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An Analysis of Children's Responses to Storybook Characters in Non-Traditional Roles

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Sex role stereotypes have been investigated in text materials (Rupley, Garcia and Longnion, 1981; Scott and Feldman-Summers, 1979; Taylor, 1973) and in children's literature (Ashby and Wittmaier, 1978; DeLisi and Johns, 1984; Donlan, 1972; Key, 1971; Kropp and Halverson, 1983; Styer, 1975; Weitzman, 1972; Winkeljohann and Gallant, 1980). These studies have examined the stereotypical roles portrayed by male and female characters, in terms of the way the males and females are presented in the material. Findings indicate change in sex roles to be slow; males still tend to be viewed as active and achieving while girls are passive and emotional (Weitzman, 1972, p. 1125). According to social learning theory perspective, such stereotyped views of sex roles are incorporated into a child's repertoire of behaviors. Children selectively imitate what they perceive as culturally designated appropriate sex role behavior (Hartley, 1959; Weitzman, 1972). In support of this theory researchers have also found children exposed to material containing non-traditional roles have been influenced by the stories that they hear (Berg-Cross and Berg-Cross, 1978; Kropp and Halverson, 1983; Litcher and Johnson, 1969; Styer, 1975). In these studies, hearing

socially relevant stories containing sex equitable roles, roles which reflect the changing roles for men and women, changed children's attitudes and values toward the character in the non-traditional role. If society has indeed reacted to findings such as these by exposing students to more sex-equitable literature and ideas, it may mean that children today have less sex-typed attitudes and are less likely to find such roles novel. One way of determining if this is the case would be to examine the ways in which children freely respond to such literature.

Having children respond to literary works is inherent in a reader-response approach to the study of literature. Such a perspective results in having children construct their own personal meaning through a transaction with the text (Cooper, 1985; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1983, 1985). "Trans-active response to literature asserts that the reading of works is not merely the communication of a message to a passive receiver; the transaction is an internal activity in which the reader recreates the text and confers meaning on the work" (Webb, 1985, p. 274). In such a way, literature becomes a personal experience for the reader, in which the words on the page are internalized, and not merely heard. In using a reader-response perspective with non-traditional literature, children are allowed to construct their own views of the world suggested by the text and to respond accordingly. The purpose of this study was to analyze, from a reader-response perspective, children's responses to story characters in non-traditional roles and to investigate the relationship of gender for these responses.

Method

Subjects. One hundred fifty-four subjects, from diverse cultural and SES backgrounds, between the ages of eight and 10 years participated in this study. Subjects

included 67 males and 87 females in eight intact classrooms. All attended third grade at an elementary school in a suburban community in the southwest.

Materials. In order to examine children's responses literature, existing works were preferred over contrived text. Two picture books which focus on non-traditional roles were selected. These were *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972) and *White Dynamite and Curly Kidd* (Martin and Archambault, 1986). *William's Doll* portrays a young boy's experiences associated with wanting a doll. His brother and neighbor call him a sissy. But his grandmother understands and buys him the doll, convincing everyone else that it is okay for a boy to have a doll. *White Dynamite and Curly Kidd* is the story of Lucky Kidd. She watches her father ride an ill-tempered bull at the rodeo and thinks perhaps that she might want to be a bull rider someday. The reader does not know that Lucky is a female until the last page of the story when she removes her hat.

Procedure. Each story was read orally by the researcher with no discussion during the reading period. The following probe was given on an overhead: "Write anything you want about what I just read." Then the procedure was repeated for the second story. The order of stories was counter-balanced across classes to account for possible influence of story sequence on response.

Data analysis. Data were analyzed to determine positive or negative reactions to the non-traditional role portrayed in the story. In cases where the responses did not refer to the non-traditional role, they were classified as either descriptive/evaluative or connecting. Description of the coding system and examples are found in the Appendix. In a few cases, responses were too vague to be classified

(e.g., the book was good) and were not included in the data analysis. Both researchers coded the data and consensus was reached upon any that had disagreement. An independent rater was trained in the use of the classification system and coded one-fourth of the data. Interrater reliability was established with a 95 percent agreement on coding the categories.

Results

Responses to a male in a non-traditional role.

Chi square analysis of the free response to *William's Doll* indicated a significant relationship between gender and the categories of response (χ^2 (d.f. 3, N = 154) = 10.64, $p < .01$). The percentages of responses in each category by gender are found in Table 1.

Table 1
Categories of Children's Responses by Gender

	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Positive</u>	<u>Descriptive/ Evaluative</u>	<u>Connecting</u>
<i>William's Doll*</i>				
Male	16%	8%	67%	9%
Female	9%	26%	53%	12%
Total	12%	18%	59%	10%
N = 154				
<i>Curly Kidd**</i>				
Male	5%	13%	70%	12%
Female	2%	25%	61%	12%
Total	3%	20%	65%	12%
N = 154				

Note: *Significant difference between males & females was at the .01 level.

**No significant difference between males & females.

Only 16 percent of the males and nine percent of the females responded negatively to the non-traditional role of the main character in the story *William's Doll*. There was a higher percentage of positive reaction in responses written by females.

A small percentage of responses were categorized as connecting responses. In these responses, students made personal connections with the events in the story without making either a positive or negative comment about the main character being in a non-traditional role. This type of response clearly indicated that these students found personal significance in these stories. They focused on their own aspect of the story that was important to them, but which had nothing to do with their reaction to the main character in the non-traditional role.

The largest percentage of responses fell under the category of descriptive/evaluative, with 53 percent of the females and 59 percent of the males responding to the story in this way. Most of the children's responses in this category resulted in a retelling of the story. In other responses, children commented on a part of the story, such as *A boy wanted a doll*. Although these children mentioned the doll, they did not express a positive or negative reaction to the character owning one.

Responses to a female in a non-traditional role.

Chi square analysis of the free responses to the story *White Dynamite and Curly Kidd* resulted in no significant difference between males and females. In the total analysis, only 23 percent of all students reacted to the non-traditional role. This is important in light of the fact that such a small number of the total subjects responded in either a negative or positive way. Of the few negative responses, the children

questioned the fact that the girl in the story would want to be a bull rider. There were more positive reactions with children commenting on the fact that they liked the idea of the girl being a bull rider. As in the case of *William's Doll*, most of the responses resulted in describing or evaluating the story.

In the connecting responses, the children did not react to the non-stereotyped role; instead these subjects were able to relate their responses to a personal experience or to situations which they could imagine.

Discussion

Traditionally, research examining the effects of sex-equitable literature has explicitly called attention to the non-traditional roles portrayed in such literature and required that children react to this role. In such studies, students were often required to articulate opinions regarding the appropriateness of males or females being engaged in non-traditional behavior. From a literary response perspective, little has been known regarding children's response preferences to such works. The findings from this study indicate that expressing opinions regarding the appropriateness of such roles is not a common focus of elementary children. Role appropriateness was an issue in only 25 to 30 percent of the responses; the most common response type was descriptive or evaluative in nature. Other studies examining students' responses to literature (not necessarily sex-equitable in nature), have found that retelling, summarizing, and expressing opinions on specific parts are the most common type of responses expressed by children in the elementary grades (Applebee, 1978; Cullinan, Harwood, and Galda, 1983; Many, 1989). In comparison, when framing their response to sex equitable literature, subjects in this study seem to view such works in the same way they do literature in general.

It is also interesting to note that some children were able to make personal connections between their lives or their own literary creations and the non-traditional works used in this study. When students are able to place themselves in non-traditional roles, as Misty did when she said, *If I was Curly's daughter, I'd follow his lead and look up to him when I was in trouble*, they are making the types of life-to-text connections encouraged by many reader-response proponents (Cochran-Smith, 1984; Many, 1990, 1992). Such personal associations with text help the students see how the world offered by the text and their own personal worlds relate, thus often allowing them to expand their own world horizons in meaningful ways. Interestingly, children also expressed that they would or would not be involved in the activities represented in the story giving explanations other than gender as a reason. For example, Robert wrote, *I want to be a bull rider some day but I think it is too dangerous for me*. These responses support Bem's (1981) gender schema theory view in that the readers seem to be using criteria other than gender when making their decisions regarding behaviors.

Chi square analysis revealed a significant relationship between sex and the types of responses for *William's Doll*. Males tended to be more likely to react negatively and less likely to react positively to the non-traditional role than did girls. This pattern was repeated for the second story but the results were not significant.

Overall, only 12 percent of the total responses to *William's Doll* contained any negative reactions to the non-traditional role. This is in marked contrast to Styer's (1975) study which examined kindergarten children's reactions to the same book. When asked, 59 percent of the boys and 52

percent of the girls contended that William should not want a doll. Although Styer's findings were in response to a specific probe question and not a free response format, the contrast of her findings with the low percentage of negative reactions in this study could be an indication that more flexible attitudes are evident in students today than in earlier times.

Recent research has suggested that students are being exposed to a greater amount of sex-equitable literature (Scott, 1986) and that such material results in less stereotyped attitudes (Schau and Scott, 1984). Earlier studies examining the effects of literature containing characters in non-traditional roles (Jennings, 1975; Koblinsky, Cruse and Sugawara, 1978) cited the novelty of the main character as a limitation to the study because the main character of the story appeared in a role that was in conflict with the familiar traditional role. Due to the novelty of the main character's role, the children's recall of the story was improved. This, in turn, was viewed as a limitation because they then focused on this aspect of the story. In this study, only 24 percent of the male's response to *William's Doll* and 18 percent of the male's response to *White Dynamite and Curly Kidd* contain a reaction, either positive or negative, to this non-traditional role. Females were more likely to react to the non-traditional role in both texts, but still almost two-thirds of the female students did not express a specific judgment regarding the non-traditional role. This may be an indication that students today have been exposed to such roles and consequentially this image is less novel.

Conclusions

The reader-response techniques used in this study allowed close examination of the subjects' unique focus on the story experience and may provide promising alternatives for analyzing the effects of sex-equitable literature in

future research. In summary, the findings from this study suggest that when students are asked to write a free response to a story containing a main character in a non-traditional role, they may not react to that aspect of the story. Instead, they relate the story to their own lives (such as wanting to own an object mentioned in the story), or comment on events in the story (such as a retelling). Such findings make us, as teachers and researchers, reevaluate which aspect a child might become involved with when reading and responding to a piece of non-traditional literature. Children may not focus on what the teacher has in mind. As teachers we need to be willing to put control in the hands of the child. Instead of guiding children into judging appropriateness of roles and telling children what to react to in non-traditional literary work, teachers should allow children time to make decisions as to what is personally relevant. Children should have opportunities to be problem solvers; as they must be in life. In this study, the judgmental decision regarding appropriateness of the non-traditional role was not an issue for most children. Very few children focused on the moral decision of whether the behaviors of characters were right or wrong. Instead, the majority of male and female responses focused on whether or not they could or they could not do something, or what the story was about.

By empowering students in such ways, students who find such roles novel are allowed to reflect and react to the issues raised and consequently be exposed to the opportunities for attitude change or value clarification. Children who do not find the gender issue personally relevant are still able to have a valuable literary experience even though the non-traditional role itself is not of primary significance to them.

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APPENDIX

Coding of Free Responses to Story Characters in Non-traditional Roles

Directions:

- 1) Read each response.
- 2) Determine if the response contains a positive or negative reaction to the non-traditional role of the story character as described in categorization scheme below.
- 3) If the response does not contain a positive or negative reaction to the non-traditional role of the story character, examine the response to see if it contains any elements which would exemplify a connecting type response.
- 4) If not, the response should fit into the descriptive/evaluative category.

Categorization of Responses

Negative reaction

These responses contain a negative reaction to the non-traditional role of the story character. The response must mention the non-traditional role and must imply rejection or dissatisfaction towards portrayal of the character in that activity. Responses may make a general negative evaluation of the book as a whole and then go on to mention a number of aspects of the story, including the non-traditional content. Responses can include statements in which the student makes connections between their own lives/preferences and the story but because they also include a negative reaction to the actions of the story character, the response falls into this category. Examples: *I didn't like this story. The girl wanted to be a bull rider. I like when he got a basketball and net and a train. I did not like when he got a doll. He was a sissy. I don't blame the kid across the street.*

Positive reaction

These responses contain a positive reaction to the non-traditional role of the story character. The response must mention the non-traditional role and must imply acceptance or approval of the portrayal of the character in that activity. Responses may make a general positive evaluation of the book as a whole and then go on to mention a number of aspects of the story, including the nontraditional

content. Responses can include statements in which the student makes connection between their own lives/preferences and the story but because they also include a positive reaction to the actions of the story character, the response falls into this category. Examples: *The girl was going to be a bull rider when she grew up. It was a good story. William wanted a doll and didn't want anything else. He was going to be a good father.*

Connecting responses

In these responses students make personal connections with the events of the story. Such responses may take the form of students describing similar events in their lives, telling what they would have done in similar instances, or describing similar stories which they have experienced or which they create out of their own imaginations.

Students may talk about themselves in terms of what they would have done in the non-traditional role but they do not make a positive or negative comment about the story character being in the nontraditional role. Responses may also contain descriptions of the story or evaluations of the story but the response is coded here because it includes the connecting type response. Examples: *I want to be a bull rider some day but I think it is too dangerous for me. There was once a boy named John and he wanted a doll. (Continues to create a new story from his/her imagination which may parallel the shared story. The new story is not retelling the shared story; it is an original creation.)*

Descriptive/evaluative responses

These responses are made up of descriptive or evaluative responses to the story. They may mention the non-traditional nature of the story character's role but a positive or negative reaction to that portrayal is not evident in the response. When reactions are made to the nontraditional role, the reactions are neutral or vague, such as *I thought it was funny, surprising, interesting, etc.* Students may detail their positive or negative reactions to elements other than the non-traditional roles of the story. These responses do not contain connections to the story. Examples: *The book is good if it was a first grade book. William wanted a doll.*