

I KNOW! IT'S BACKWARDS DAY! GENDER ROLES AND *WILLIAM'S DOLL*

Geraldine Van de Kleut

Abstract

*This article presents a case study of an exploration of gender roles in a second-grade classroom. The author discusses some of the discursive identities in which she and her students are positioned, and then uses the picture book *William's Doll* to introduce a discussion of discursive gender identities with her students. She then asks students to step outside their discursive gender roles and to reflect on that experience. The data generated by this study point to new directions for talking with students about how they are positioned, and position themselves, in multiple and contradictory discourses.*

Introduction

Since 1999, when I began a Master's degree from Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, I have been engaged in action research in my classroom. Taken as a whole, my research is directed at two broad questions: is teaching a possible act, and, if so, can I improve my practice. My struggle to satisfactorily answer the first question arises from Manning's (1993) discussion of three forms of curriculum: the envisaged curriculum, which is the one laid out in curriculum documents and planned for by teachers, the enacted curriculum, which is what is carried out within the classroom on any particular day, and the real curriculum, which is what students take away with them. Although teachers spend most of their time engaging with envisaged curriculum, it is the real curriculum which is the only indicator of the effectiveness of teaching and the existence of learning. Moreover, as a veteran of many years of schooling, I understand that the real curriculum is not measurable by tests that follow units of study, as such knowledge is quickly forgotten. Since my primary goal as a teacher is to educate for democratic citizenship, my curriculum involves issues of social justice and equity, and I work for social change in my students, my classroom, and myself. As a teacher researcher, my data involves the documentation of change as a way of answering my research questions.

Gee's Discourse Theory

Early in my graduate studies I encountered the work of Gee (1996) and his theory of discourse. According to Gee, discourses are

...ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or 'types of people') by specific *groups of people*... They are, thus, always and everywhere *social* and products of social histories. (viii)

Discourses provide people with recognizable ways of being and acting that identify them as belonging to a group. Moreover, as people belong to many different groups, organized by culture, race, gender, religion, etc., they have identities in many different discourses, some of which contradict each other. When we interpret social situations and texts, our understanding depends on the discourses to which we have access. For example, Davies (1989) read a picture book called *The Paperbag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) to a number of 4 and 5 year old children. In the story, Princess Elizabeth is poised to marry Prince Ronald until a dragon burns down her castle and takes the prince. Elizabeth has nothing to wear but a paper bag, but she goes to rescue Ronald. When she appears in the cave after successfully outwitting the dragon, Ronald will have nothing to do with her because she is dirty and underdressed. Elizabeth tells him that he may look like a prince, but he is a bum, and she skips off alone into the sunset. Davies asked the children what happened to Elizabeth after the end of the story,

and regardless of socio-economic background or gender roles in their families, the children overwhelmingly answered that Elizabeth cleaned herself up and went back to marry Ronald.

According to Davies, two principal discourses are present in Munsch's text: a discourse of fairy tales and a discourse of feminism. In the discourse of fairy tales, Elizabeth must marry Ronald; in the discourse of feminism, Elizabeth is free to reject him and live her own life. The humour in the text arises from the contradiction between the two discourses, and the thwarting of the expectations set up in the fairy tale setting by feminism. However, although the children in Davies' study were well-versed in the discursive rules of fairy tales, they had no access to the discourse of feminism, and thus were unable to allow Elizabeth the agency that Munsch so clearly grants her. After reading Davies' account, I began to wonder if I, too, could identify moments in my classroom that represented the contradictions in discourse that Davies identifies, and if I could engage my students in critically analyzing their own discursive positions.

If my students and I were to productively engage in analyzing our discursive identities, we needed to understand that we not only were we constituted —provided our identities— by discourse, but that we were active participants who also carried out the work of discourse and thus constituted ourselves at the same time. In the process of exploring discourse theory I came to understand that my students were positioned and were positioning themselves in three major discourses as they came to school. First, I saw my students placed in a discourse of Western childhood, one that constructs them as innocent, innately good, loving, and loveable. The school in which I have taught for the last ten years serves solidly middle-class children in an area that is almost exclusively white and Christian. The children are well fed and cared for, and their upbringing is supported by the twin pillars of humanism and materialism. My students believe, for the most part, that they can be and have anything they want.

Secondly, my students are constructing a gender identity for themselves both in the classroom and on the playground. This identity work does not start at school; it is a task we hand children the moment they are born and their gender is announced. My students conduct category maintenance in this binomial gender discourse seriously and continuously alongside anything else that goes on at school (Davies, 1989, 1993).

Thirdly, I saw that my students and I had an identity in a pedagogical discourse that affected their responses to anything I introduced or expected. When they were with me they were doing school, and doing school involves rules and expectations that are part of the institution and are carried out by all its members. Although I at times deplore the repressive nature of pedagogical discourse as it is enacted in my school, I rely on its effects to keep my students in their seats and their pencils moving when nothing else is working.

I decided to engage the students in a discussion of binomial gender discourse, which offers its participants two strictly defined gender roles. As Davies (1993) states:

Within the framework of [poststructuralist theory] it makes more sense to introduce children to a discourse which enables them to see for themselves the discourses and storylines through which gendered persons are constituted, to see the cultural and historical production of gendered persons that they are each caught up in. In this different approach, children can be introduced to the possibility, not of learning the culture, or new aspects of it, as passive recipients, but as producers of culture, as writers and readers who make themselves and are made within the discourses available to them. (2)

My research question, then, concerned the possibility of demonstrating to my students some of the contradictions with which they lived, and interrogating with them these discursive positions.

Collecting and Analyzing Data

In 2002 I began my eighth year of teaching practice and my fourth year of teaching second grade at a large school on the edge of a small city in south-western Ontario. The school draws its students equally from comparatively wealthy suburban areas and farms, with a few children coming from poorer housing developments on the outskirts of the city. My students are, every year and overwhelmingly, white, English-speaking, and able to recite the Lord's Prayer along with the vice-principal in the morning. That year my class consisted of 25 students, 12 girls and 13 boys, with only two students who belonged to visible minorities.

My data collection that year consisted of a teaching journal, artefacts, and taped and transcribed teaching sessions and conversations. The teaching journal contained notes on workshops and presentations, field notes, reflections on events in the classroom and my teaching, and conversations transcribed from memory. The selection criterion I used for the contents of the journal was that which I found significant at the time, broadly structured around my central research questions. The artefacts I collected were generally student work, both assigned and incidental, as they responded to classroom events, readings, and assignments. The videotapes of classroom sessions were helpful in revealing texts and themes that escaped my notice at the time, a frequent occurrence in the crowded place that Peterson (1992) calls the classroom. The data was analyzed by cross-comparing the three sources for patterns and similar themes in order to develop the issues that arose during the study. A second analysis was done in order to trace the evidence of discursive positions in the data. Finally, both analyses were combined to create the account that follows. Taken together, the data and its analysis form a case study that six years later still intrigues and informs me, and provides a springboard for new questions and possibilities in my research.

William's Doll

At the end of September of 2002, I read *William's Doll* (Zolotow, 1972) to my class. In this picture book, William wants a baby doll very badly, but his brother and the boy next door call him a sissy, and his father will have none of it. William's father buys him a basketball and a train set. William becomes very good at basketball and very involved in the model train, but as he says to his grandmother when she visits, he still wants a doll. His grandmother buys him exactly the doll he wants, and when William's father objects, says tartly that William needs a doll in order to practice being a father.

I stopped reading at one point in the text and asked my class whether they felt William ought to have the doll. There were some people, male and female, who felt that a doll for a boy was a bad idea. Kenny said, "Dolls are for girls." Peter said, "He shouldn't want a doll, he should play cars." Celina said, "He will get teased." Many, however, thought that William should be allowed to have a doll. My journal reads:

I can see this is a struggle for them. I was surprised how many boys admitted to playing with dolls, and that there was no derision over this. I asked them what they would do if a boy showed up with a swaddled doll on his shoulder on the playground. Hunter said, "he can pretend it's his sister's!" (30/09/2002)

I then asked my class to write about *William's Doll*. Overwhelmingly, the entries agreed that William should have a doll, even those from the children who in discussion felt that it was not appropriate.

People can have dolls if they want. It doesn't matter what kind of doll, if they have a boy doll or girl dolls. (Kenny)

It does not matter what you play with or what other people say. It just matters what you like to play with or what you think you should play with. The end. (Ray)

William's father should have been a little bit smarter like his grandmother. I bet old people are smarter than us. They are old and old people know more. (Otis)

It's ok to have a doll. Everybody could have one if they wanted one. Boys can have a doll, just not girls, and girls can play football, not just boys. (Hunter)

It seemed to me, reading the entries over, that the boys in my class, as a whole, were writing from a liberal humanist discursive position, in which there was only one right answer to the question of boys and dolls. Zolotow herself does not resolve the teasing by the boy next door and by William's brother, and nor did my students engage in the question of what happens to boys with dolls. It seemed that almost everyone agreed that William, like them, could have anything he wanted.

There is a second discourse present as well. My students' simultaneous positioning in discourses of humanism and binomial gender distinctions is evident in their distance from these entries. None of my male students used the word "I" here, and yet I heard it everywhere, tacked to the ends of their sentences: everyone should have a doll if they want one, and thank God I'm not weird enough to want one. My journal reads:

There is a real problem that boys can't play with dolls and have friends. As Hunter said, they'd have to hide. My class feels safe because they don't want to play with dolls — they have learned not to, or to couch their wanting in terms of favours to siblings. Kye's comment in class discussion was,

Kye: If my neighbour really wants to play dolls, I say, let's play soccer. If she says, no, I really want to play dolls, I say, well, if you really want to.

Me: And do you like it?

Kye: It's okay. (2/10/2002)

I read Ray's entry (above) aloud to the class, and asked them to consider whether it did indeed matter what people said. In the end, we had a list on the board of eight boys who were willing to take dolls outside one lunch recess (a total of forty minutes) and play with them in plain view of the Grades One to Three classes that shared their space. Girls were going to take clipboards out and record what was said to the boys as they played. The list remained on the board for two days, and boys continued to consider, erase, and rewrite their names on the list.

The Dolls Go Outside

Excitement was high on the day of the dolls. The girls brought in their favourites, and took time to instruct the boys on how to play since, as I pointed out, if they turned the dolls into missiles and took off their heads they would not be playing the way girls usually played. In the end, six boys took dolls out, and played in various ways, from running and thrusting their dolls in everyone's faces in order to elicit responses, to sitting deliberately in front of the boy-dominated soccer field in a group of girls and dressing and undressing a baby doll.

The girls brought in full clipboards, and read them to the class. The recorded comments ranged from "bitch" to "e-e-e-e-u-w" to "What the heck is that?" I had to negotiate for copies of their recording sheets, since they wanted to keep them and take them home. The boys themselves were generally negative:

My brother's friend was on the soccer field, and he said, "R-a-a-a-a-y!" He meant I shouldn't be playing with them. (Ray)

It's not that fun because you get laughed at and it's no fun getting laughed at. Right when I came out of the door some one laughed at me. (Kenny)

It was kind of boring. Soccer is my favourite sport. I have no clue why I did it.
If you ask us to do it again, I'm not signing up. (Kye)

In order to deal with whatever might come up, I had arranged my schedule of supervision duty so that I was outside when my students were. Consequently, I was able to observe the reaction of a student from another class who was also outside. With two of her female friends she was sitting on the concrete, playing with tiny, poseable dolls equipped with extensive plastic wardrobes and myriads of plastic accessories. The three girls complained to me as the supervising teacher about a boy who was throwing small pebbles at them. This was the second time in a number of weeks that I had dealt with this same boy in this same situation, and I had thought the first time that he wanted to play and couldn't because of the gender roles that bound him.

This time, I said, "You know, I think Sam wants to play, and feels like he can't because he's a boy. So he throws stones instead. But he really wishes he could play, and he only has a brother, so he never sees these toys." I expected understanding and sympathy, since surely the girls could acknowledge the appeal of the miniature consumers they were holding.

Sybil stared at me for a moment without blinking, and then fell over sideways onto the concrete, shrieking with laughter. When she recovered, she sat up, wiped her eyes, and said, "I know! It's backwards day!"

As my students had demonstrated, it was possible for them to position themselves in two separate discourses, humanism and gender distinction, and hold two contradictory views at the same time: that everyone should be allowed to have a doll, and that no boy should want one. The contradictions live because the children themselves take on the work of discourse. Sybil cannot conceive of Sam wanting to play with dolls outside of a 'backwards day', reminiscent of the medieval celebrations of St. Stephen's Day when the social order convulsed and lords became servants (Gilbert, 2008). It is easier for her to accept the positionings of a gender discourse that constructs Sam as someone who simply throws stones at girls, than to imagine that he may want to play dolls with her. In so constructing Sam, she constructs herself as someone whose play is undesirable and disrespectful to half of the school.

Advice For William

My students had been faced with the costs of stepping outside of the binomial gender discourse, and I was curious to know whether it had changed their minds about the desirability of the humanist view. I asked them to pretend that William was their cousin, and that he had just written them a letter to say that he was moving and would be going to their school. In the letter, William tells them that he wants friends at the school, but is really nervous about coming, and wants to bring his doll with him to make him feel better.

Of twenty-three letters, fourteen of them advise William against bringing the doll at all. Of these fourteen, eleven are written by boys, including four of the six boys who themselves took dolls out to the playground. Eight of these letters begin with either, "Dear William, Do not...." or "Dear William, Don't...". One begins, "Dear William, no, no, please don't."

Three of the remaining letters, all written by girls, offer William a chance to remain, uneasily, a part of both discourses:

I think you should bring your doll. I would bring mine too. But do not bring it tomorrow. From Carlotta

It is ok that you bring your doll to school. Just don't bring it outside to play.
With love, Alison. I think you are a lot like everybody.

Bring your doll but don't bring it every day because if you do you will get more laughed at. Love: Celina.

Brandon offers William a position in the humanist discourse, at the same time lending support by his own position in that discourse:

You can bring your doll. If I had a doll I would bring it. From Brandon

Finally, two boys and four girls take on the binomial gender discourse in the name of the world as they feel it ought to be, and offer themselves as solutions:

I think you should stay around me if you bring it. Danielle

It is okay if you bring your doll to our school. I will be your friend so you can bring your doll. From Angel

Do not bring your doll to school because the people will make fun of you but I will not make fun of you. I will make friends with you. From Alex

Come and play with me so if somebody comes along and they say something mean to you I will just say, do not say that. Just leave him alone. He is playing with me. It is his first time at this school. He is nervous so he brought his doll. From Chelsea

Just bring your doll and if anybody makes fun of you I'll say how would you like it. Love, Peter.

Just bring your doll. If they make fun of you I will say, Boys could play with a doll any time they want to. My little brother plays with a doll some times too. Girls could play with a boy toy sometime too. I think girls could play with a game boy, too. Boys could play with dolls too, but he could play Barbies too. From Rosemary.

As a teacher researcher it is tempting to point to this group of responses and call my question answered. After all, these students are able to imagine a world in which children can be protected from others, and in this world they offer themselves as potential protectors and mediators. However, within the discourses of schooling in which my students and I participate, the right answer is the one that matches the teacher's. Like a test, these answers demonstrate that my students know what the right answers are; they have successfully participated in a unit of study and can formulate what they feel are my answers to the questions raised by *William's Doll*. These answers do not, in and of themselves, indicate what the received curriculum is in this instance, or whether it will lead to a changed and more just world.

Moreover, the case of Hunter points to another interpretation of this set of responses. Hunter was a child who was markedly larger and heavier than the rest of the students in the class, and struggled with hurtful comments thrown at him by other students. One day when I told him how glad I was to have him in my class, he replied, "How could you be? I'm fat and ugly." Much of the work that has been done to Hunter has been accomplished through teasing which, as Davies (1993) points out, is closely connected to identity:

[Teasing] can be better understood as the struggle of the group individually and collectively to achieve themselves as knowable individuals within a predictable knowable collective reality. (19)

Hunter pays the costs of being other —fat— to the groups' identity as thin, with all of the Western cultural associations that accompany size and weight. In addition, he has taken on the work of the discourse himself by forming his identity around these associations. His vulnerability on the playground, therefore, prevented him from carrying out his intention to play with a doll; within five minutes of going outside he was backed against the wall, hiding his doll behind his back and crying. I took his doll from him and put it away.

The responses above, from the students who were proposing change, were from those for whom change was not too costly for social survival on the playground. It is easy to overestimate the value of the freedom we offer children, and underestimate the costs. When Hunter was backed against the wall, hiding his doll, none of these potential protectors were in evidence. Within Hunter's difficulties, as within my students' contradictory stances towards doll-playing for boys, are the contradictions of the discourses within which he is positioned and within which he positions himself. Liberal humanism promises Hunter the freedom to be whatever he wishes, including fat. The self-acceptance humanism promotes, however, is silent about the social construction of identity:

...in general...identities are not primarily the private property of individuals but are social constructions, suppressed and promoted in accordance with the political interests of the dominant social order. In particular ... the oppressed are actively encouraged to construct identities that reaffirm the basic validity of this dominant moral order... (Kitzinger 1989, 94).

Hunter has accepted the moral weight this culture attaches to his condition, and thus blames himself for what he sees as a failure to be 'normal'. It is small wonder that the freedom I offer him to play with dolls becomes altogether too costly.

At the close of the research study and the year it seemed clear to me that I had, indeed, been able to demonstrate to my students and to me some of the discursive contradictions we inhabited, and our own roles in enacting these contradictions. After their doll-playing experiment, many of my students freely admitted that in other circumstances they would have been making negative comments of their own to male students with dolls, and that although they may not have made the gender rules that governed the playground, they frequently participated in enforcing them.

Implications of the research

I am a different teacher because of the research I conducted that year. The ability to demonstrate that children can and do grapple with contradictory theoretical positions, and that within a classroom it is possible to make visible ordinarily invisible and commonsense understandings and ways of operating has led to changes in my teaching praxis and further research. As such, my second question has been answered: through the course of this study, I have gotten better at teaching students the implications of discourse theory. In addition, this research study has been the basis for introducing every subsequent class I have taught to issues of gender and identity construction, and discussions of what the rules are, where they come from, and how they are enforced. The absorbed interest of students, regardless of age, in this research story confirms for me that students are as eager to explore and understand the identities they inhabit as I am. Most often, the relating of this story has led to suggestions from students of other classes as to how this research can be continued in their own contexts.

The research study also has implications for the way in which critical literacy is conducted in classrooms. Too often, critical literacy is seen as the teaching of a canon: when teachers read the appropriate books (and there is considerable overlap among the various lists provided in articles and books on critical literacy) and ask the appropriate question or set of questions, critical literacy has been 'done'. As this study demonstrates, reading *William's Doll* and asking students whether William should have had the doll does little but engage students in the 'right' answers provided by liberal humanism and implied or given by their teachers; such superficial engagement does not acknowledge the separate reality that exists beyond the windows of the classroom, or, indeed, within every classroom outside of official notice. Superficial engagement does not lead to change, as amply demonstrate in the research of Greever, Austin & Welhousen (2000). These researchers compared two sets of responses to *William's Doll* done by students twenty years apart, and found that in twenty years there was little change in children's attitudes toward gender roles. Unless we bring the lived lives of our students to the table of our discussions, very little that is critical in either sense of the word can occur.

Finally, the research opens a set of questions that are related to my first research question. If teaching is a possible act, then learning must have taken place; if learning has taken place, then there should be some effect on my students' ability to lead more democratic, more equitable, and more just lives, in my classroom, on the playground, and in the future. Finding the results of the differences in my students and myself —let alone measuring them— is a difficult task. If my students developed new positions within discourse as a result of this work, the effects would ripple outward, like stones thrown into water, and the ripples would extend into their home lives and their new grades in ways that would often be hidden from me, and unmarked by others. If my teaching is directed toward democratic citizenship, then it is possible that its effects cannot be truly measured until my students take up full citizenship as adults. And since at that point there will have been immeasurable numbers of influences on my students' lives, the effects of my teaching, if any, cannot be ascertained. It is possible that my many teaching journals and artefacts, the weight of years of data collection, point to the conclusion that while teaching can be assessed, this kind of learning cannot, and the real subject of my study is not my students, but myself and my practice.

References

- Gilbert, R. (2008). Religious Celebrations and Feast Days. Retrieved July 22, 2008, from <http://rosaliegilbert.com/feastdays.html#ststephens>
- Greever, E., Austin, P. & Welhousen, K. (2000) *William's Doll* Revisited. *Language Arts*, 77(4): 324-330.
- Davies, B. (1989). *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool Children and Gender*. North Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin.
- Davies, B. (1993). *Shards of Glass: Children Reading and Writing Beyond Gendered Identities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Gee, J.P. (1996). *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Kitzinger, C. (1989). The discursive construction of identities: liberal humanism as an ideology of social control: the regulation of lesbian identities. In H.W. Simons (Ed.), *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences*. London: Sage.
- Manning, A. (1993, May 22). *Curriculum as Conversation*. Keynote address given at Western Australian Reading Conference.
- Munsch, R. (1980). *The Paper Bag Princess*. Toronto, ON: Annick.
- Peterson, R. (1992). *Life in a Crowded Place: Making a Learning Community*. Richmond Hill, ON: Scholastic.
- Zolotow, C. (1972). *William's Doll*. New York: HarperCollins.

Biographical Note:

Geraldine Van de Kleut is a practicing elementary school teacher who has taught children from Junior Kindergarten to Grade Six. In addition to her twelve years of classroom experience, she has spent two years as a literacy coach for the Lambton-Kent District School Board. She received her Master's degree from Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax in

2003. Her current research interests include whiteness and the racialized nature of schools and schooling. She can be reached at Ger.vandekleut@gmail.com.