



'How Does It Get into my Imagination?': elementary school children's intertextual knowledge and gendered storylines

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ABSTRACT *This article draws on a case study of children's response to stories and uses post-structuralist theory to examine how the children who participated in the study used their intertextual knowledge to understand and produce disruptive stories. 'Disruptive' refers here to texts that challenge and go beyond conventional and limiting traditional storylines about race, gender and class through presenting unexpected characterisations, plots, outcomes or details—for example, feminist fairy tales, or stories where the protagonists belong to visible minorities. This article looks specifically at stories that disrupt conventional storylines about gender, and explores ways of broadening children's intertextual knowledge and enhancing their ability to read and write critically. Examples from children's writing and conversations are analysed.*

Introduction: a Shareable Imaginative World

The little mermaid, she's not as pretty in the book as in the movie or in my imagination ... and I don't know how the pictures got in my imagination 'cause I never even saw the movie yet. 'Cause my imagination was more like the movie and just a teensy bit of the story ... I'm still thinking about that. How does it get into my imagination? 'Cause no one ever told me about the little mermaid. I only heard the title about it and nothing about the story.
(Sarah)

This article draws on data from a case study of children's response to stories to examine how intertextual knowledge contributes to their understanding of what it means to be male or female. Intertextual knowledge refers here to the use of previously known texts to make sense of new ones and to give coherence to lived experience. Sarah, the student quoted, did not feel she understood the process, yet her question, 'How does it get into my imagination?', illustrates a sense of intertextual knowledge. She knew that her ideas about characters and stories came from somewhere, but was not sure where. Her

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comments also indicate the impact of certain Hollywood films when she says 'my imagination was more like the movie'.

Toni Morrison writes that '[r]eaders and writers both struggle to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative worlds' (Morrison, 1992, p. xii). This article examines how the conversations and writings of the children who participated in the study revealed aspects of their shareable imaginative world. The excerpts used here were chosen to illustrate and raise questions about the impact of various kinds of texts in constituting children's sense of gendered identity, and to explore how conventional storylines about gender can be disrupted. The study findings indicate that important factors in this process may be: the teacher's provision and presentation of disruptive texts (texts that challenge and go beyond conventional and limiting traditional storylines about race, gender and class through presenting unexpected characterisations, plots, outcomes or details—for example, feminist fairy tales, or stories where the protagonists belong to visible minorities) as part of the curriculum, the powerful impact of certain kinds of films and stories on children's imaginative background, and children's identification with certain kinds of characters.

Description of the Study: background and methodology

This research was done with the teacher and students of a Grade 4/5 classroom (ages approximately 9–11) at Charles Street Public School [1]. Charles Street Public School is an urban Canadian school drawing on a diverse population, both in terms of national and ethnic origin, and socio-economic situation. The children in the class represented a wide variety of backgrounds. Their teacher was a drama specialist and a talented storyteller who was also committed to working for social justice and race and gender equity. This is important because I suggest here that in her teaching approach and choice of materials the teacher may have provided a discursive framework wherein these children could understand and, in some cases, produce disruptive texts.

As an ethnographic researcher, I spent several afternoons a week over a 6-month period working with this class. During part of this time I observed and took notes, and functioned informally as a teacher's aide, evaluating and preparing materials and helping individual children with whatever task was at hand. I also regularly withdrew small groups of seven or eight children (previously established heterogeneous reading groups) to read the selected disruptive stories and do a variety of response activities. The school board and the children's parents consented to this research project on the understanding that I was also a certified teacher and that the time the children spent with me in small groups would enhance their regular language arts programme. Rachelle, the classroom teacher, had invited me to do the research in her classroom because of our mutual interests in equity issues and in drama and storytelling.

In my discussion of the data, I use the term 'text' in the broad sense of anything—film, play, oral story, picture, book—that provides a storyline or framework for discussion [2]. With the intention of generating conversations and writing with the small reading groups, I chose about a dozen storybooks that I saw as being potentially disruptive in terms of their treatment of race, gender or class. I hoped that these stories would function to surprise the readers/listeners into questioning some of their previously held assumptions about how the world works, and who can play which roles in it. As well, such stories might, as Mem Fox put it, 'give courage ... [and] make a difference to [children's] lives' (Fox, 1993, p. 88). As the children listened to the selected stories and participated in follow-up activities and discussions, they talked and wrote extensively about their

interpretations and their lives in relation to these texts. They also frequently made references to other texts, including films and pictures they had seen.

The follow-up activities were open-ended so as to generate as much spontaneous conversation as possible. They included such activities as illustrating a story as they listened to it; inventing or rewriting endings to stories; dramatising stories; rewriting or retelling a fairy tale from the point of view of someone other than the hero or heroine; and talking freely about their favourite stories and about true stories from their experience.

The study data are made up of transcribed tapes of the small group discussion and activity sessions, examples of children's writing and artwork, and my fieldnotes of day-to-day life in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework: intertextuality, discourse and disruptive stories

Response to stories can take place only in the context of previous knowledge and experience. Readers respond not only to the text itself in a 'live circuit' (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 14), or to each other in discussion, but to the multitudinous voices of their cultures and histories. These constitute the shareable imaginative world that enables children to understand and take pleasure in stories, and to extrapolate from them to lived experience. Intertextual knowledge is a major factor in the constitution of this imaginative world. In responding to texts of all kinds, most school-age children already have a wide repertoire of storylines and character types to draw upon. They know certain kinds of people and certain situations and resolutions from their lives and the retold lives of friends and family, others from films, books and other forms of media. They make sense of one text by reference to others, or to previous readings of the same one. In other words, they have a great deal of intertextual knowledge. This is important because of the ways it gets played out in life, and its potential to expand or limit the horizons of young readers.

Valerie Walkerdine (1984) and Bronwyn Davies (1989, 1993), both writing on issues of gender equity and education, have discussed children's need for and understanding of disruptive stories. Both have concluded that school equity programmes relying on non-stereotyped role models and non-sexist curricula will not be effective in disrupting dominant discourses of gender because they discount the contexts that make texts intelligible, and the role of the conscious and unconscious desires of the reader—in other words, the child's imaginative world. However, their conclusions differ from one another in one important respect. Davies (1989) found that children could not necessarily understand feminist fairy tales and often saw them as 'stories gone wrong'. She argues that it would be more effective to teach children how discourses of resistance work as a means of disrupting storylines that uphold inequitable social structures (Davies, 1993). Walkerdine (1984), on the other hand, concludes that, because the fantasies currently popular with young girls are so enticing, there is a need for equally appealing alternative fantasies.

In a study of her own classroom practice, Alexis Wing (1997) suggests that the factors needed to develop critical literacy in children are 'a text that children can identify with [and] an opportunity to express opinions and listen to others under the supervision of a teacher' (p. 493). The data presented here seem to support both Wing's argument that the role of the teacher is of crucial importance and her emphasis on the identification process.

In a study of children's response to gender roles in fairy tales, Ella Westland (1993)

found that the girls favoured 'upside down' fairy tales with independent heroines while the boys preferred more traditional male heroes. She argues that the girls' preferences were due to their familiarity with 'alternative gender images' (p. 246) and suggests that the reason for the difference between boys and girls was due to the need to identify with a hero/heroine of the same sex. Thus, the girls tended to identify with the independent heroines, but the boys did not, and nor did they align themselves with the weak and silly princes typical of this genre. Therefore, she concludes that there is a need for more engaging alternative heroes for boys and that a more in-depth study of children's engagement with heroes and heroines would enrich our understanding of this complex area.

In the study under discussion here, identification with certain kinds of characters in films and stories seemed quite central to the process of making meaning. While role model socialisation theory is no longer current among feminist theorists (Jones, 1997), these findings, along with my own, suggest that role models *are* important. However, children's engagement with them is complex and the use of non-stereotyped role models in equity programmes needs to take this into account. The simplistic patterning notion of most sex role socialisation theory has not done so.

Several researchers (Davies, 1993, 1997; Jones, 1993, 1997; Golden, 1996) have suggested that post-structuralism is a useful theoretical framework for examining a topic as complex as gender construction in that it takes into account the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the social construction of meaning. Central to the analysis in this article are the post-structuralist notions of discourse and discursive practices. By discourse is meant the ways in which we organise and explain lived experience through language. Within any society, at any given time, there are a range of discourses operating. These discourses are never static but constantly in flux. We can only make meaning and interpret events from within discourses available to us (Jones, 1997). Thus, for example, we might explain gender differences in certain trades and professions from within the discourse that women *choose* other sorts of activities (e.g. professional women make less money than men because they prefer to spend more time with their families), or from within an alternative or competing discourse that the predominant value system of Western industrial society renders it much more difficult for women to spend long hours at work than for men (e.g. it is women who are blamed if the home is untidy, the children do poorly in school, and so on). The latter discourse in this example is probably more widely available than it was 30 years ago but the former is still dominant in much of Western society.

Philip MacNaghtan explains discourses as 'not only ... observable linguistic activities, but also ... the world of human signs, symbols, activities, texts, etc. which together comprise a particular worldview ... our experience of reality is constituted in and through discourse', adding that 'the aim of analysis is to unravel the processes through which discourse is constructed, and the consequences of these constructions' (in Burman & Parker, 1993, p. 54). This study views stories as texts which, although frequently contributing to the reproduction of limiting and oppressive meanings within society, also have the potential to take part in alternative discourses and thus contribute to the production of new meanings. Certain kinds of stories and activities could thus be key elements in a pedagogy of equity.

The excerpts presented here are examples of the work of children who have been exposed both to alternative fantasies and to strategies for doing critical analytical reading. At the same time, they also illustrate the dominance of certain kinds of stories and films—for example, Disney versions of fairy tales—in the shareable imaginative world of

many late twentieth century North American children. I found that most of the children who participated in this study were well able to understand the disruptive texts I used, and also, in many cases, to write their own disruptive fantasies. In part, this may be simply because these children were older than the children who participated in Davies's earlier study (1989). However, it is likely that it is also because they were familiar with a wide variety of disruptive texts, both in popular culture and in the classroom, prior to participating in the study, and because their teacher had provided them with discursive contexts and critical analytical tools for interpreting such stories.

Rewriting Gendered Storylines

Something Different

Once upon a time in a far off place a beautiful princess named Caroline was kidnapped. Since she was very intelligent she escaped the locked door with a hairpin. At that moment a knight named Henry came to save her. There was only one problem: the knight was so stupid he got lost five times and fell off his horse seventeen times. So by the time Henry figured it out (which took five hours to do) he was so stunned Henry didn't notice the dragon behind him. The dragon snatched him up and dropped him in the dungeon. When Caroline found out about Henry she had to go to the Witch's house to steal the magic keys. Caroline did not like the idea of stealing. She couldn't think of anything else to do so she just left. She thought about it all the way there, then she came up with talking to the witch. 'Nobody can be as bad as the townspeople say.' So when she got to the witch's house, she knocked on the door. An old woman came out with a smile and said, 'I have never had anybody knock on my door. They always break in, knock me out, then take what they want! So what would you like my child?' 'My name is Caroline. I need your magic keys to save a knight.' 'My, my something different,' said the witch. 'Here are the keys, Good luck!' So off went Caroline. When she arrived at the dungeon she heard moaning that sounded like someone or something was in pain. She walked towards the moan. Finally she saw a dragon who had a thorn stuck in her foot. She pulled it out. The dragon was so grateful that she let the knight go. Caroline became Henry's tutor and they all lived happily ever after.

This story was written by Samantha. Of all the writing produced in the course of the study, this is probably the best example of a disruptive story written by one of the children: a Rapunzel who escapes from the tower by her own wit and guile (as, supposedly, she did in early versions of the traditional story); a female Daniel and a female dragon in the lion's den; a witch who is really kind and has been the victim of oppression; magic keys and a magic quest which are rendered futile and unnecessary by ordinary human kindness; and a princess who lives happily ever after as the prince's *tutor*. The old rigid roles for story characters are gone, replaced by resourcefulness, kindness and equality. At the same time, this is also a good story in the sense of being both humorous and compelling, of using traditional elements of storytelling in a new way without losing the dramatic impact of the quest, the power struggle, the mythological characters. The title, 'Something Different', would seem to indicate that Samantha was aware that her story did not conform to the usual standards of accepted narratives, that she was challenging the *status quo*.

In most of the best known versions of fairy tales (Perrault, Grimm, Disney), the only strong females are witches; witches are typically wicked and females (other than witches) are often victims who survive only because they are rescued by men. All this has been said before. The dominance of such versions has been well documented (de Beauvoir, 1970; Walkerdine, 1984; Davies, 1993; Fox, 1993). What is obvious in Samantha's writing, however, is that more disruptive storylines also had made their mark. Most of the children who participated in this study were able to understand disruptive stories and some of them, like Samantha, could write their own. I present and discuss several of these in the rest of this section and the next.

One of the open-ended activities in which the children participated in their reading groups was designed to explore the notion of the 'other'. I read them Jon Scieszka's *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf* (1989), a sophisticated and entertaining retelling of the traditional story, in which the wolf, from a prison cell, explains how he was framed for murder. When we finished reading and discussing the story, I asked the children to write their own stories, telling a well-known fairy tale from the point of view of a character other than the hero or heroine. From their writing, it appeared that not all of the children understood what I meant. However, a number of them did produce stories that either retold traditional stories in disruptive ways, or from unusual points of view. Two examples that explore and critique traditional storylines about gender are examined here.

Bart and Samantha rewrote two of the best known European fairy tales, 'Little Red Riding Hood' and 'Cinderella'. Of all the children's rewritings, Samantha's was probably the best example of a story told from the point of view of the other. She chose to write in the angry and unrepentant voice of Cinderella's ugly stepsister. Bart, on the other hand, did a different kind of retelling. He used, as is generally the case in fairy tales, an omniscient narrator. However, he gave the story a new twist by having Red Riding Hood fight back. Thus, both stories are, in different ways, about strong, assertive female characters. Here are the stories.

'Cinderella' by Samantha

My name is Carin.

I'm one of the supposedly evil step-sisters. The way this terrible rumour started is that I just asked a mere favour from Cindy (Cinderella). She didn't mind. She actually seemed to like it and when the ball came along she was doing a favour and singing along to herself. When she was done, she put on one of my dresses (which I said she could) and pulled down the neck so far any man would go cuckoo over her. So of course the prince fell for her and he dropped me in a dip. I wouldn't marry him if he begged and he would if I was wearing that dress. And she married that jerk and now I live by myself and I don't even miss her.

'Little Red Riding Hood' by Bart

Once upon a time!

There lived a girl whose name was Little Red Riding Hood and she liked to give stuff to her granny but she was a musclewoman so she walked down the road and saw a wolf and she gave him a punch

POW

and gave her stuff to Granny.

THE END

This activity was intended to encourage the children to critique the rigid storyline of most fairy tales they knew by rewriting them from a different perspective. Thus, although it did not specifically teach post-structuralist theory, it did indirectly encourage the children to reflect on the range of discourses available to them about what it means to be male or female. The stories given here, both written by children who were average students academically, show clear evidence of the ability to do a critical analytical reading and a rewriting that deconstructed traditional narratives. Although I had not specifically asked the children to focus on gender, most of the successful rewritings did so. This is perhaps not surprising, given the versions of classic fairy tales most familiar to them along with their intertextual knowledge of alternative versions, many of which reversed or rewrote traditional gender roles. As well, their general awareness of gender issues was probably above average because of their teacher's emphasis on anti-racism and anti-sexism throughout the school year and across the curriculum. It was Rachelle's stated intention to raise the children's awareness in these areas. The room decor (posters, etc.), the materials she used, the stories she told, her democratic approach to teaching, and the kinds of activities the children engaged in all contributed to the creation of an unusually rich and critical discursive context for making sense of disruptive stories.

In the first example, Samantha critiques the traditional fairy tale convention/ideology of living happily ever after; in the second example, Bart invents a Red Riding Hood who is more than able to look after herself without any help from armed woodsmen. Although Samantha's ugly step sister seems resentful, and Bart proposes a direct and violent solution to an age-old problem and recasts the heroine as a hero in the traditional male mode (having originally written 'she was a muscleman' and later changing it to 'she was a musclemwoman' [4]), both stories are also clearly disruptive and can be placed within shifting discourses of what it means to be a woman. Far from being just entertaining and innocuous trivia, these stories can be seen as part of a changing narrative theme where such resolutions are possible, where women *do* defend themselves and live interesting lives without marrying princes. Harold Rosen explains the importance of such themes and of intertextuality to individual stories:

As we grow in our narrative resources we come to recognize and compose stories which follow different sets of conventions ... [S]tories do not offer single meanings. They form interlocking sets of meanings, and listening to a story is a search for these meanings through the meanings we already possess. (1988, p. 170)

The disruptive stories of gender to which these two children had previously been exposed provided a set of meanings that countered more constraining discourses of femininity strongly enough to enable them to write from these perspectives. Access to a wide range of storylines can be instrumental in making children aware of conventional meanings and ways of being and presenting alternatives. Many of the children, including Bart and Samantha, did explore alternative roles of characters and approaches to problems. Their use of what, at first, seem merely to be different clichés (a resentful ugly stepsister, a muscular Red Riding Hood) can also be seen as evidence of their ability and willingness to explore alternative discourses of gender.

In using humour as social critique with children, as I did in this activity, there is a risk of trivialising serious issues. However, the Bakhtinian notion of carnival is useful here. The carnivalesque role reversals of these stories, in which '[e]verything serious had to have, and indeed did have, its comic double' (Bakhtin, in Morson (Ed.), 1986, p. 105) are a kind of social critique in which the children could obviously engage with pleasure. A

degree of comprehension of changing underlying storylines is also evident in their response writings.

As well as seeing carnival reversals as a liberating kind of social critique, Bakhtin (writing as Medvedev) also suggests, along the lines of Rosen's emphasis on the importance of narrative resources, that:

the human consciousness possesses a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualizing reality. A given consciousness is richer or poorer in genres, depending on its ideological environment.
(Medvedev, in Morson (Ed.), 1986, p. 57)

Certainly, most of the children who participated in this study had many narrative resources, discursive frameworks or inner genres available to them, although some seemed more entrenched than others. Competing discourses of femininity were constantly surfacing in discussions and writing about female protagonists and heroines. Some of these are examined in the next section.

Intertextuality and Alternative Heroines

A number of girls in the class, and, indeed, some boys as well, had a somewhat romanticised view of swashbuckling heroines who fought with swords and wore armour. This interest seemed to have come, in part, from a video, *Willow*, that a number of them had recently seen. This film, mentioned in their discussions (see later), presents a fantasy world where an evil queen is in power. It is prophesied that a baby girl will bring peace and goodness to the land. The adventures in the film revolve around saving this baby girl from the evil queen who wants to kill her. One of the adventurers who set out to save her is a beautiful princess who wears armour, rides into battle and fights with a sword.

As with the two rewritten fairy tales by Bart and Samantha, discussions and stories around the theme of female heroines tended to take part in a variety of discourses about femininity and heroism. Suzanne, for example, wrote the following poem:

Powers

A long time ago
The legend did say
There was an old kingdom
All hidden away
There lived a queen
Her powers were great
One cut from her blade
You would die the next day

Here again is a physically powerful and dominant woman. In this case, however, unlike Bart's Red Riding Hood, she is not defending herself. She is simply powerful because she is. I attempted to discuss changing discourses about heroines with Suzanne, asking her why she was so interested in sword fighting, and female knights in armour. She responded, 'I just like it because I like it'. However, during one group discussion, the following exchanges took place:

Emma Lina: I liked her [the heroine of *The Princess and the Goblin* (MacDonald, 1949), a fairy tale about an adventurous princess] because she acted bad and she went up these stairs her father told her not to go up and she met this ghost lady ...

Elizabeth: What did you like about that?

Michael: Emma Lina acts bad too!

Emma Lina: She was adventurous! It's not like—*likely* for a princess to act bad ... so it makes it more interesting. It's usually the little boy who's bad.

...

Suzanne: [referring to the film *Willow*] Well, I liked the magic and the swordfighting. That's what they did.

Monique: You said you liked it that the knights were ladies ...

Suzanne: Yes, the knights are ladies so they're not all *men!* ... There's one girl knight and she could beat all of them practically. [Later, she referred back to this and added 'And she wears armour, she looks really good in armour'.]

At the end of this session, I asked them what they could learn about life from these stories.

Emma Lina: Instead of waiting for your prince to come, you could be something else.

Josh: It doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman, you can still be a knight in shining armour. All you have to do is get some armour and put it on.

I remember as a child making up those stories for myself where I was the adventurous hero instead of the victim, where I rescued princes locked in towers. But I don't think I would ever have told anyone about them or written them down. They were too much beyond the borders of any story I had ever heard told publicly for me to risk sharing them. I toed the discursive line publicly, but was able to imagine other possibilities for myself. I wonder how many other girls did the same? Or boys, for that matter. The discursive context provided by Rachelle's classroom and the wider availability of certain kinds of alternative texts today probably made it easier for these children to tell such stories publicly. If I think back to my own childhood desire for swashbuckling heroines who 'looked good in armour', there was a need to identify not with the victim, but with the brave one who righted wrongs and rescued captives. For the identification to be complete, there was also a need for this brave one to be female.

Engagement with a female knight who looks good in armour is, of course, not unproblematic. Nor is the appeal of the princess who 'acted bad'. When I asked Emma Lina later to talk more about the princess who 'was bad', she corrected me, 'No, she *acted* bad', and was concerned that I should understand that really she was *good*. There is nothing new about a concern that girls be *good*, and nothing radical about a model of female emancipation wherein women and girls emulate men (symbolised here by putting on armour). Nevertheless, in this study I found that most of the children were at least attempting to question dominant discourses of gender, were aware of competing discourses, and spoke of their own lives in terms of girls having agency or the power to act. Hollywood films like *Willow*, while sometimes functioning to uphold dominant discourses of gender (e.g. romantic love and the importance of looking good), could also contribute in an important way to disrupting discourses of the passive female. The children's engagement with other kinds of feminist stories, provided by the teacher, and an emphasis in the classroom on deconstructive and critical reading skills seemed to have had an effect as well on the children's willingness and ability to attempt to rewrite storylines of female agency.

Like Emma Lina and Suzanne, many of the children who participated in this study emphasised their identification with a specific character as a main reason for their pleasurable response to certain stories. It makes sense, then, that the creation of engaging

characters in disruptive stories would be an important part of any equity programme. Valerie Walkerdine, in an article on comics for pre-teen girls, discusses the need for alternative fantasies and heroines:

The question of alternative fictions for girls might then engage with the relational dynamic. How might other kinds of fantasies be produced which deal differently with desires and conflicts? What other fantasy resolutions might be offered? What about characters who are not simply good or bad ... ? If current fictions produce such powerful effects, such potent fantasies, we too must work on the production of other possible dreams and fantasies. (Walkerdine, 1984, p. 184)

Gail Scott elaborates on the concept of new kinds of heroines in a discussion of her role as a writer and respondent in the creation of new cultural spaces for women. She is particularly interested in the process of identification with heroines in the development of a sense of self:

the almost too proper image of the 'strong woman' of a certain kind of feminist fiction, marching with her sisters towards a better future ... the soapy harlequins, obsessed largely with the risks and perils of heterosexual love ... On one hand she understands (as opposed to *knows*, i.e. with her whole body) the need for the constant positive reaffirmation of the female subject after millennia of women-hating patriarchy ... On the other hand, there was this pubescent identification with Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With The Wind* ... [a third possibility is] the Amazon utopia ... situating herself beyond history ... (Scott, 1988, pp. 18–20)

None of the aforementioned types of heroine seems quite able to provide both pleasurable self-identification and an emancipatory model or space of being. Scott suggests that the one who can best do this is one who is cyclical, ambivalent, polyphonic, carnivalesque: 'both grandiose and humble, miserable and angry, not to mention any other imaginable contradiction, without shame ...' (1988, p. 22). This quotation aptly describes Samantha's Princess Caroline in 'Something Different' and many of the disruptive story characters most appreciated by the children (for example, the princess who *was* good but *acted* bad).

This proposal of a polyphonic, carnivalesque hero/ine is particularly interesting in that it challenges much that has been written on the importance of story. Both writers on the psychological or therapeutic nature of stories (Bettelheim, 1977; Gold, 1990) and on their ideological functions (Bloch in Zipes, 1988; Zipes, 1988) have emphasised the importance of the struggle between good and evil in stories. Are Walkerdine and Scott right about the emancipatory potential of the carnivalesque, 'not simply good or bad' heroine, and of her aesthetic appeal? Perhaps the struggle between good and evil, that timeless universal theme, is not so much lost in the postmodern carnival as rewritten. Perhaps it takes place, more humanly, within the same person, rather than between binary opposites.

Intertextuality and Race

In reporting on this study, I do not want to seem overly optimistic. While I did indeed find that many of the Charles Street School children had a breadth of intertextual knowledge that enabled them to critique binary oppositions and begin to think about new kinds of heroes and heroines, we have seen that their understanding of gender

emancipation was not without confusion and problems. In addition, no discussion of emancipation or equity can limit itself solely to gender. This study examined intertextual knowledge of race and class as well and, while I am limited by space considerations, I want to give one example of how intertextual knowledge pertaining to skin colour was still lodged firmly within one of the most painful of binary oppositions.

It was Marilyn, an African-Canadian who recognised the intertextual connections between Cinderella and two other stories, one we had used in the reading groups, *The Talking Eggs* (San Souci, 1989) and one Rachelle had read to the whole class, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Step toe, 1987). These are both versions of the familiar oppressed youngest daughter goes from rags to riches story, the former from Louisiana and the latter from West Africa. When I read *The Talking Eggs* to the reading groups, I asked them to illustrate the characters as they imagined them, without looking at the actual illustrations. The children almost invariably drew white characters, no matter what colour they were themselves. When they subsequently asked to see the illustrations in the book and saw that the characters were black, their exclamations usually led to interesting discussions and, I believe, played a role in the development of a more critical literacy. As Marilyn was drawing (before seeing the book illustrations), she remarked that Blanche, the heroine of *The Talking Eggs*, reminded her both of Cinderella and of Mufaro's beautiful daughter, but that she had chosen to draw her like Cinderella. Her illustration shows a blonde young woman dressed in rags standing at an ironing board. The following conversation ensued:

Elizabeth: Marilyn, you drew Blanche all in rags before she got rich. Since the story didn't give you details of what she looked like, how did you decide how to draw her?

Marilyn: Well, I got some [ideas] from *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* ... well, she wasn't dressed exactly in rags but ... she had smudge marks all over her and she was ironing and all that so I thought of Blanche as in rags and old shoes like Cinderella.

Elizabeth: But you drew her more like Cinderella than like the illustrations in *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*?

Marilyn: Well, in *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* she was ironing and all that stuff and Cinderella, she's always in rags and always ironing ...

[group discussion of the story's ending]

Marilyn: I mostly thought she would be, you know how Cinderella is? And I mostly thought she would get married and live happily ever after [the heroine of *The Talking Eggs* does not marry].

This discussion illustrates an important point about the intertextuality of children's stories. Marilyn did indeed have a wide range of possible texts and images available to her and she recognised relationships and resemblances among several of them. Despite this, the Perrault/Disney Cinderella remained somehow dominant in her imagination, just as Disney heroines seem to have been so dominant for Sarah that, although she knew several versions of the story, she *imagined* the little mermaid like the Disney character before she even saw the film.

Repeated exposure to certain images and themes does seem to have a cumulative effect. This was also expressed by another girl, Monique. As she drew Blanche, she commented, 'I imagine her dark but I'm drawing her blonde'. I asked her why but she said she didn't know. Both Marilyn, an African-Canadian, and Monique, a dark skinned girl of Chilean background, drew the heroine as *unlike* themselves, even though Marilyn saw Blanche's resemblance to an African character as well as a European one, and Monique stated that she imagined Blanche differently from the way she was drawing her.

A third girl, also dark skinned herself, had exclaimed, on seeing the illustrations in the book, 'Oh, she's dark! I drew her yellow [haired]!' When I asked her why, she answered without hesitation, 'Well, she was good, so I wanted to make her pretty'. If, in dominant discourses, good equals pretty equals blonde, then how does the dark child learn to see herself? My own children, who are also dark skinned, often used to ask me what colour the hero/ines of stories were as I read to them. This seems to indicate that colour as well as gender may be important to the identification process. I am not suggesting that children are only able to identify with characters who are like themselves, but that it is important that they at least occasionally see something of their physical selves in the hero/ines of film and fiction.

Despite improvements in the availability of alternative images in children's literature and other cultural forms, white images of goodness and beauty are still vastly more pervasive. As well, such influential institutions as the Disney studios actually work with and exaggerate images and storylines that often function to reproduce racism and sexism. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this issue in detail but, as an example, my own daughter asked, while watching the Disney version of *The Little Mermaid*, 'Aren't there any black mermaids?' While there are none, the Sea Witch is black and sings a calypso song. More recent and superficially more inclusive films such as *Pocahontas* or *Mulan* (with a Native American and a Chinese heroine respectively) may have a different kind of impact, although *Pocahontas* has already been widely critiqued by both feminists and anti-racists. The heroines of *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Willow* and most 'feminist fairy tales' are white. Through such ubiquitous cultural forms, bloneness (especially for females) and certain kinds of bodies, clothes and so on, maintain their powerful associations with goodness, beauty, comfort and romance. Darkness, on the other hand, is still equated with the exotic, the occult and, often, with evil.

Implications for Teaching Practice and Further Research

Although the conversations and writings discussed here indicate that certain limiting storylines remain dominant, and are constantly reinforced through cultural forms such as books and films, they also show the impact of more disruptive storylines of gender. Many of the Charles Street School children were able to understand, take pleasure in, and create stories that disrupted traditional limiting storylines. This seems to have been partly due to their intertextual knowledge of popular culture stories and films that, at least to some extent, disrupted traditional storylines of gender, and partly due to the way they had been taught. Their teacher, Rachelle, believed profoundly in the importance of stories, and in maintaining a teaching practice that was anti-racist and anti-sexist. (I must add that some of the study findings concerning race were much more encouraging than those outlined earlier but, again, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article to discuss these in more detail). Over the course of the 2 years the children were in her class, Rachelle exposed them to a rich variety of disruptive texts and response activities. The children frequently mentioned to me how much they loved her stories. The teacher, through providing desirable alternatives and critical reading activities, may play a key role in developing children's intertextual knowledge and enhancing their ability to critique limiting stories and to understand and create new ones.

Both Davies (1993) and Jones (1997) have argued that feminist research should no longer focus on such aspects of learning as role modelling, stereotyping, curriculum choice and so on. However, I would like to suggest that, while sex role socialisation theory is obviously too simplistic, it is important to examine the kinds of real and fictional

characters children identify with. It is also crucial to consider, as a central aspect of critical or feminist pedagogy, how to expand children's narrative resources of race, class and gender through the creation and promotion of desirable disruptive texts. Children certainly need to develop skills in critical literacy, whether through learning feminist post-structuralist theory as Davies proposes, or by other means such as those described here. However, this study also illustrates the impact, both positive and negative, of identification with story hero/ines and intertextual knowledge of various kinds of storylines. Since many teachers who are concerned with equity issues may not have the time or the inclination to learn post-structuralist theory, it is encouraging that exposure to disruptive stories of various kinds, in particular those with characters children can identify strongly with, and critical reading activities, can play a role in challenging dominant discourses and making alternatives more visible.

Stories are central both to children's shareable *imaginative* world and to their practical understanding of the *real* world. They can both contribute to the reproduction of limiting meanings and challenge them in the language of possibility and hope. As British Member of Parliament, Diane Abbott, put it in an address to the National Council of Teachers of English (USA), '[i]t falls upon those who teach our children, whatever their colour, to teach *all* our children, whatever *their* colour, that heroes and heroines can be any shade or gender' (cited in Bianchini, 1995, p. 234).

NOTES

- [1] The names of the school, teacher and students have been changed to protect the anonymity of the subjects. Most of the children chose their own pseudonyms for the study.
- [2] In the course of the study, the children themselves seemed to use 'story' in this sense. Thus, they frequently referred to the 'story' of a picture, film or event in their own lives. One boy said his favourite story was a film he had not seen, and a girl said hers was a book she had not read. In both cases they knew the general gist of the storyline and this was enough for them to say this story was their favourite.
- [3] In reproducing children's writing, I have corrected spelling and punctuation, but have not changed any wording or syntax.
- [4] As I worked on the final version of this article, the spellchecker on my computer tried to convert 'musclewoman' back to 'muscleman'. Apparently the notion of a 'musclewoman' has not entered the dominant discourse at Microsoft!

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