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# Preschool Teachers' Stated Approaches to Imaginary Companion Behavior Among Preschool Students

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**PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' STATED APPROACHES  
TO IMAGINARY COMPANION BEHAVIOR  
AMONG PRESCHOOL STUDENTS**

**Submitted to the Graduate Committee  
of the Department of Education and Human Development  
State University of New York  
College at Brockport  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Science in Education**

**by**

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As for my imaginary companion, what can I say? Without you I would never have conceived of the idea. Thanks doesn't seem like the right word to express my feelings, but it's the only one left to write.

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine the responses of preschool teachers toward students with imaginary companions, in particular, their reactions to situations involving imaginary companions in the classroom settings.

Past research has focused on reflections of individuals who have had imaginary companions in childhood. Professional attitudes toward these children have ranged from very positive to suggestive of mental illness, requiring treatment.

The subjects were 27 female preschool teachers currently teaching nursery school in the western New York region. Eight hypothetical imaginary companion scenarios were devised. Each scenario was comprised of three to five short sentences. Subjects responded to each scenario in a free-response written format. They were instructed to respond to the situations presented as they would in their own classroom. All responses were then analyzed for overall feeling tone/theme.

Eight themes were found to be present in the responses. These themes were: Responsible/"correct" behavior; Diversion/socialization; Extension/school activities; Praise, acknowledgment; Questioning/

child/parent/"friend"; Sarcasm/rude comments/derision; Acceptance/ignore behavior; and Don't know.

Responses elicited revealed no definitive across-case approach to imaginary companion behavior in the preschool classroom. There were definitive response patterns/themes found within cases. Each student's case was unique and specific, individualized responses were given by subjects to each scenario.

Teaching implications suggested the need to treat children with imaginary companions with respect and encourage the positive aspects of such behavior. Female students in particular tended to be treated not as creative, but dependent and in need of "weaning" from the imaginary companion.

Future research in real classroom settings would help determine whether stated responses are reflective of actual teacher actions. Other possible research would include cross-cultural studies and interviewing of adults who presently have "imaginary companions."

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## Chapter I

### Statement of the Problem

. . . 'There is no use trying' Alice said.  
'One can't believe impossible things.'  
. . . 'I daresay you haven't had much  
practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your  
age I always did it for half-an-hour a day.  
Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six  
impossible things before breakfast.'  
*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (cited in  
Panati, 1974)

How often does the average person take the time to let his/her mind roam free? It is commonly recognized that the physical body needs to find release from pent-up energy, but how many realize the need the mind has to "take a walk on the wild side"? Teachers understand the need for frequent breaks between activities to allow for large muscle movement and "letting off steam" or "getting the wiggles out." The activity of mental release is just as crucial for the health of the mind as physical activity is to the health of the body.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the responses of preschool teachers toward students with imaginary companions, in

particular, their reactions to situations involving imaginary companions in the classroom setting.

The height of make-believe play is reached between the ages of eighteen months and seven or eight years (Millar, 1968). It was felt by this researcher that preschool teachers would be in a better position to observe imaginary companion behavior as societal constraints would not yet have driven it underground.

### Question

What are preschool teachers' stated responses to imaginary companion behavior among preschool students?

### Need for the Study

Understanding the importance of a child's inner world of imagination is crucial when dealing with children. Learning from those whose imaginative world is keener and more fully developed can not only help those children who lack this gift, but provide a safe and nurturing atmosphere for those who possess it.

Most children's artistic impulses start disappearing around the age of 9 because they are "brainwashed" from the school age of 6 onward to use their left hemisphere almost exclusively. A child is never encouraged to

conjure fantasies or entertain hallucinations, in fact the child who does is punished.  
(Panati, 1974, p. 206)

Establishing a baseline of preschool teachers' attitudes toward imaginary companions and their reactions to imaginary companion situations which may arise in the classroom will enable focusing upon improvement. Teachers will not only see where they are, but also gain insight into where they want to be in the future.

"Imagination and fantasy needs to be seen to be valued by those important to children, otherwise they may learn to doubt, fear or reject this essential part of themselves" (Phillips, 1986, p. 20).

#### Definition of Terms

Eidetic image /i det' ik/: An unusually vivid elaborate and apparently exact mental image coming from a visual experience and happening as a fantasy, dream, or memory. (*The Signet/Mosby Medical Encyclopedia*, 1987, p. 199)

Fantasy: Any mental representation or image of a sensible or sense-like object. More especially, any mental image of a whimsical, bizarre, or grotesque character. (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989, p. 722)

Feeling Tone: That overall theme or impression that is derived from the reading of a written work.

Imaginary companion: A person, an animal, or a thing which the child creates in fantasy to play the role of a companion...If a child is timid or has had unpleasant early social experiences, he may prefer an imaginary playmate to a real one...Most companions are people--mainly children of the child's own sex and age. Indications are that imaginary companions are more common among girls, and that they persist longer among girls...(Hurlock, 1972, p. 329).

Intelligence: "The ability to interact and this ability can grow only by interacting with new phenomena, that is, by moving from that which is known into that which is not known" (Pearce, 1977, p. 12-13).

Kinesthetic fantasy: Fantasy involving "the perception of muscle movement, tension, etc., derived from the functioning of afferent nerves connected with muscle tissue, joints, and tendons." (*Funk and Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary*, Vol. I, 1986 edition, p. 357)

Oneiric fantasy: Of or belonging to dreams--dream fantasies--divination by means of dreams. (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd<sup>ed.</sup>, 1989, p. 812)

## Chapter II

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

This chapter will deal with research findings concerning the characteristics of children with imaginary companions as well as the attitudes toward imaginary companion behavior evidenced by others.

#### Characteristics of Children with Imaginary Companions

Researchers have been intrigued by the relatively widespread phenomenon of imaginary companions in childhood for many years. Harriman (1937) found evidence that as much as one-third of all children between the ages of 3-9 years old have imaginary companions. He felt that the imaginary companion exemplified the creative impulse and feared that formal education may repress the tendency. A century ago Burnham (1892) noted that:

The imaginative child often seems to live half his life in a world of poetry and made-believe. Such imaginative children not only have imaginary playmates and personate animals and men...but they almost reconstruct ideally the world in which they live. Beasts, birds, and

their food and furniture talk with them... They have play-brothers and sisters, and dear friends with whom they talk... Much of this imagining centers about their own personalities, and consists in ideals for the future. (Cited in Kalyan-Masih & Adams, 1975, p. 12)

Green (1922) found that the "fantasy" of the imaginary companion does generally disappear when the child is at school. This was true in spite of the fact that "The companion was very much treasured by the child" [Hurlock and Burstein (1932) (cited in Kalyan-Masih & Adams, 1975, p. 12)].

In their 1969 study of biographical correlates of artistic and literary creativity in adolescent girls, Anastasi and Schaefer found that one of the correlates of both art and writing creativity was the citing of eidetic imagery or imaginary companions in childhood. Although researchers thought this may be due to the greater willingness of creative subjects to report this type of experience, Schaefer (1969) found it worth pursuing further.

The question posed in his follow-up study was: "Is the imaginary-companion phenomenon characteristic of the highly creative person?" (Schaefer, 1959, p. 748). Four hundred females and four hundred males participated in this study. Schaefer found that the incidence of this phenomenon across all groups was 12 -- 31%, which was consistent with the findings of earlier researchers, e.g., Svendsen, 1934. Occurrence of

this phenomenon significantly favored creative groups over the control groups. Moreover, for both males and females, those who had created works of a literary nature reported greater incidence of this phenomenon.

Lane (1976) found a similar difference between highly gifted arithmetic achievers and highly gifted language achievers in his study of personalities and academic achievement of highly gifted and high achieving children. Language achievers demonstrated a significantly higher level of fantasy than did arithmetic achievers.

The writings of many literary artists lend support to these research findings. Robert Louis Stevenson's poem, "The Unseen Playmate," was based upon his own experiences as a child with imaginary companions. "Marina Tsvetaeva, a great twentieth century Russian poet, described how she was moved to write by the imaginal being 'which wanted to exist through her'" (Watkins, 1986, p. 9).

"Creative adults and adolescents often report a lonely, imaginative childhood, and describe having imaginary friends -- a feature associated with a predisposition to imaginative play" (Schmukler, 1982, p. 77). This statement would seem to attribute a nurturing basis with childhood experience shaping later behavior.

In a 1973 study of children with "stronger dispositions to fantasy,"



Singer and Singer found these children to be more playful and could concentrate on a task longer than those who lacked this disposition.

They'll wait longer, entertain themselves more, resist temptation more and remember and report details better... Patience and calm are not the only attributes associated with the ability to fantasize. Those who are best at it are often among the older children in the family, and emotionally close to their parents. (Phillips, 1986, p. 12)

In fact, Nagera (1969) found that psychotic children did not have imaginary companions. Imaginative play therapy is often used to treat mental illness in children. "Even when the treatment is brief (Hartley et al. 1952) imaginative play is an important, if under-used therapy for troubled youngsters, at any stage of development" (cited in Shmukler, 1986, p. 80). Pulaski (1975) used fantasy to calm hyperactive children and increase their attention span. Singer and Singer (1979) found that boys low in imaginative ability tended to be more physically aggressive than children with rich fantasy lives. They used fantasy to help these boys cope with their feelings of aggression (cited in Phillips, 1986).

### Attitudes Toward Imaginary Companion Behavior

There is little research available concerning attitudes of parents, teachers and other professionals toward children with imaginary companions.

Some professionals, parents and theorists believe that imaginary companions have a harmful effect on a child and that they are evidence of insecurity, withdrawal, latent neurosis and a poor substitute for real companions... Only a generation ago, children who reported having imaginary playmates were thought crazy and parents often tried to cure them, thereby probably forcing children to keep their companions secret. (Fraiberg, 1971, p. 18)

Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim views imaginary companions as symptomatic of some problem which needs to be diagnosed and treated (cited in Phillips, 1986). In fact, by middle childhood, children "rarely engage in spontaneous and complex imaginative dramas" (Phillips, 1986, p. 18).

It is felt by a number of researchers that parents and teachers inadvertently convey disapproval of fantasy in school age children (Pulaski, 1974; Schell & Hall, 1983).

In a study of parental attitudes toward imaginary companions conducted in 1982, researchers found that parents in the study did not hold

very positive attitudes towards children's playing with imaginary companions. In fact, when researchers compared ratings of imaginary companion behavior with deceitful behavior ratings, they found mothers' ratings to have a correlation of 0.40 which they described as "a fairly strong correlation." It would appear that mothers see fantasy and deceit as much the same behavior. Interestingly enough, although "the fathers appeared to be much more discouraging of such behavior," (Brooks & Knowles, 1982, p. 32) their rating of imaginary companion behavior and deceit were independent ( $r = 0.04$ ,  $n = 30$ ). Evidently, the fathers in the study, while not approving of imaginary companions, did not view this behavior as deceitful in nature (Brooks & Knowles, 1982).

It is popularly held by parents and teachers that a high level of fantasy could encourage children to become withdrawn and that it may be detrimental to mental health by causing confusion between reality and fantasy. But the evidence is to the contrary: an imaginative predisposition helps children to integrate the two states of mind more effectively, enabling them to think more clearly and to build up a more realistic view of themselves and the world. (Shmukler, 1986, p. 80)

### Summary

In this chapter the focus has been on not only the existing body of knowledge concerning the characteristics of children with imaginary companions, but the attitudes parents, teachers and other professionals bring to their dealings with children exhibiting this phenomenon. Attitudes range from those who feel imaginary companions are beneficial and something to be encouraged among children, to those who feel it is indicative of mental illness and should be treated.

In the past there has been a focus on reflections of individuals who have had imaginary companions in childhood. Based upon these reflections, researchers have found a positive correlation between imaginary companions in early childhood and later literary achievement.

## Chapter III

### The Research Design

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the responses of preschool teachers toward students with imaginary companions; in particular, their reactions to situations involving imaginary companions in the classroom setting.

The height of make-believe play is reached between the ages of eighteen months and seven or eight years (Millar, 1968). It was felt by this researcher that preschool teachers would be in a better position to observe imaginary companion behavior as societal constraints would not yet have driven it underground.

#### Question

What are preschool teachers' stated responses to imaginary companion behavior among preschool students?

## Methodology

### Subjects

The subjects in this study were 27 female preschool teachers currently teaching nursery school in the Western New York region.

Eight hypothetical imaginary companion situations were provided.

### Procedure

Using the insights gained from extensive research into occurrences of the imaginary companion phenomenon and its manifestations among creative individuals, this researcher devised eight hypothetical imaginary companion situations which could occur in preschool situations. These eight hypothetical situations were distributed to numerous preschools in the Western New York region.

Each situation was comprised of 3-5 short sentences and involved respondents in writing a brief statement concerning their reaction to a child with an imaginary companion. Respondents were further instructed to handle the situations as they would in their own preschool class.

Complete confidentiality and anonymity were assured to respondents, and consent forms were provided in which this was plainly stated. Each respondent was requested to provide a fictitious name by which he/she could be referred if necessary. Other data requested included: sex,

highest level of education attained, number of years teaching preschool children and a blank space for any further information respondents felt like providing. Background data form and hypothetical situation response forms can be found in Appendices A - B.

### Descriptive Analysis

The 27 responses to the imaginary companion situations were analyzed for overall feeling tone/major themes. Stendler's (1949) study of elementary teachers' approaches to classroom behavior problems provided a model for analysis of thematic data. After 25 free response statements were presented, the responses were analyzed for recurrent themes. The frequency of the themes were tallied and raw data converted to percentages.

## Chapter IV

### Analysis of Data

#### Question

What are preschool teachers' stated responses to imaginary companion behavior among preschool students?

#### Findings

Figure 1 (page 18) illustrates teacher responses which fit into eight major themes. Stendler's (1949) study provided a model for thematic analysis. Major themes were, for purposes of analysis, those themes which constituted 50% or more of teacher responses and/or the largest percentage of teacher responses in cases in which no theme drew 50% of responses. Minor themes were those which, although not contained in 50% of responses or the largest percentage of responses, still appeared in a sufficient enough number of responses, either by way of total percent of responses (i.e. 30.0%) or comparatively great enough percent across cases, to warrant comment.



The first theme was that of responsible behavior. In these instances the teacher expected the student to cooperate with the standards/rules that existed in the school. These responses involved the teacher in firm guidance toward "correct" behavior, warnings to the student of risks involved in such behavior, and possible consequences of the behavior. Table 1 (page 19) shows that twenty-five percent of total responses contained this theme.

The second theme found in teacher responses was that of diversion/socialization. In this instance the student was encouraged to participate in other activities with fellow student(s)/teacher(s). These included instances in which the teacher chose to use humor, although none of the teachers detailed the humorous approach they would use. Twenty-three percent of total responses contained this theme. (Refer to Table 1 page 19)

Theme three was that of extension/school activities. In this case the teacher encouraged sharing of abilities/imaginary friend behavior with other students/class. This included use of the behavior as a "jumping off point" in which the teacher uses the student's friend for instructional purposes, e.g. instruction in real versus pretend (30% of responses).

A fourth theme involved instances in which the teacher complimented

the student for not depending upon the imaginary companion. This theme included instances in which the teacher encouraged/went along with the behavior and/or actually praised such behavior as imaginative and good (30% of responses).

Theme five was that of questioning. In this case either the student, parent(s) or even the imaginary companion was questioned about the behavior by the teacher. Twenty-four percent of responses included questioning behavior on the teacher's part.

A surprising sixth theme was that of sarcasm/rude comments/derision. Only four percent of responses were easily identified as containing rude comments or jokes about the imaginary companion. Such comments as "I don't see anyone" or "...you want to be bigger than anyone" were contextually found to be sarcastic in nature.

The seventh theme was that of acceptance of such behavior as normal developmentally/ignoring the behavior. In these cases the student was left alone and not forced to participate in other activities. This theme also included instances in which the student was comforted concerning missing the imaginary companion (i.e. Rachel and Joanie). This theme appeared in twenty-three percent of responses.

An eight theme/category was created when in one instance the teacher didn't know how to react/respond to the child's behavior (.5% of responses).

THEME	CHARACTERISTICS
1. Responsible/"correct" behavior	Rules, firm guidance in "correct" behavior, cooperation, warn of safety risks.
2. Diversion/socialization	Interest in other activities, involve with other children, have child join group.
3. Extension/school activities	Use behavior as 'jumping off point', e.g. instruction in 'real' versus 'pretend'.
4. Praise, acknowledgment	Compliment abilities, independent behavior, encourage use of imagination.
5. Questioning/child/parent/friend	Ask child/parent(s) about 'friend', talk to 'friend', listed to child interact with 'friend'.
6. Sarcasm/rude comments/derision	Joke about 'friend', make rude comments, e.g. 'you want to be bigger than anyone'.
7. Acceptance/ignore behavior	Normal developmental stage, ignore-leave alone, don't force participation, offer comfort, i.e. Rachel and Joanie.
8. Don't know	Unable to determine appropriate responses.

**Figure 1 RECURRENT THEMES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS**

THEME	% OF RESPONSE
1. Responsible/"correct" behavior	25
2. Diversion/socialization	23
3. Extension/school activities	30
4. Praise/acknowledgement	30
5. Questioning/child/parent/'friend'	24
6. Sarcasm/rude comments/derision	4
7. Acceptance/ignore behavior	23
8. Don't know	.5

**Table 1 RECURRENT THEMES ACROSS CASE PERCENTAGES**

As has been illustrated in Table 1, no overriding theme was found to exist across cases. Each student's case was unique and specific, individualized responses were needed. It should be further noted that in each scenario the teachers' responses may have contained more than one theme.

In Tables 2 and 3 (page 23) the scenarios (found in Appendix A) are examined for major and minor themes. Table 2 presents raw data, while Table 3 converts the raw data to percentages.

In the first scenario, that of Kathy and her doll Amanda, a major theme of diversion/socialization emerged (56% responses). The majority of teachers chose to involve Kathy in other activities. These included inviting other students with similar interests in dolls to play with Kathy and various play activities involving dolls. The minor themes of praise-acknowledgement and extension/school activities comprised 33% and 30% of the responses respectively. Another theme of acceptance/ignoring the behavior constituted 22% of responses.

The second scenario involving Jason and the blocks was overwhelmingly responded to (89%) with teachers stressing responsible behavior. Probably due to the nature of the problem (cleaning up a mess), this was the most important element the teachers surveyed. A minor theme of praise-acknowledgement (26%) was noted. In these instances the teacher did encourage or go along with the idea of the imaginary companion being real to the child, although still expecting the child to clean up the mess.

In the case of Shannon, there was no real major theme. The largest number of teachers did tend to praise the behavior and acknowledge Shannon's abilities (44%). However, it was in this particular scenario that the most sarcastic and derisive responses were found. It was evident that

a number of teachers felt sorry for the imaginary companion "Tiny" and thus felt obliged to stand up for him. In many instances this was accomplished by putting down the child (Shannon). This scenario also was found to have the most questioning behavior exhibited by teachers (30%).

In the case of Marcella, the overwhelming theme of teachers was extension/school activities (74%). In most cases the teachers encouraged Marcella to share her abilities with other classmates. Teachers also tended to encourage extension of Marcella's "talent" by having her write down the songs her "friend" taught her. The minor theme of diversion/socialization was also noted (30%). A number of teachers sought to get Marcella interested in school activities and other students.

Rachel and her imaginary companion Joanie constituted an interesting case. Two major themes emerged, although both were under 50% of the total responses. These themes were diversion/socialization and acceptance/ignoring the behavior (41% each). Most teachers tried to interest Rachel in other activities and comfort her. None tried to dissuade her from belief that her companion existed.

Mitchell and his space friend Turin was the most often praised imaginary companion behavior. A full 56% of responses involved praise of Mitchell for a good imagination and encouraged him to continue to exercise it. This

scenario also found a large number of teachers (44%) who used Mitchell's story as a "jumping off point" for instructing other students in the difference between "real" and "pretend" and/or as an encouragement to other students in the rewards of using their imaginations.

The main theme found in the Alice scenario was that of acceptance/ignoring the behavior (56%). Most teachers felt this behavior was not a problem and that Alice should be left alone with her companion. However, two minor themes were noted as well. Extension/school activities comprised 33% of the teachers' responses. These teachers tried to involve Alice in talking with "real" friends about her adventures. The theme of questioning drew 30% of teacher responses. Teachers responding thus tried to get Alice to talk with them and/or listened to her interact with her "friend".

Terrance and his friend Fred the frog was the scenario which came in second only to Jason and Nathan in the percentage of teachers stressing responsible behavior (74%). The majority of teachers warned Terrance not to frighten other children with his stories. He was most often told to tell "nice" stories instead. Another 48% of responses theme was that of questioning. These teachers felt that Terrance must have emotional problems to be telling such stories. They chose to question his parent(s)

about these "problems".

SCENARIOS	THEMES							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Kathy	0	15	8	9	2	0	6	0
Jason	24	5	1	7	1	2	4	0
Shannon	7	4	3	12	8	4	3	0
Marcella	1	8	20	7	7	0	4	0
Rachel	2	11	5	9	9	0	11	1
Mitchell	1	1	12	15	4	1	4	0
Alice	0	3	9	2	8	0	15	0
Terrance	19	3	6	2	13	2	3	0

**Table 2 WITHIN SCENARIO OCCURRENCE OF THEMES**

SCENARIOS	THEMES							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Kathy	0	56	30	33	7	0	22	0
Jason	89	19	4	26	4	7	15	0
Shannon	26	15	11	44	30	15	11	0
Marcella	4	30	74	26	26	0	15	0
Rachel	7	41	19	33	33	0	41	4
Mitchell	4	4	44	56	15	4	15	0
Alice	0	11	33	7	30	0	56	0
Terrance	74	11	22	7	48	7	11	0

**Table 3 PERCENTAGES OF WITHIN SCENARIO THEMES**



## Chapter V

### Conclusions and Implications

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the responses of preschool teachers to students with imaginary companions; in particular, their responses to situations involving imaginary companions in the classroom.

#### Conclusions

The responses elicited from participants in this study revealed no definitive across-case approach to imaginary companion behavior in the preschool classroom. However, there were definite response patterns/themes found within cases. It would appear that each case provided unique challenges and growth opportunities for participants. Each case was handled according to situational constraints presented.

The theme of responsible/"correct" behavior was most often found in response to Jason and the block corner and Terrance and his friend, Fred the frog. Both situations were seen as demanding an emphasis on firm guidance in correct behavior by the majority of respondents. In Jason's

case, teaching the child to take responsibility for cleaning up after himself took precedence over the imaginative aspects of blaming his imaginary companion.

Terrance was viewed as the child most likely to have emotional problems. Warning Terrance not to frighten other children was the main thrust of responses. He was also the child most often questioned about his "friend". It was evident that the majority of preschool teachers in this study were more concerned with protecting other children from Terrance than in developing his storytelling talent, although a number of teachers did encourage him to tell "nice" stories.

As the only female whose behavior provoked any sizable number of respondents stressing the theme of responsibility, Shannon is an interesting case. Although most respondents did praise Shannon's climbing ability, a number were obviously sarcastic in nature. Such comments as "You want to be bigger than anyone" and urgent pleas for Shannon to feel sorry for Tiny were noted to occur in 41% of responses (themes one and six). Her competitive nature was seen as more of a problem behavior than a positive personality trait. Respondents were more likely to view it as a weed to be pulled than as a flower to be nurtured. This, even in a situation in which the child is obviously only competing with herself.

Alice and Rachel were the two female students whose imaginary companion behavior was generally viewed as normal developmental behavior by respondents in this study. In Alice's case, the teacher was most likely to leave her alone with her imaginary companion. In Rachel's case, diversion/socialization was the main theme probably due to the obvious need to comfort a child who has lost her imaginary companion. At the same time this situation was seen as normal behavior for the age.

Most of the scenarios in which female students had imaginary companions found respondents interested in "weaning" the students away from "dependence" upon their imaginary companions. In the cases of Rachel and Joanie, Kathy and Amanda, and Marcella and her invisible friend, respondents chose to have the child become involved in various diversions and social activities. Except for Marcella's case, the female with an imaginary companion was often viewed as having a character defect in need of change rather than a good imagination. Since Marcella exhibited a musical talent she may have been more favorably responded to than the other students. Developing this talent became more the goal than the issue of the imaginary companion. This was true in most instances, however, there were some respondents who did feel that Marcella should be involved with her regular classroom activities and leave the imaginary companion for

later, when she was at home.

Overall, it was generally agreed that imaginary companion behavior was acceptable only to the extent that it did not interfere with classroom management, classroom rules, or the well being of the other students in the class.

### Implications for Teaching Practice

The results of this study revealed no overall approach to imaginary companion behavior in the classroom setting. That may be due to the very different situational constraints which were displayed in each scenario presented. Generally, teachers in the survey displayed great tact and provided intelligent responses to each unique situation faced. Although some teachers did ignore the imaginary companion aspect of each situation, most tended to provide the child with the type of guidance and/or direction which was pertinent to the most pressing need demonstrated.

It is difficult to provide any definitive recommendations for teaching practice due to the lack of real life reactions from the children who would be affected by the teachers' responses to the scenarios. One recommendation which is easy to state but more difficult to practice is the avoidance of using sarcasm or misguided humor in these situations.

Although appearing funny to the teacher, and perhaps the class at the time a situation arises involving imaginary companion type behavior, it is important to remember that the companion is usually very important to the self-esteem and character development of the child. A harsh or condescending reaction may prove detrimental to the child and cause the child to avoid further disclosure of self in the future. This may, in turn, lead to shyness and fear of interacting with other people in the future.

#### Implications for Future Research

Many intriguing research possibilities exist in this field. One of particular interest to this researcher is the idea of changing the scenarios presented, with male students and female students' situations being reversed in order to see if the responses of the teachers surveyed would change. This would be especially interesting in the cases of Shannon and her unusually competitive nature, which was in a number of instances not encouraged by teachers in the present study. If Shannon had been a male student would the responses have been different?

Another follow-up study that would possibly yield helpful information is that of interviewing adults who have "imaginary companions". A cross cultural comparison study of acceptance of such behavior would be useful

in bringing out the various values and beliefs of the societies being studied.

Another interesting research project would be the setting up of an experimental classroom in which children with imaginary companions are encouraged to bring their friend to school. This would allow for much greater insight into the phenomenon as well as provide such children with friends who have similar interests and possibly traits.

Field work in ordinary classroom settings would also be of use in future research in order to see if actual teacher actions reflect stated responses to the behavior.

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## **APPENDICES**

**A. Scenarios**

**B. Information Sheet**

**APPENDIX A**

Kathy has a doll named Amanda that she insists on carrying everywhere with her. She spends most of the day in quiet conversations with Amanda and tends to prefer this to interacting with the other students in the class.

Jason is trying to explain that he is not responsible for the mess in the block corner and should not have to clean it up. He insists that Nathan threw all the blocks around. There is no one named Nathan in the class. When you remind Jason of this fact, he says, "That's him there, see". He points over to the block corner. You can't see anyone there.

Three-year-old Shannon is playing on the jungle gym. She climbs to the top and shouts down, "Come on up, I bet you can't climb this high!" You, as teacher, run over and ask who she is shouting at. She replies, "Tiny, see he can't climb like me!" You look around, see no one, and say ...

Marcella (age 4) likes to sit singing and gazing out the window most of the time. She says she has a friend no one else can see who teaches her songs.



Rachel (age 3) is extremely upset. It seems she is missing her friend Joanie. Joanie has been left at home. Rachel asks you to call her mother and have her bring Joanie to school.

Four-year-old Mitchell insists during Show and Tell that he has just returned from the moon with his space friend Turin. The other students say, "That's impossible!"

Two-year-old Alice is sitting alone under the reading table talking excitedly about an adventure she had yesterday after school. She is totally absorbed in explaining all the details, gesturing and smiling periodically, looking to her right -- no one is there.

Four-year-old Terrance likes to make up stories that are very scary. He explains that his friend Fred the frog tells him these stories and insists that he tell everyone.

**APPENDIX B**

FICTITIOUS NAME \_\_\_\_\_

circle one

circle highest level completed

SEX M F

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL

High School

College 1 2 3 4

Graduate degree

Vocational school

\_\_\_\_\_

Other (explain)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

EXPERIENCE: number of years teaching preschool children \_\_\_\_\_

Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_