is our responsibility to ensure that the books that the children are reading are not influencing them to feed into the sexist ideals that men are more dominant

that females. In their study, Richter and Smith (2006) stated that men had always been portrayed as being the one in "control of the domestic decisions and discipline from family affairs to do with children" (p.155). In their study, however, they state that this should no longer have been portrayed in media as fatherhood has experienced a shift, and that they are sharing the role equally as the good and bad cop along with the cooperation of the mother.

Independence of Ability:

As a society, I believe we tend to hold expectations for each gender, of what it is to be a woman, and what it is to be a man, by the certain attributes; strong, aggressive, independent vs. weak, passive and dependent. We seem to take on these societal norms from learned behaviour, whether it is from our peers, media or the depictions of genders in the literature that we read. A stark contrast is made between the two titles *The Surf Carnival* and *Solo Flyer,* the readers are met with both a female protagonist and a male protagonist, and like all good stories there comes a climax in each of the books, where our main character comes into some trouble. In *The Surf Carnival* – the main character, Sofie, is competing in a competition when she ends up in a troubling situation, in which she becomes panicked and it is noted that she was struggling to stay calm and to find a resolution, which in the end comes with help that comes from non-other than a male character. However, in contrast, in *Solo Flyer* – we meet Kel, who finds himself in a situation which is as equally as stressful, and to no surprise he becomes panicked, yet he manages to sort he situation out for himself. It is here as a reader, that I perceived a big difference in their personal strength and ability to manage and self-regulate, their own emotions. As a society, we allow more space and acceptance to females to be more

emotional and express the view of 'it's okay to not be okay', however, it also needs to highlight that girls can also be strong.

Should we allow boys to have more independence than girls? According to the books analysed in this study, yes, we should. In *Solo Flyer*, the protagonist is portrayed as being obviously very independent for his age. He frequently flies across the country solo to visit his father, and is portrayed to be confident in doing so, and makes his way through arrivals by himself to collect his bags and meet his father. Whilst reading the book, immediately alarm bells and red flags were ringing as perhaps this was too much independence? Is it safe for a child to embark on these journeys alone? Many questions were coming to mind; why is he not nervous? Even I, as an adult am extremely nervous in situations where I have to travel significant distance alone, especially if it involves a flight. Where is all this confidence, and independence coming from within this child? Tepper and Cassidy (1999) stated this in their paper, that boys are more often than not portrayed as suppressing emotions such as fear and worry as it can emasculate the characters.

In contrast to this, in *Cool Moves*, the protagonist, who is already at a disadvantage as to how independent she can be in terms of travelling alone, due to her being in a wheelchair, is highly reliant on others to help her go places. When her mother is called into work at the last minute she is suddenly dependent on her best friend Carlos to help her get to her appointments and her chess tournament. She must travel by taxi to her physiotherapy appointment, and is seeking help from parents and other adults, when her wheelchair is stolen and she is rendered immobile. In their paper, Brown et al (2008) stated that boys and girls travel differently due to the expectations, and assumptions made

by parents formed by social norms, e.g. boys are more likely to be portrayed as being independent and travel places alone because girls are seen to be more vulnerable and unable to travel alone on grounds of safety.

Do Boys and Girls Play Differently:

How the male and female child and adolescent behaviour is portrayed in books has been influenced by what is expected and viewed as normal within society. In *Nelson is Kidnapped* we are met by an adventurous elephant, whose adventurous ways were in the end the actions that resulted in his kidnapping. In the story we meet Nelson and his sister Nina, Nelson loves to play, and there is an emphasis shown to how he is playing and the types of games that young elephants play, they find themselves in battles of strength, where they play pushing fames to see who the most dominant elephant in the herd is. An issue that stood out to me as a reader, was that, Nina the protagonists sister was also a young elephant, yet it seemed that her only role in the book was to take care of her bother and keep him out of harm's way. What interested me was the message that girls don't play, that a girl's role is to take care of younger siblings, but also that it is the norm for boys to be out being adventurous and playing. Lever (1978) discussed this in her study when she looked at how males were more akin to joining in and partaking in the more physically demanding competitive sports over females, as it was a common view in society that battling playing field "served as a training ground for future soldiers" (p. 480).

It is not just the types of games that children play, but it is the character's attitudes towards how the games should be played. In *Cool Moves*, we see a view of boys as different to girls in how they play, and why they play. The villain of the story, Melody's main opponent in the chess tournament, Iggie Pike, is shown in a different light to the

protagonist and her previous opponent. As a reader you would wonder is it because he is the 'antagonist' or because he is a male character, or both? In the story, there is a sense of astonishment that Iggie would be interested in chess, let alone be good enough at it to compete in a tournament, and make it to the final. As the story unfolds we find out that the only way Iggie became interested in chess and learned to play, was due to a computer games in which you would destroy the opponents game pieces upon taking them out in the game. The element of violence, and rough play is depicted as being the reasoning for which he became interested in chess. His notion was incomprehensible, the idea that the only reason a male character would be interested in a passive activity, such as chess, would be because it is linked to violent, rough, and boisterous actions, whereas there were zero issues raised at the idea of female characters playing the game. If this is the message we are portraying in our literature to young children, there would be more pressure on children to behave and play in a manner that is deemed to appropriate by society, their peers and what is reflected in the books and media. This has been reflected in the literature, in the (2005) Pike and Jennings report on how the gender of the children that modelled the games had an influence on who played it, then the literature and advertisements that children are exposed to reflect on who is going to want to play with certain games and how they will want to engage with it.

Character's Behaviours and Language:

At times, it is not what is said or done, it is how it is said and done that matters most. Though the majority of the books had female protagonists, it was incredibly difficult as a reader to ignore the images that are being depicted of the characters, through the descriptions of them and how they behave and speak. In *Cool Moves,* there is a tense

moment when the protagonist Melody is in the middle of a heated chess match with her opponent Tara. As the match reaches a climax, there is a cringe worthy point when it reads "Tara pushed her long, golden hair behind her dainty ears" (p.4) Why? What was the necessity in using words like 'dainty'? There was no need to describe her in that way, it adds nothing to the story. Peterson and Lach (1990) stated that it is an outdated concept from the 1960's/70's that female characters are described as passive, pretty, and dainty.

How the characters spoke in the books was an interesting trend that emerged again, and again across the reading scheme. The males were predominately presented in a dominant manner, the authors described their actions in words such as; stormed, shouted, growled, warned etc., whereas, the female characters' actions were describe using verbs such as; shrugged, muttered, asked, whispered etc., the female characters were shown to be much more passive in nature. Though, some female characters did break the mould and showed some aggressive traits and their dominance at times, there was a clear message being displayed in the sheer lack of actions and descriptions that would usually be used in femininity from the male characters. This leads me to wonder, why? And what impact would this have on children reading these books, if the message portrayed was that it is okay for female characters, as rare as it might be, to show masculine traits, but it was simply not okay for males to do the opposite. This would lead to pressures being put on both genders, for girls to be seen as weaker in their behaviours and actions, and boys being told that they must not behave in a certain manner. In their study, Tepper and Cassidy (1999) stated that indeed, the messages portrayed in children's books in terms of the language used when either describing the characters, or the actions which the characters took, or manner in which they behaved in, would have shown male characters shying

away from feminine attributes as this would not be a social norm or accepted behaviour for the given gender in society.

Is Non-Stereotypical Behaviour a Negative Thing?

In her (2009) paper Frohreich discussed how women who have acted out against the norms of gender binaries, have been portrayed in an archetypal view. There is room for assumptions to be made, that women who do not take on the roles that society expect them to must be evil and ones to avoid. Perhaps that is the reason why three of the female characters are portrayed in this negative light, one assuming an abandoning role as a mother leaving her child to fend for herself in *Cool Moves* and the other two were kidnappers. What affect could the portrayal of non-stereotypical gendered behaviour have on children when it is depicted in this manner in the books that they are reading. In both *Nelson is Kidnapped,* and *Car Trouble,* we are met by two female characters who behave in a dominant manner, however both are attempting to kidnap the protagonists in the books. Does this send the message to children that, if they meet a strong willed, dominant female that they should be weary of her, as that is not how females are 'supposed' to behave? Obviously, yes, we should be instilling the message that children should be weary of strangers, but the books emphasized being wary two female kidnappers. Children should be shown strong, dominant female characters who are in positive role models, and a representation of a woman who is more than a passive character. Green (1997) spoke about how gender roles that are depicted in media can be repetitive and also damaging for a child's perception of what they should be. In her study, she presented the female roles in categories. In these two stories *Car Trouble* and *Nelson is Kidnapped* we have two strong women who are being aggressive towards the younger characters, they are

according to Green (1997) depicting the 'shrew' character who is a mean character, often

the villain, not the typical depiction of a female character.

Conclusion:

The books examined in this study, displayed many traditional ideals of gender binary expectations that are held in society. The protagonists for the most part, were female, however, all aimed to crystalise into the gender expectations that are deemed appropriate to their gender, and this played a major part in the depiction of the characters themselves and the progression of the plot. Children spend many of the formative years trying to fit in, and wanting to belong to a group, and see themselves represented in others. Because of this, children act in a way they think they should, because of what is expected of them. The female characters in the book only displayed actions of dominance, and against the status quo when they were portraying archetypal characters. All of the independent, adventurous and strong characters were male. For the most part female characters were there to play the role of the maternal influence, whether they were 'mothers', 'teachers' or 'babysitters'. The male characters however, displayed masculinities that were in opposition to the traditional femininities displayed in the female characters, and when they displayed femininities it was a negative thing. The negativity attached to female characters displaying masculine traits, and male characters displaying feminine traits, implies that woman are inferior to men. Other female characters in the books rarely displayed dominant characterisations and were regularly associated with domestic roles.

If the messages we are sending to the youngest and the most impressionable members of our society is that, men are better than women because they are stronger and we are all encouraged for our endeavours when we behave in a way that is expected of them this not gender equality. We have not built a gender equal anti-patriarchal society

just because we have both males and females in it. Therefore, these books do not acknowledge gender equality, gender equality. Gender equality should not be assumed to be displayed in books just because the protagonists are female characters. In future, the authors of books should make a stronger effort to create characters that are more than the stereotypical image of a woman, and when it is done, that it is not a negative thing, to ensure that gender equality is portrayed in their books. I do not believe that the writers, illustrators and creators of this series, and other materials such as the ones that were analysed set out with an intention to neglect the female characters and portray them in a stereotypical characterisation and favour the male characters, and their endeavours. The results of this study, due to its sample size may be difficult to generalise. However, due to the fact that the findings were similar to those found in (Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus and Young, 2006.; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido & Tope, 2011, and Louie 2012) the sentiments presented in the books may be a representation of the society that they were written in and reflect today's society in Ireland. If we are aiming to promote and achieve gender equality, in which I truly hope we are successful, we must include a world where gender is equal in the books we are allowing children to read and learn from. The books that we give children, should provide them with the confidence to be who they are, and reflect a society we wish to see the children grow in, and to portray the gender equality we want to achieve, and want to see in the societies we are raising our children in.

"It's my view that gender is culturally formed, but it's also a domain

of agency or freedom and that it is most important to resist the

violence that is imposed by ideal gender norms, especially against

those who are gender different, who are nonconforming in their

gender presentation."

– Judith Butler (2011)

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