

William's Doll Revisited

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In this article, Greever, Austin, and Welhousen examine the responses to the book *William's Doll* by two groups of fourth-grade students separated by over 20 years.

Research studies can emerge from burning questions, from quiet wonderings, and from problems that require solutions. Our study of gender differences in children's responses to the book *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972) began in a different way—by happenstance. In the recesses of a retired colleague's file cabinet, carefully saved for over 20 years, we found responses to *William's Doll* written by a group of fourth-grade students in 1975. Since two of us (Ellen and Patricia) teach children's literature, this is a book we often share with our classes.

When *William's Doll* was published in 1972, it was heralded by reviewers as a "landmark book" (Schroeder, 1972, p. 73). In the story, William, described by Schroeder as "an unmistakably normal, healthy, fashionable, shaggy-haired child," asks for a doll. His father's response is to buy him stereotypical toys for boys instead—a basketball and a train. His brother's response, along with other boys, is to call William a creep and a sissy. Only William's grandmother truly understands and honors William's request. With no such precedent in children's literature, "the liberated male child [made] his debut" (Silvey, 1972, p. 584).

What a find, these yellowed papers from young children who would now be about 32 years old. We read them eagerly and found that the responses to the book were varied. Some young readers responded favorably to the breaking of the stereotype, feeling that it was perfectly normal and natural that William would want a doll. Others responded unfavorably and reinforced the stereotype, agreeing more with the characters who branded William a sissy. What if we were to go to the same grade at the same school more than 20 years later and get responses from a whole new generation of (we hoped) enlightened readers? Many novels begin with the question, "what if?"; so did our study. Would children today be more attuned to gender equity? In an era of political correctness and awareness, has society raised children's consciousness with regard to their perception of gender roles? Beginning to formalize our research plan, we asked the question: what do we already know about how and when children develop an understanding of gender roles? At this juncture, we brought aboard our department's resident expert on gender issues, Karyn.

DEVELOPMENT OF GENDER ROLES

We considered four widely accepted theories that attempt to explain how children use information to form gender percep-

tions: social learning theory, Kohlberg's theory of cognitive and moral development, gender schema processing theory, and an integrative theory that combines the previous three. According to social learning theory, children are influenced primarily by their awareness of personally significant people and their daily activities such as employment outside the home, housekeeping tasks, and leisure activities (Bandura, 1977). Children's perceptions are also influenced through reward and punishment. In terms of rewards, the types of toys purchased and the activities adults choose for children often impart gender-specific information for children. Punishments for behaving in a manner which is not acceptable to an adult's idea of what is gender appropriate may include a negative comment, a non-verbal expression, or simply ignoring the child. Observing significant adults in their daily routines and receiving rewards and punishments for gender-related behavior provide children with powerful messages concerning acceptable and unacceptable behavior for males and females.

**William's Doll . . . is one of many
sources that supply information
about gender roles.**

Kohlberg's (1966) seminal work, *The Development of Sex Differences*, suggests that the rigidity of children's gender perceptions is related to both cognitive and moral development. As young children internalize information about gender roles, they are also at a rudimentary stage of classifying behaviors as right or wrong. As they develop their sense of what it means to be male or female, they come to believe that sex-stereotyped behavior is correct, and nontraditional behaviors are morally wrong. As a result, their understanding of being male and being female becomes very rigid. Examples of this level of understanding are prevalent in early childhood classrooms, such as when a child "tattles" on a boy who is playing dress-up in women's clothing as if he has broken a serious rule. Gilligan (1982) challenged Kohlberg's research on moral development because it was based solely on samples of boys and men and never considered that girls and women might develop differently. Gilligan's work with girls and women suggests that girls develop their sense of morality with more concern for relationships and the feelings of others than a rigid sense of right and wrong.

The third theory we took into account, the gender schema processing theory (Signorella, 1987), is based on the child's development of gender schema. New information relating to gender roles is constantly being gathered and processed cognitively. This additional data either reinforces existing schemas or requires a revision in the child's thinking. The content and quantity of information children receive related to gender roles and children's cognitive operations contribute equally to their perceptions on gender.

The fourth theory was an integrative one. Based on the research of Serbin, Powlishta, and Gulko (1993), it incorporates elements from the social learning theory, the theory of cognitive and moral development, and the gender schema processing theory and is currently being used to examine young children's gender-related behavior (Marshall, Robeson, & Keefe, 1999). The most striking similarity among the theories is the belief that children are strongly influenced by information they receive from their environment.

For children, the possible sources of information on gender-role expectations in society include parents and other family members (Fagot, 1982; Fagot, Leinbach & O'Boyle, 1992; Katz, 1987; Lamb, 1986), peers (Fishbein & Imai, 1993; Maccoby, 1989; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987), the media (Durkin, 1985; Santrock, 1993), and educational settings including personnel and instructional materials (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Scott & Schau, 1985; Turner, Gervai & Hinde, 1993). These sources present direct and indirect messages about gender roles through language, behavior, and visual representations, and they are the major components necessary for the formation of perceptions relating to gender. In *William's Doll*, young William received information from parents, siblings, and friends that it was not okay for a boy to want a doll. For readers of *William's Doll*, the book itself is one of many sources that supply information about gender roles.

Since *William's Doll* is ostensibly about a father's choice of toys for his son, we sought out research that focused on toy choices. Since a parent is a child's first teacher, and since many parents are actively aware of this, they may feel a conscious or subconscious responsibility to teach gender-appropriate behavior to their offspring. Parents may feel it is important that their children demonstrate appropriate gender behavior in order to be accepted by peers or to avoid being teased. This effort is evident in parents' reactions to children's toy choices. Many parents will respond positively when their children choose gender-stereotyped toys and negatively when they choose non-stereotypical toys (Fagot et al., 1992). Parents' need to ensure gender-appropriate behavior in their children is further illustrated by their own selection of toys for their children. In addition to buying more toys for sons than daughters (Pereira, 1994), parents also use gender designations made by the marketing divisions of toy manufacturing companies in order to select toys. Stereotypes are perpetuated also when mothers or fathers purchase those toys for their same-sex offspring that are similar to the ones they themselves played with a generation ago. Even the most open-minded parents fall into the habit of buying gender-stereotyped toys, thereby perpetuating gender stereotypes.

As a result of the literature review, we formulated the following research questions:

- Is there a difference between boys' and girls' responses to *William's Doll*?
- Did fourth graders in 1997 respond differently from fourth graders in 1975, and if so, how?
- What is the range of the children's responses to the story?

COLLECTING THE DATA AND ESTABLISHING THE METHODOLOGY

From the headings on the students' responses and the memory of our retired colleague, we gleaned that, in 1975, a library science graduate student asked a group of fourth-grade students at an elementary school in greater New Orleans to write down what they thought about *William's Doll* after hearing the story. Satisfying our "what if" scenario, we returned to the same school in 1997. We contacted a fourth grade teacher at the school who agreed to have her students participate in the study. Twenty-four children from her class participated. Together with the 26 responses from 1975, the responses of 50 children were gathered for the study.

Twenty-two years had brought substantial changes to the elementary school. In 1975, the school population was 1,013; in 1997, it had dropped to 669. The ethnicity of the population in 1975 was 85% White, 15% African American (the only distinction made in 1975). In 1997, the ethnicity of the school population was 68.3% white, 23.2% African American, 5.2% Hispanic, 0.6% American Indian, and 2.7% Asian. Whether these changes in the school population would affect the data, we couldn't tell. The lack of adequate socioeconomic data also made it impossible to evaluate the comparability of the two groups of children in economic terms.

When we visited the class, we began with a brief introduction explaining only that *William's Doll* is a book for younger children, and we wanted their opinions about it. Ellen read the story to the children and asked them to write their thoughts about what happened in the story. We took our cue from the heading of one paper from 1975 that stated, "What I thought of *William's Doll*." We wanted to avoid asking a question that was too leading, and we specifically wanted to avoid prompting the children to think in terms of gender.

Once the data was collected, we coded the responses and created a key to label both the gender of each respondent and the date that each response was collected, removing all identifying information so that the responses could be evaluated objectively. We removed four responses from the sample at this time because we judged that they did not respond to the question asked. This left a total of forty-six responses for analysis.

We chose content analysis (Carney, 1972; Holsti, 1969) as the most appropriate method for analyzing the children's responses to the story. We recruited three graduate students to perform the analysis and trained them using responses to *William's Doll* collected from a different site. We instructed the raters to form an overall impression of each response; a response was either favorable to the idea of William's having a doll or it was unfavorable. Interrater reliability was high, with 96% agreement between the raters. On the two cases where there was disagreement, the majority opinion was used.

INTERPRETING THE LARGER PICTURE

On a quantitative level, we had already answered our "what if" question—what if we were to go to the same grade at the

same school more than 20 years later and get responses from a new generation of hopefully enlightened readers. Purely and simply, the passage of time hadn't enlightened them at all.¹ We were, however, interested in more than the statistical analysis. We looked for patterns as well and considered the full range of responses. After several readings of the students' writings and after discussing a number of potential classifications, we devised subcategories that emerged from the responses themselves and which echoed what the literature says about influences on children's perceptions of developing gender roles. Maintaining the initial classification of each response as favorable or unfavorable to the idea of William's having a doll, we then placed each response in appropriate subcategories. Responses could be classified as belonging to more than one subcategory. For those responses favorable to the idea of William's having a doll, the following subcategories were used:

- (a) Respondent addressed attitudes of adults in the story
- (b) Respondent addressed attitudes of peers in the story
- (c) Respondent addressed the importance of learning to care for babies
- (d) Respondent addressed the importance of people making their own choices

For those responses unfavorable to the idea of William's having a doll, three subcategories were used:

- (a) Respondent addressed attitudes of adults in the story
- (b) Respondent addressed attitudes of peers in the story
- (c) Respondent addressed the attitude or behavior that boys don't play with dolls

After agreeing upon the subcategories, each of us classified the responses independently. We then discussed the classification and reached a consensus on those responses where we had initially disagreed. Eight responses (four favorable and four unfavorable) were not assigned to additional subcategories because they gave no additional information about the respondents' attitudes or reasoning. After classification, we examined the gender breakdown in each category (see Table 1 for complete classification).

Responses Favorable to the Idea of William's Having a Doll

Of the 29 responses that indicated a favorable attitude toward William's having a doll, 10 (6 girls and 4 boys) addressed the attitudes of the adults in the story, 7 (all girls) addressed the attitudes of William's peers in the story, 12 (4 girls and 8 boys) mentioned the importance of learning to care for babies, and 8 (all girls) cited the need for people to make their own choices. This breakdown provides insight in terms of the respondents' attitudes toward gender roles.

Slightly more girls than boys mentioned the attitudes of the adults in the story. One girl from 1975 discussed both the grandmother's and the father's attitudes.²

Table 1. Descriptive Classification

| | Year | Number of Boys | Number of Girls | Number of Children |
|---|--------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Responses Favorable to the Idea of William's Having a Doll | 1975 | 9 | 10 | 19 |
| | 1997 | 3 | 7 | 10 |
| | Total | 12 | 17 | 29 |
| Respondent addressed attitudes of adults in story | 1975 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| | 1997 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| | Total | 4 | 6 | 10 |
| Respondent addressed attitudes of peers in story | 1975 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| | 1997 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| | Total | 0 | 7 | 7 |
| Respondent addressed the importance of learning to care for babies | 1975 | 7 | 2 | 9 |
| | 1997 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | Total | 8 | 4 | 12 |
| Respondent addressed the importance of people making their own choices | 1975 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| | 1997 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| | Total | 0 | 8 | 8 |
| Responses Unfavorable to the Idea of William's Having a Doll | 1975 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| | 1997 | 7 | 3 | 10 |
| | Total | 11 | 6 | 17 |
| Respondent addressed attitudes of adults in story | 1975 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| | 1997 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Total | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Respondent addressed attitudes of peers in story | 1975 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| | 1997 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| | Total | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Respondent addressed the attitude or behavior that boys don't play with dolls | 1975 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| | 1997 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| | Total | 7 | 6 | 13 |

I thought that if he wanted a doll he should get what he wanted not something else. The grandmother understood the problem and solved it. But the dad didn't understand until the grandmother had to explain it to him.

A boy from 1975 focused on the lesson he learned from the story:

I like the story because it had meaning. And what I mean by meaning is that the boy wanted to be a father and a good one to. So he wanted to practice so that he could be good. And the only one who understood was his grandmother. I think the story taught a lesson to me and that it isn't so bad to want to practice to be a father that is one thing I learned.

The children who mentioned adult attitudes in their responses clearly indicated that adults serve as powerful role models, as would be expected from the perspective of social learning the-

ory (Bandura, 1977). This belief seems most evident in the favorable responses. Perhaps the conclusion we can draw here is that the favorable attitude (toward boys having dolls) provides a more conscious influence than the unfavorable. Children who are influenced by adults to challenge gender stereotypes are more likely to be aware of that influence than those who are influenced by adults to accept gender stereotypes.

Surprisingly, 8 of the 12 responses that discussed the need for boys to learn about child care were from boys. For instance, one boy writing in 1997 wrote:

I think it was nice for the grandma to buy William a doll so he could know how it feels like to be a father. Then when William would be a father he would be a good father and care for his children in a right way.

Another male response, this time from 1975, indicated that although men should know how to care for their children, women still have the primary responsibility for child care.

I thought the story made sense because sometimes or later when a boy becomes a father he will have to know how to take care of a baby, if his wife goes someplace and leaves the father to babysit he will have to know how to take care of it. I don't think that they teach men how to take care of baby so it is good to know as soon as you can.

More typical is the simple statement of a boy writing in 1975, "William wanted to learn how to take care of a baby, then when he has kids he will learn how to understand his kids better." Although these responses indicate that some boys from 1975 were beginning to internalize the idea that child care should be an equal responsibility, we noted that only one of the boys in the 1997 group articulated this idea.

Also of interest is the fact that for both respondents that fell under the other favorable subcategories, responses mentioning the attitudes of peers and responses suggesting people should make their own choices were from girls. The respondents who mentioned peer attitudes usually focused on their sense that the brother and the neighbor were "mean" or "jealous." One girl from 1997 focused on the error of the peer attitudes: "I think his brother and his neighbor were very very wrong." Perhaps this is indicative of the theory that girls are more concerned with feelings, as is suggested in Gilligan's (1982) ethic of care.

The girls who indicated that children should be able to make their own choices perhaps show evidence that they are applying the idea of equal opportunity to boys as well. One girl from 1975 focused on how her opinion changed and her response also demonstrates that not all girls want to play with dolls, either:

I thought that he was a sisy at first, but then I didn't think so because I understood why he really wanted it. At first I thought he was a sisy because I would have been delighted with the basketball and the train but I know that everyone is not the same.

Another girl, also from 1975, focused more on the issue of personal choice.

William's grandmother was right about the doll. He would learn how to take care of a baby. I don't think he was a sissy. I think its all right doll are all right for everybody to have one. People can play with any thing they want.

Responses Unfavorable to the Idea of William's Having a Doll

Of the 17 responses that indicated an unfavorable attitude toward William's having a doll, only 1 response, from a boy, addressed the attitudes of the adults in the story; 4 responses (1 girl and 3 boys) addressed the attitude of William's peers in the story; and 13 (6 girls and 7 boys) were unfavorable because "boys don't play with dolls." These unfavorable responses, from both boys and girls, are typical of the ingrained stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles that many children develop. They exemplify Kohlberg's (1996) theory that children have rigid perceptions of gender roles.

Our attempts to classify one response in particular proved problematic because it showed a transformation in the student's attitude about William's having a doll:

The story was out of place because a boy should not want a doll. The basketball his father brought him and the trainset was the toy a boy should play with. But the little boy still wanted a doll. When his Grandmother came the boy had a good plan to finally get a doll. So they went on a walk and William told his Grandmother that every body was against him to get a doll. But his Grandmother was not so she went to the store and bought a doll and he loved it. I thought his Grandmother had a good point when she told William father about why William should have a doll. (Boy, 1975)

The initial statement, "a boy should not want a doll," puts this response squarely in the boys-don't-play-with-dolls subcategory, but the subsequent statement, "I thought his Grandmother had a good point when she told William father about why William should have a doll," shows the effect the book had on the child's thinking. Upon reflection, we decided that this response, which acknowledges a positive attitude toward gender equity and is ranked as favorable overall, should be in both favorable and unfavorable subcategories.

The largest subcategory, with 13 responses saying that boys don't play with dolls, has several variations on that theme. Some implied that playing with dolls makes one effeminate:

I think the story was good but i never saw a kid that wanted a doll more than a basketball the boy was like a girl because i never wanted a doll befor accept maybe when i was a baby. (Boy, 1997)

I thought the story was very good except for William wanting a doll. Maybe little babies play with dolls but William is

a little to old to be playing with dolls. I think boys should be more masquent, not soft, and feminine like most girls! (Girl, 1975)

Williams should of took all the thing he dad gave him instead of a doll because dolls are for girls and William is a boy. (Boy, 1997)

Others focused either on the sorts of toys that are more typically associated with boys or on their own personal toy choices:

I thought the story was silly because little boy's don't play with dolls, they play football, basketball and lot of things like that. (Girl, 1975)

I liked it but Willuum dont need a doll he needs boy toys to play with like a basketball a alatik [electric] car that you can play with. (Girl, 1997)

William didn't want anything except his doll. He didn't want a train or to play basketball he wanted his doll. But also he did not want the boy next door calling him a sissy or his brother calling him a creap. He was only interested in playing with his doll, which I think is kind of weird, I would have chosen a M16 K. A. 60 violator assult rifle. (Boy, 1997)

One of the responses that focused on peer attitudes was a bit unsettling. This boy approved of the behavior of William's brother and neighbor: "I really like the part when his brother and the boy next door called him creep and sissy" (1975). These responses demonstrate that, for many children, there has been little change in perception of gender roles.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Although this study has dealt with only a small sample of children and their responses to one book, the results are suggestive of deeper and broader issues. The emotional price paid by boys who choose non-traditional toys and activities causes damage that can be devastating and long-lasting. At about the same time as boys enter school, they begin devoting great amounts of time and energy to avoiding behavior that may be deemed feminine. Being taunted for behaving like a girl can be a potent lesson and may lower self-esteem and contribute to negative attitudes toward females, which in turn may interfere with healthy relationships. Behaving or dressing like a girl, expressing emotions, or desiring toys or objects that are stereotypically feminine can lead to such harsh criticism that boys will avoid these things at all costs. This kind of suppression can lead to a distorted and unhealthy view of what it means to be male. Even when boys do attempt to cross gender lines, parents and teachers will try to pull them back, which serves as reinforcement for stereotypical male behavior (Pollack, 1998; Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

Research has informed us of overwhelming evidence that stereotyped attitudes toward gender are perpetuated in the school as well as at home. Teachers, like parents, are usually

very unaware and typically deny that they perpetuate biased perceptions of males and females. Teachers send messages to children about gender through their own behavior, their language in the classroom, and the documented differential treatment given to boys and girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). In nonacademic situations, teachers reinforce gender stereotyping by assigning classroom duties by gender, with girls more frequently assigned the role of helpmate (Grant, 1983), and by complimenting girls on their hair, dress, and neatness in school work (Sadker & Sadker, 1994) rather than commending girls on their academic accomplishments. Unfortunately, school personnel typically provide children with information that reinforces gender stereotypes learned at home, rather than challenging children's biased perceptions.

Since the advent of the Women's Movement, attention has been focused on how to best educate and raise girls in a male-dominated world. The concomitant problem that boys are placed at risk academically, physically, and emotionally is just beginning to get the attention of experts in the fields of psychology and education. Pollack (1998) has found that even though our society is reevaluating ideas about females and gender roles, the constricting assumptions about males have not changed since the nineteenth century. These assumptions about how males are expected to behave at different stages of their lives are referred to by Pollack (1998) as the "Boy Code" and are so deeply ingrained that most people are unaware of them. Boys, on the other hand, become painfully aware of the code when they violate or try to ignore it and are taunted or ostracized by significant adults or peers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

As in all research, when examining results of the study, the "so what?" factor emerges. What do classroom teachers do with a heightened awareness that children's attitudes toward gender roles have not changed despite the fact that they should be seeing those roles differently thanks to laws which enforce equal opportunity for females in the workplace and schools? While these attempts to demand equality between the sexes may have influenced society's behaviors, there is strong evidence that children are still biased in their gender-related attitudes and these biases place unfair limitations on both boys and girls. Teachers, however, are in an ideal position to address children's stereotypical perceptions of gender on a personal level in authentic situations. In order to do this effectively, teachers need to become more aware of gender-related issues, examine their own biases, and engage children in situations where perceptions can be discussed openly.

Teachers can become more enlightened about gender-related issues by reading current publications dealing with this topic. Recently, authors have been targeting the difficulties that boys face as they grow up in our society. *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (Pollack, 1998), *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (Kindlon & Thomp-

son, 1998), and *The Wonder of Boys* (Gurian, 1997) are essential readings for teachers in today's classrooms and can be used by teachers to explore and reflect on their own belief systems.

Teachers . . . typically deny that they perpetuate biased perceptions of males and females.

After becoming more fully aware of the current issues facing children as they grow up, teachers must examine and confront their own biases. In discussions with our university students about *William's Doll*, we have found that although preservice and practicing teachers are in favor of societal changes regarding gender roles, they are unwilling to encourage or even allow their own sons to engage in stereotypically female activities. This kind of thinking as, "It's okay for everyone else's child, but not my son!", is common and illustrates the need for teachers to carefully examine their own attitudes. Schlank and Metzger (1997) suggest that teachers "begin with themselves" by reflecting on their own childhoods with questions such as: "Did you always like being a girl/boy? Why/why not?" "When you were a child, what were your favorite toys, games, and activities and who were your playmates?" "How independent were you allowed to be?" Next, teachers need to focus on the influence of gender in their present lives by answering questions such as "How has your gender affected your adult life?" and "How did the world you grew up in differ from today's world in terms of gender?" Reflecting on questions such as these allows teachers to explore and come to terms with their own biases.

Finally, teachers can present situations to children that promote authentic discussion about gender perceptions. Since literature affords students the opportunity to talk about issues in other people's lives while maintaining distance from their own, teachers may want to seek out children's books and develop consciousness-raising activities. Titles such as *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (DePaola, 1979), *You Have a Girlfriend, Alfie Atkins?* (Bergstrom, 1988), *Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?* (Sachar, 1993), *Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World* (Walter, 1986), *Knitwits* (Taylor, 1992), *You're a Brave Man, Julius Zimmerman* (Mills, 1999), and *What if They Saw Me Now?* (Ure, 1982) focus primarily on issues or themes of boys who play with girls, what it means to be a boy or a girl, and boys who engage in stereotypically female activities such as babysitting, cooking, knitting, and dancing. When selecting and reading books of this nature, teachers should be keen observers of children's verbal and nonverbal reactions. Who knows? If teachers examine their own belief systems and gently challenge unfair gender perceptions with their students, maybe, just maybe, if we revisit students' responses to *William's Doll* in 2010, we'll find children more attuned to gender equity. ●

Notes

1. We also used analysis of variance to test for differences among the groups of students—gender and date of response—in their attitudes toward William having a doll. The only statistically significant difference was in gender; a higher proportion of girls than boys had favorable responses. There was no significant difference in the interaction between gender and year. For more information, contact the authors.
2. All responses reproduced below are exactly as the students wrote them.

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