

School Librarian Influence on Junior High Girls' Reading

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When I first started brainstorming for my Feminist Research and Action project, I wanted to conduct research on a topic which utilized my background as a literature major and my minor in Women's Studies. Throughout my studies at Minnesota State University-Mankato, I have taken classes devoted to adolescent literature as well as participated in and led, discussions analyzing the literature preferences of adolescent girls. Growing up in a generation that made books like *The Babysitter's Club* and *Sweet Valley High* popular, I was interested in finding out the popular reading choices of today's junior high girls. After investigating numerous book lists and reviews online, I observed that today's popular choices don't stray far from the choices I made as a young reader. The prevalent themes are still based on romance, real life experiences, and diary formats. The covers still tantalize readers with its ideological portrayal of teen life. Examples of such portrayals vary from images of girls dressed in trendy clothes, happy and beautiful with flawless skin and a perfect physique to teenage girls and boys embraced in a hug more common with adults. Given all of these observations, it's apparent the literature targeted at young girls is gendered (an action based on the social perceptions and expectations towards a particular sex) and often sexist. Considering the potentially oppressive texts, a question that I had and that has been discussed among many scholars is if girls are capable of making a connection between the books they read and real life situations.

My future interest of obtaining a master's degree in library science led me to my interest in the influence that school librarians have on adolescent girls' reading choices. Students looking for a good "leisure read" head to the most convenient place: the school library. I was interested to see if librarians influenced students' reading choices through verbal suggestions or through the selection of novels that they ordered for the library. Keeping the popular literature choices of adolescent girls in mind, I was also interested in finding out if these influences were consciously or unconsciously gendered. While I suspected that the reading choices that junior high girls make are greatly influenced by several people including their parents, peers, and teachers, I wanted to find out how much of an influence school librarians have on junior high girls' reading choices. I also wanted to know if these influences limit girls' access to reading materials. More important, was my concern that these influences challenge girls' abilities to critically analyze literature.

### **Literature Review**

In order to conduct my research, I began by searching for scholarly articles discussing the popular literature choices of adolescent girls as well as articles about school librarians' roles and influences they may have on students' reading. The existing literature discussing the roles of school librarians and the influence they have on junior high students' reading choices appears to be limited and difficult to find. Despite the lack of such literature, Richard James Hurley attempts to answer an issue/concern similar to my own research in his article, "Who Motivates Junior-Senior High School Reading?"

As (a) school librarian in a progressive junior-senior high school I have often wondered just who influences my youthful clientele to read and to

keep reading. Is it the teacher, the parent, the pals, relatives, hobby leader, or a dozen other people the adolescent meets that encourages him in his reading interests? (486).

Despite the date, 1938, in which the article was written, Hurley's observation that "the influence of any one person varies with the milieu around him" holds true throughout the decades. His observations are applicable to similar observations made by current researchers, but his research findings are outdated and inapplicable to current studies. Thus, his article should only be considered as a comparative tool. Considering Hurley's question, it is important to continue to define a school librarian's role and influence on today's students.

In her report entitled, "Teenagers, Reading, and Censorship: Teenagers' views on censorship in libraries", published for UCE Library Services, Sarah McNicol examines librarians' roles and influences on students. McNicol analyzes results from a survey she conducted on adolescents, their reading choices and librarians' roles. Her 2004 survey of school and children's librarians investigated attitudes towards censorship and intellectual freedom. The results including that "school and children's librarians should provide resources presenting a variety of view points on current and historical issues" and to "give students access to a variety of resources to help them to develop critical thinking skills", defines their roles as librarians (4). In a 2005 follow-up survey, McNicol interviewed students, ages 11-16, about the results stated above. Many students were unable to access the literature they were interested in (many titles and subjects popular among their peers) because the librarians deemed them to be "inappropriate" (12).

Whether the librarians chose not to stock such titles on the shelves or simply refused students the ability to check out the novels, the limitations went against the results from the previous year's survey. Such actions suggest that students are incapable of using critical thinking skills when reading literature. In an attempt to disprove that students are incapable of using critical thinking skills when reading popular novels, a feminist approach is applied by some researchers.

In Angela E. Huber's research she conveys her concern towards the reading choices of adolescent girls, but within her research, she recognizes that many girls are capable of critical analysis. Huber states, "The readers I talked with are also capable of sophisticated, critical reflection on, and analysis of, characters and narratives...the majority were critical both of the representation of femininity and of everyday life" (91). Many of the popular novels targeted at and read by young girls focus on idealistic, heterosexual relationships and other issues that appear to be "gendered" towards girls. The girls that Huber interviewed enjoyed such books, but were hesitant to admit liking them because they feared it made them seem less intelligent or less capable to thinking critically.

Similarly in her research, Carol Ricker-Wilson found that young girls who read popular novels were capable of critical analysis. Like Huber, Ricker-Wilson noticed that girls who read romance novels were quick to justify their decision to read such novels. Ricker-Wilson states, "My students were all quick to claim their romance reading as escapist. Indeed, all understood it as a pleasurable escape from sexuality's vicissitudes" (58). She also revealed that the readers continued their critical analysis through frequent

questioning and discourse of the circumstances that the seemingly intelligent and assertive heroines allowed themselves to be part of. Ricker-Wilson proposed that such analysis could be encouraged through feminism and the creation of the “new” type of heroine.

Many of Huber and Ricker-Wilson’s readers recognized that the heterosexual relationships within the popular novels bore little resemblance to reality, but found more interest in the author’s portrayal of women. Depending on the portrayal of the heroine in the novels, many girls were attracted to the realities of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Huber stresses the importance of such realities within popular texts for young girls, “Girls are better served with novels that offer them not only positive role models but also a structural “map” of social reality, one which reveals the historical development, and interrelationship, of the institutions of gender, race, and class” (85).

### **Methodology**

I decided that the best form of methodology to utilize would be quantitative survey research. If I was attempting to answer my research question(s) without a “feminist lens”, my results and analysis would be vastly different. However, unlike the historical past of survey research, junior high girls are an important variable in my survey. Patricia Lina Leavey describes the importance of including girls/women as a variable in quantitative (or statistical data) research: “Conducting survey research as a feminist implies a political engagement to look at the world with attention to gender dimensions and differences” (33).

Using survey research was my best approach because I could collect statistical data by neutrally phrasing questions without the risk of persuading or suggesting my viewpoints on to my research subjects. In my preliminary survey, I requested that the librarians assist me by keeping track of data. The data they collected was within predefined categories. I also believe that my method of research was the best approach because my research question may suggest that librarians are responsible for recommending literature based on a student's gender. If I were to ask open ended questions that suggested that librarians are responsible for "genderizing" student literature choices, I would most likely offend my research subjects and would have inaccurate results. I also created a follow-up survey with open-ended questions asking about recommendations, literature genres and popular reading choices. While I feel that qualitative research, in the form of in-depth interviews, would offer some fascinating results for my research, I believe that my success rate in conducting research would be a little less than that of quantitative research.

Another advantage to using survey research is the potential of attracting a "non-feminist" audience. This type of advantage is evident when feminist psychologists, Kathi Miner-Rubino and Toby Esptein Jayaratne, describe their reasons for using quantitative research. Miner-Rubino states in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, "There is something powerful in quantification...I quickly recognized that people who would not call themselves feminists (and in fact would vehemently resist the label) listened when I explained these findings in quantified terms...people respond to quantitative data." (294-5). The point that Miner-Rubino makes is particularly important because the research

subjects and my potential audience come from a diverse background of values and beliefs. While my statistical data collected from the surveys may attract the attention of a vast audience, I hoped that by conveying my analysis through the “feminist lens” I would inspire my audience to consider a feminist view rather than feel forced to accept it as the only means of analysis.

As stated above, a potential problem with my proposed method of using quantitative research would be not creating open-ended or neutral survey questions. This potential problem can be avoided quite easily by carefully choosing words that will not reflect the hypothesis of the research project. Such carelessness could make the subjects feel threatened or offended and their decision to withdraw their participation in the project could occur. As a researcher, I was optimistic that all of the potential survey participants I contacted would accept my request for their participation. However, another potential problem that a quantitative researcher must be willing to face is the lack of responses from potential participants or their unwillingness to participate.

Being aware of these potential problems, the additional sources I used in my research project were crucial in enriching my research and helpful in analyzing my results (if the return of quantitative research was successful), as well as helpful in proving or disproving my hypothesis. While I hoped that the survey results were the main components in my analysis, there are numerous articles that were helpful in analyzing my research. When searching through journals, I had hoped to find more articles which focused on the specifics of my research question. I was also hoping to find, within these articles, that my suspicions that the tendencies to “genderize” adolescent literature were

in fact true. I found several articles that focused on the popular reading choices of adolescents, but not many about a librarian's influence on students' reading choices. One article, in particular, proved to be the most helpful because the author's research method was similar to mine. In Angela Hubler's article, "Beyond the Image: Adolescent Girls, Reading, and Social Reality", she discusses mass-market girls' fiction and its depiction of reality. In order to answer her research questions, Hubler started her research by conducting a pilot survey and then conducted a workshop in which she interviewed adolescent girls. Hubler also read numerous journal articles, analyzing and citing them in her article and by utilizing the primary and secondary sources of her research, she was able to answer her research question.

### **Analysis/Interpretations of Research**

In my preliminary survey, I contacted eighteen junior high school librarians throughout Southern Minnesota and requested that they keep track of recommendations they give to students. All librarians were asked to state the gender of the student, the grade level, the book recommendation, and the reason for giving the recommendation. While I was more interested in the recommendations given to junior high girls, I did not want to risk inaccurate results by requesting that the recommendations only be given to girls. I also conducted a follow-up survey with open-ended questions about recommendations, literature genres, and popular reading choices among students. The preliminary survey only yielded one respondent, but after I contacted the same librarians through e-mail, five agreed to participate in my follow-up survey. While there were two male and sixteen female librarians, all of the respondents were female. Many of the

librarians work in smaller school districts and are librarians for all of the city's school systems. The age and race of my respondents are unknown.

Many of the results I received were similar. When asked if they gave recommendations, all respondents agreed to giving some recommendations. However, the frequency of giving recommendations varied. One respondent stated, " We (herself and other library staff) do make recommendations, most of the reading that students do in junior high school come from lists that classroom teachers have suggested reading".

Another respondent's recommendations were more frequent.

I am often asked and always recommend at least three books per student to give them some choice. I also tell them that if they are reading for fun, it should be obvious by the halfway point if the book is interesting for them.

If they don't like it by that point, return it and we'll find a new one.

Another respondent stated that she rarely gave recommendations, "Not very often. Our fiction books are labeled Fantasy, Science Fiction, Mystery, Historical, Classic, and Newbery. The students are required to read each type of book for English. They are good about finding a book on their own". Upon further discussion with my participants, these particular genres are gendered. While exploring the genres that boys and girls prefer and are most likely to read, boys were more inclined to read books in the Fantasy, Science Fiction and Historical genres than girls. While some girls found interest in some of the novels in the Classical genre (i.e. Jane Austen), most of the books in the Classical genre were encouraged to all students for English assignments/reading. When asked

about the most popular literature genres among girls, all respondents stated that girls were most interested in novels about romance, reality, and drama. As one respondent explained, “Girls are heavily into romance. [By authors] Sarah Dessen, Lurlene McDaniel, etc. and fantasy fiction”. Another respondent stated, “Girls are into Nicholas Sparks books, books dealing with teenage pregnancy, etc.” Nicholas Sparks’ most popular novels, *The Notebook*, *Message in a Bottle*, and *A Walk to Remember*, were made into major motion pictures by the same name. Sparks’ novels portray love stories and relationships. Many of the titles, that students showed interest in, listed by the librarians were on the book lists that I had initially investigated online. All of the respondents, when listing their recommendations for girls, had recommended books from the Romance, Drama, and Life Experience genres. When asked if they restrict students from checking out books because they are deemed too age inappropriate or controversial in subject matter, none of the librarians stated that they enforced such restrictions. When I asked if they had controversial novels on their shelves, none of the librarians felt that they did, but many said that the definition of controversy covers a broad spectrum. As one librarian stated,

I have had a couple books donated, one on incest, the other on domestic abuse – I decided to put them in the counselor’s office so that we would have them available for someone who would request them, but they would be a little more in depth than I would care to have my average junior high student pick up and read. One thought though, most any book can be controversial to somebody. We have the Harry Potter Series – and people

have strong opinions about that book – either they like it or they absolutely don't and don't think it should be in a media center.

Although I found there to be a small amount of literature discussing librarians' influences on reading choices, the results of my research proved that librarians are at least somewhat influential. As found in existing literature and within my research, romance novels continue to be a popular choice among junior high school girls. However, because most romance novels portray white, heterosexual relationships with fairy tale endings, it seems clear that girls are not exploring other genres or themes. From a feminist point of view, this research is important because girls are reading sexist books (i.e. romance novels). It's important to figure out why girls keep reading these books. Are these types of books all that are available? Are they the only books recommended to them?

As seen in both Huber and Ricker-Wilson's research, girls are, in fact, capable of critically analyzing literature; they also found that girls were attracted to realities of gender, race, and class. Given my research results concerning girls' reading choices, librarians could be responsible for this consistent trend and request for romance novels. Their responsibility could lie within not offering diverse recommendations or not seeing a problem with such texts.

While controversial novels are restricted from some students, as seen in McNicol's report, I believe, in regards to my research and results, the amount of controversial novels may be limited due to lack of funding and smaller school sizes. My respondents seemed more aware about whether or not they had controversial novels in their libraries. Those who did, confronted potential issues and took action. However, no

one seemed concerned or brought up potential problems with girls' becoming heavily immersed into a romance novel. Additionally, no one questioned girls' capabilities about analyzing the literature they choose to read.

### **Action Statement**

Considering the results from my research, there are several possibilities for action. My research indicates that junior high girls' should be exposed to literature that will continue to interest them, but also allow them to be critical thinkers. For example, if young girls continue to read romance novels, a very pleasurable read and form of "escapism", among many junior high girls, it is important that they focus on other aspects of the novel or aspects that are missing. Other researchers, like Huber and Ricker-Wilson, point out that many girls who read romance novels are capable of critiquing the storyline and its poor reflection of reality. I believe that through discussion/literature circles, girls would be given the opportunity to analyze the literature they read. Such literature circles could be mediated by university students majoring in Women's Studies, Education, or Ethic Studies (for example) and be used as part of a service learning project.

When I asked my participants if there were any existing literature discussion groups, besides English class, available for junior high students, only one respondent said there was one available during homeroom time. Because some of my participants commented on their lack of funding for books, an obvious step towards action would be to increase funding for school libraries. Additionally, book donations could increase the amount of diverse books within the school library. Considering the results from my

research, I believe it would be advantageous for educators and librarians to discuss the trends in reading choices and discuss the potential challenges that girls may face by the continuation of reading novels which offer them no connection to real life situations.

However, as seen within my research, it cannot be assumed that educators and librarians are aware of such problems or even know how to initiate such discourse. If a professor or a student with connections to Women's Studies made educators and librarians aware of the reading trends and the oppressive nature of the texts, changes could be made. As it is important for girls to discuss and analyze their literature preferences; it is also important that educators and librarians participate in this discussion with girls.

### **Conclusion**

The research that I conducted, as stated in my Action Statement, is beneficial to teachers, librarians, parents and students by prompting further discourse about literature with students. As my research results indicate, librarians, whether they offer students several recommendations or very little, are influential in the reading choices that girls make. Their influences are seen through the books they order and the recommendations they give based on the gender and the interests of the students. Further research could include a diverse group of participants from larger school districts as well as in-depth interviews with girls and the literature choices they make. Throughout my research process, I was not surprised to find that Romance is popular genre read by junior high girls. However, I was surprised in my findings, in regards to, the influences that librarians have. I had assumed that school librarians were very involved in the reading choices that students make. I envisioned analytical discourse between librarians and

students. While my research proved that most of my respondents seemed interested in recommending books to students, I was surprised by those who didn't seem to participate in recommending literature at all. However, through my research and the finalization of my project, I know that I'd like to explore my research further. I would like to use qualitative research to discover girls' opinions of the books they read, why they read them, and if they critically analyze the books they choose for "leisure reads".

Author biography:

Sarah Turbes is a senior majoring in Literature and minoring in Women's Studies. She wrote her paper in conjunction with Women's Studies 330: Feminist Research and Action, but wanted to combine and apply her knowledge in Literature. A native of Mankato, Sarah's favorite thing to pretend as a child was "librarian". After graduating, Sarah hopes to attend graduate school to receive a master's in Library Science and work in a city or university library.

Faculty mentor biography:

Jocelyn Fenton Stitt is an assistant professor of Women's Studies at Minnesota State University. Her research interests include the intertwining of the familial and the imperial in the British Caribbean from the nineteenth-century to the present and feminist mothering. She teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses on Global Feminism and international issues. Sarah Turbes and Amanda Slowinski were students in her course Feminist Research and Action in Spring 2007.

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