PEER-REVIEWED

Gender Nonconforming Boys in Picture Books

Using Protagonists to Examine Social Roles and Stereotypes

DAVID CAMPOS

As I was exploring the children's literature section at my community library, I spotted the picture book *Williams' Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow (1972) standing upright on a bookshelf. I picked it up and reminisced about reading it to my students when I taught second grade in the early nineties. At that time, I noticed a pattern in some of my students' conversations that caused me concern because of some of their comments:

> "Those sneakers are for girls."
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> "Boys don't play house."
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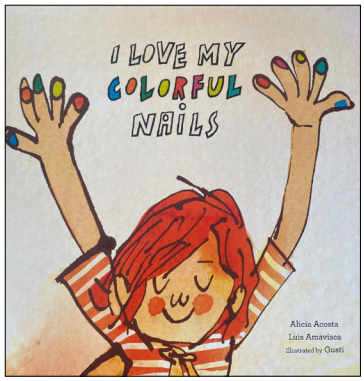
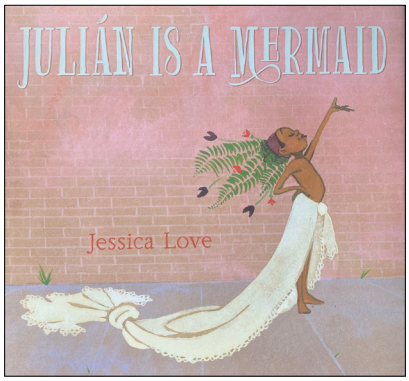
> "Girls aren't supposed to play soccer."
>
> "Cars and trucks are for boys."

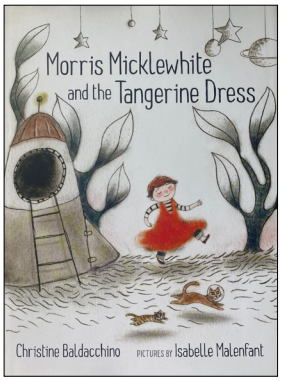
I shouldn't have been troubled with what they were saying. After all, the ideas that young children have about gender often reflect traditional views about social roles and gender stereotypes. In fact, by first grade, children have strong ideas about what is appropriate or acceptable for either gender,[1] including associating toys, clothing, games, jobs, colors, and behaviors with one of the sexes.[2] Psychologists have found that children are more likely to believe that math and computers are for boys, draw a man to represent a scientist or mathematician, and use the term "brilliance" to describe men but "nice" for women.[3] Even in modern times when children may be exposed to an increasing number of persons in nontraditional gender roles (e.g., female firefighters, male nurses, mothers doing yard work, fathers doing housework), it seems that children still cling to gender stereotypes. One study even found that five- to seven-year-olds were less likely to choose a girl as a teammate when they were told a game was designed for "really, really smart" children, which suggested to the researchers that both sexes have a bias against girls' abilities.[4]

Children develop these perceptions from direct and indirect messages from parents and family members, peers, media, and personnel and instructional materials.[5] These messages are in the form "of gender-based behavior towards children or children's exposure to gender discrimination against other people and gender-attributed evaluations of certain behaviors."[6] Psychologists explain, "Gender stereotypes conveyed to the child by the parents [and others] through explicit or implicit messages reinforce the gender inequality in the child's mind, and the consequences deepen in this direction."[7] They point out that young children accept these norms and expectations and seek out same-sex peers to socialize with, who in turn reinforce the norms and behavioral styles. Consult the work of Albert Bandura (social learning theory),[8] Lawrence Kohlberg (theories of cognitive and moral development),[9] and Margaret Signorella and Lynn Liben (gender

***David Campos**, PhD, is Professor of Education at The University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas, where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in instructional design and delivery, special education, and culturally responsive teaching. He writes about LGBTQ youth, childhood health and wellness, and the schooling of Latinos.*







schema processing theory)[10] to learn more about other theories on how children form gender perceptions.

But when I was teaching my second graders, I was distressed when I observed how their statements might have influenced their behaviors and caused some students to conform to the gender roles or stereotypes they were hearing. A classroom of boys and girls learning alongside each another, coexisting peacefully, slowly began to splinter when some students expressed gender stereotypes and others began repeating them. I intervened when I heard a few students make defaming remarks about their peers who acted in ways that clashed with their ideas about gender roles. The insults were about boys.

Librarians can devote instructional time to explore gender roles in the early grades so that a school culture is cultivated that is inclusive of boys who show individuality in their thoughts and actions, such as a boy who enjoys wearing a princess outfit, playing with dolls, or carrying a purse. Such lessons can protect gender nonconforming boys from being targeted for harassment and bullying in later grades.

Moreover, children's perceptions of gender stereotypes can be altered through instructional lessons. Psychologists assert, "When children are taught that not people's gender, but their abilities and interests determine how well they can do an activity, children move from the idea of the 'constancy' of traditional gender roles, and they can think much more egalitarian."[11]

Why Focus on Boys?

Of course, gender nonconforming girls exist in school populations, but boys tend to be treated more harshly when they do not adhere to gender roles, seem effeminate, or exude a feminine sensibility. In fact, research finds that boys who do not fit masculine stereotypes are often ridiculed,[12] excluded,[13] and bullied in schools. One 2017 study of 9,300 students found that boys who were appraised as effeminate reported the highest risk of being bullied when compared with heterosexual boys and girls and sexual minority girls.[14] See *The 2017 National School Climate Survey*,[15] the Human Rights Campaign *2018 LGBTQ Youth Report*,[16] and the CDC *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2017*[17] for data that suggest that the prevalence of bullying is highest among gay and bisexual males (or those perceived to be) than other groups of students.

These kinds of reports have led psychologists to speculate that boys have much greater social pressures to conform to gender stereotypes than girls,[18] and suppressing their "natural emotions and pressuring them to behave according to a specific stereotype negatively affects their emotional growth and self-esteem."[19] In one study specific to children's reactions to *William's Doll*, the researchers concluded

> the emotional price paid by boys who choose non-traditional toys and activities causes damage that can be devastating and long-lasting. . . . 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.[20]

Other psychologists have noted that gender nonconforming children who are subjected to social pressures to conform risk developing serious mental health problems, such as chronic sadness and anxiety.[21] Indeed, boys who do not fit the traditional boy model pay a heavy price for not being likeminded: emotional pain and loneliness.[22]

Using picture books for lessons on gender roles and stereotypes can be beneficial for gender nonconforming boys. When boys can identify with the protagonist's predicament and learn there *are* others with relatable tendencies, they may feel less isolated, less marginalized, and less atypical. Moreover, they can learn how similar characters effectively deal with similar conflicts they have experienced. These positive outcomes can contribute to better mental health and well-being in their current and subsequent schooling, especially when other students have learned to examine their own attitudes and beliefs and are accepting and supportive of their peers.

For all the other boys (and girls), they learn that it is perfectly acceptable that some boys may be drawn to toys, play, or fashion traditionally attributed to girls or that some boys prefer to read or write poetry rather than pursue athletic sports or play with hypermasculine action figures, for example. Such books can also help children understand that "there are many ways to manhood and that some paths look very different from traditional ones."[23]

With instruction and guidance, they can learn to resist judging and mistreating boys who do not behave in ways that align with their ideas of boy roles. Reading one or two books featuring gender nonconforming boy protagonists may not drastically or radically alter some children's views on gender roles and stereotypes, especially when they receive counter messages elsewhere. But doing so is a step toward children having positive experiences about such boys, learning to respect and appreciate differences, and understanding that people function and work in diverse communities.

Picture Books about Gender Nonconforming Boys

In my efforts to teach my students about gender roles and stereotypes and suppress some of the troublesome behaviors I was witnessing, I set out to find a picture book that could help me spark a discussion on the topic. At the time (early 1990s), the only picture book I could find was *William's Doll* by Charlotte Zolotow, published in 1972. Picture books about gender nonconforming boys simply did not exist then. In the story, William desperately wants a doll to play with, but his father, brother, and the boy next door balk at the idea. His grandmother buys him the doll he covets, so that he—as she explains—can practice being a father.

As I read the title and the first few pages, one student raised her hand to inquire if the protagonist was indeed a boy even though William is a boy's name, William is referred to as he (and his), and he is illustrated in traditional boy clothes. When I confirmed that William was a boy, some of the students protested their disbelief in him. Their seven-year-old minds had a difficult time reconciling that a boy would rather play with a doll than with a train set or basketball, as revealed in the story.

I later found out that some of my second graders' opinions aligned with other children's when I read the study, "William's Doll Revisited." The authors of the research noted favorable and unfavorable responses to William in two groups of children, one in 1975 and the other in 1997. But the researchers had expected a more positive attitude toward William from the latter group given the children's exposure to the rich diversity in modern day. They explained, "There is strong evidence that children are still biased [twenty-two years later] in their gender-related attitudes and these biases place unfair limitation on both boys and girls."[24] And, emphasized accordingly, "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 conscious-raising activities."[25] (It would be interesting to see how children today—twenty-six years later—perceive William and his desire for a doll!)

In the meantime, I continued reading the story wishing there were additional books that my students could read about other gender nonconforming children because this story told one boy's account, perspective, and reality. My wish came true three decades later because the number of picture books on gender nonconforming children has increased dramatically over the years.[26] This is great news considering that some literacy experts had worried that nontraditional girls were getting more attention in children's literature than were boys who do not fit the traditional masculine stereotype.[27] Stories range from those focused on children (and animals) who do not act in accordance with social roles or expectations to stories that candidly address children who have an indisputable understanding of their gender identity that does not align with their sex they were assigned at birth.

Of these, the picture books that feature nonconventional boy protagonists can serve as a valuable resource to influence children's perceptions of boy gender stereotypes.[28] Librarians can use these to kickstart lessons that help students understand a child's unique perspective, learn to appreciate the assets he has, and build empathy for others who are socially marginalized or vulnerable. The stories can be used as teaching tools to raise awareness about boys who like to sparkle (*Angus All Aglow*; *Dazzling Travis*; *Sparkle Boy*), wear feminine-associated apparel (*The Boy & the Bindi*; *I Love My Colorful Nails*; *I Love My Purse*), play with dolls (*Clive and His Babies*; *Teddy's Favorite Toy*; *Big Bob, Little Bob*), and dance (*Dancing in Thatha's Footsteps*; *Henry Holton Takes the Ice*; *Harrison Dwight, Ballerina and Knight*). The stories can also be used to cultivate conversations on how to deal with intolerant views, beliefs, and behaviors.

Some of the books I recommend for lessons feature positively portrayed protagonists who are honest, courageous, and determined, but also affectionate, gentle, and warm-hearted. They are depicted as coveting toys or in play traditionally associated with girls or showing little to no interest in sports or common boy toys. Without being didactic and moralizing, the narratives reveal boys who are not ashamed of who they are or embarrassed to express what they enjoy. And, in the face of conflict, they react to characters in realistic ways (e.g., Ben is sad and cries when he is teased in *I Love My Colorful Nails*; Morris gets a stomach ache when he is shunned in *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*; Julián is speechless when his grandmother finds him playing dress-up in *Julián Is a Mermaid*). Many of the stories offer positive messages about acceptance, getting along, and friendship despite differences, which will come in handy when some children are resistant to the morals or intolerant of the protagonists. To ease their misgivings in such cases, conversations can focus on being kind, standing up for others, practicing inclusivity, and so forth.

Let's look at three examples to see how some of the stories evolve from normative assumptions to acceptance:

- *Big Bob, Little Bob*. It seems the only commonality two neighbor boys have is their name. Interest wise, they are polar opposites. Little Bob likes to play with dolls, Big Bob likes to play with trucks. Little Bob likes to play school, Big Bob likes to play catch. More of the same continues as Big Bob reminds Little Bob of how boys are supposed to play, dress, and act. When a girl moves into the neighborhood, she similarly proclaims boy stereotypes. Big Bob, however, quickly comes to Little Bob's defense and insists, "Boys can do whatever they want!" The ending depicts the three children harmoniously playing together, each at their pleasure. Big Bob's attitude about boy

gender roles changed largely because he got to know and spent time with Little Bob.

- *Henry Holton Takes the Ice*. Redheaded Henry does not fit in his own family, who are hockey fanatics. Even his mom drives a Zamboni to work! As expected, they all predict that he is going to become the finest hockey player ever. But despite all the fervor, Henry wants to figure skate instead, much to his father's and sister's chagrin. "Ice dancing is for girls," his sister argues. When his grandmother comes to visit, she gives him her old figure skates, which he uses at the ice rink and shows his family what he can do. After watching his stunts, his father has a change of heart and buys Henry his own figure skates and hires him a coach. Through his determination and practice, Henry starts to master some complex dance moves as his family cheers him on. The family's notion that girls figure skate and boys play hockey was refuted when they saw how talented (and determined) Henry was at ice dancing.

- *I Love My Colorful Nails*. Ben loves to paint and marvel at his nails. But one day while wearing bright red nail polish, two boys tease him with jeers, "Painting your nails is for girls." And add, "You're a girl! You're a girl!" Understandably, he becomes dejected. So, his father paints his own nails to cheer him up. But when Ben is ridiculed again, he decides to paint his nails on the weekends only, when other children can't see them. His father, on the other hand, continues to wear his painted nails proudly. In the end, all his classmates surprise Ben with a birthday party where they all showcase their painted nails. When others saw how normal it was for Ben's father—a man—to paint his nails, the boys' stereotype about their roles was broken.

While there are many stories that involve personified animals as central figures (e.g., *The Sissy Duckling*; *Willy the Wimp*; *Max, the Stubborn Little Wolf*) that can be read to the students, I find it is easier for students to identify with child characters who are similar in age and struggle with relatable, real-life issues (e.g., an overbearing sibling). Not to mention, empirically based research has found that children's books with human characters tend to have greater moral impact on children than animals. One study suggests that stories with human characters rather than anthropomorphized animals lead children to behave more generously.[29] The psychologists of the study noted, "Books that do not present animals and their environments accurately from a biological perspective may not only lead to less learning, but also influence children to adopt a human-centered view of the animal world."[30]

Lessons on Gender Roles and Stereotypes

The ideas presented below are based on research that supports how children who are taught to challenge gender stereotypes are more likely to be aware of their influences than children who learn to accept them.[31] Indeed, reading books to children that show boys and girls in different roles, having a wide range of emotions, and expressing themselves in diverse ways can position them—with some instruction—to recognize stereotypes and how influential they are.[32]

Begin the lesson by reading the stories (examples listed in the sidebar on the next page) and asking questions that encourage children to share their opinions and converse with the group. A Think-Pair-Share can help them contemplate the story and characters and discuss their ideas with a partner before reporting about them to the whole group. This strategy allows the children to express what they know and feel about gender roles and stereotypes and explore what is gender appropriate by listening to what others have to say, explaining and defending their ideas, responding to feedback, etc. They can be guided to consider how the protagonists are entitled to their individuality, have inherent assets that make them contributing members of their communities, and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

Students can reflect on the protagonists and their circumstances through questions such as:

- What do you like about ___?
- How is ___ like (different than) boys you know?
- How would you feel if you were told you could not play as you wanted?
- Why is it acceptable that ___ wants to ___ ?
- What would happen to ___ if people continued to be mean to him?

Afterward, the discussion can be augmented with anchor charts that feature the definitions of gender roles and stereotypes with key points, such as the following:

- Gender roles are expectations for how boys and girls should act, dress, and play.
- They are expectations for "what boys are supposed to do" and "what girls are supposed to do."
- These expectations come from adults, children, TV shows, commercials and social media.
- Some children act, dress, and play like they "are supposed to" (they fit gender roles).
- Some children do not act, dress, and play like they "are supposed to" (they do not fit gender roles).

Follow with examples of stereotypical gender roles and emphasize how these can be fulfilled by boys or girls, such as the following:

- Girls like to play house.
- Boys like to play rough and wrestle.
- Girls like to play school and being a nurse.
- Boys like to play at being firefighters and police officers.

- Girls play with dolls, tea sets, and jewelry.
- Boys play with action figures, trucks, and sports equipment.

At the same time, the students can be taught to challenge these expectations by asking them to contemplate: How are these expectations problematic? How could these expectations hurt someone's feelings or make someone feel left out? How are these expectations formed? Why would some people believe these expectations? What happens when we follow these expectations? What happens when we do not? What harm can happen when a boy or girl does not follow the expectations? Keep in mind that some boys may be reluctant to express how they feel about the topic. In such cases, use inclusive language about the protagonists, the other characters, the setting, etc.[33]

To continue the lesson, pair the anchor chart with one on gender stereotypes. Important points can include the following:

- Gender stereotypes are ideas that people have about boys and girls that come from beliefs that narrowly define what children can and cannot do.
- Some people believe these ideas and treat boys and girls unfairly.
- Some people believe these ideas and spread them, sometimes unknowingly.
- Gender stereotypes can be insensitive, negative, and excluding.
- Gender stereotypes can lead to harmful behaviors, like name-calling or fighting.

Using the examples below, gender stereotypes can be examined with questions such as, how does the stereotype make you feel? How might it affect the choices you make? How might children who do not fit the stereotype feel? How might it be harmful to children who break the stereotype? How are some of our beliefs based on stereotypes? What stereotypes have you heard, and how did they make you feel?

- Girls like to play at cooking and cleaning because they are home-oriented.
- Boys play rough and wrestle because they are tough and strong.
- Firefighters and police officers are perfect jobs for boys because boys are brave and strong.
- Boys who play with dolls, tea sets, and jewelry are wimps.
- Girls who wrestle are tomboys.

Steer the conversation toward gender nonconforming boys by emphasizing these ideas:

- Boys and girls can choose to act, dress, and play in different ways.
- Gender stereotypes can lead some children to believe it is wrong when boys do not act, dress, and play the same as other boys.
- It is acceptable that some boys enjoy playing with dolls, carrying a purse, or painting their nails.
- Boys who do not act, dress, and play the same as other boys should be respected.
- No boy should be bullied or harassed because he does not act, dress, or play the same as other boys.

After the reading and discussion, students can write texts of encouragement to the protagonists or advice for their persecutors, create classroom proclamations on inclusivity, start a schoolwide campaign to honor human diversity, to name a few instructional activities. While the goal of this article is to support gender nonconforming boys and promote inclusivity in learning communities, future lessons can focus on other damaging stereotypes (race, for example) to further affirm that individual differences are valued and to reassure students that all are welcomed and accepted.

Conclusion

While all students deserve to be respected for their individuality, gender nonconforming boys are at greater risk of being bullied or harassed in the upper grades than other groups of students. To create welcoming environments inclusive of all children—especially boys who resist gender norms, librarians can read picture books about boys who do not act, dress, and play like other boys. Reading these books won't eradicate children's tendencies of gender stereotyping, but it is a step toward affirming that boys who do not act, dress, and play like other boys are worthy of acceptance and respect just as all the other valuable, contributing members of their learning community. &

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