

“It’s harder to catch a boy because they’re tougher”: Using Fairytales in the Classroom to Explore Children’s Understandings of Gender

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Traditional fairytales serve to socially construct gendered categories and reify dominant understandings of masculinities and femininities. Using reading groups and participant observations in an elementary school classroom, this article explores how children actively engage with gendered messages within fairytales—specifically examining children’s adherence to, and negotiation of, gender boundaries as demonstrated through their performances of gender within daily classroom discussions and activities. This article illustrates the diverse ways in which children engage with text and how they apply these messages to their own lives, work within its confines, and explore alternatives. Findings demonstrate the potential for educators to create an environment through which children are afforded the freedom to navigate gendered messages and discourses. Such initiatives may contribute to developing more inclusive learning environments and educational opportunities that challenge the perpetuation and reinforcement of long-established gender stereotypes in the classroom.

Les contes de fées traditionnelles servent à construire des catégories sociales axées sur le genre et ils réifient les conceptions dominantes de la masculinité et la féminité. Reposant sur les groupes de lecture et les observations de participants dans une école élémentaire, cet article examine l’engagement actif des enfants avec les messages genrés dans les contes de fées, notamment la mesure dans laquelle les enfants respectent et négocient les frontières entre les sexes dans leur comportement pendant les discussions et les activités en classe. Cet article illustre les façons diverses dont les enfants réagissent au texte, mettent en pratique les messages qui s’y trouvent, fonctionnent dans ses limites et explorent des alternatives. Les résultats révèlent le potentiel pour les enseignants de créer un environnement dans lequel les enfants s’orientent en toute liberté face aux messages et aux discours genrés. De telles initiatives pourraient aider le développement de milieux d’apprentissage plus inclusifs et la création d’occasions pédagogiques qui rejettent le maintien et le renforcement de vieux stéréotypes liés au genre dans la salle de classe.

Despite seemingly equitable representations of women in popular media and the rise of post-feminism—the idea that women are now independent agents of their own destiny with the aims of feminism having been achieved (Pomerantz, Raby, & Stefanik, 2013)—there are still occurrences of gender stereotypes, transphobia, sexism, heterosexism, and violence against

women in contemporary society. Take, for instance, the scandals surrounding Jian Ghomeshi and Bill Cosby, two public figures recently revealed to have allegedly enacted sexual harassment and assault against a number of women (Timson, 2014), or the Dalhousie University School of Dentistry incident, in which a group of male students posted misogynistic comments, 'rape jokes,' and explicit sexual abuse directed towards their female colleagues on a social media site (Taber, 2014). Additionally, high rates of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer) youth depression and suicide (Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Higa et al., 2012; Russell, 2003; Taylor et al., 2009) not only indicate rampant transphobia and homophobia, but also suggest that the need for feminism is far from over. Such events prompt questions surrounding where harmful gender ideologies originate, how they are perpetuated, and where opportunities for change may lie. Furthermore, with increasing awareness of transgender children coming out at younger ages, and the call for trans* rights and advocacy, particularly in educational settings (Lau, 2015; Wolansky, 2015), the importance of discussing gender and cultivating inclusive spaces in the classroom has become especially relevant.

In this article¹ I suggest that attention needs to be directed to the elementary school classroom where gender stereotypes, heterosexist, and homophobic practices and beliefs are defined and reproduced (Blaise, 2005a; Blaise, 2005b; Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013). Baker-Sperry (2007) argued that fairytales offer highly structured and recognizable forms of storytelling for children to interpret and navigate gender norms and expectations. By focusing on this genre of children's literature, and its use in the classroom, I was afforded the opportunity to investigate how children conceptualized and constructed understandings of gender at a young age. This article therefore examines how grades one and two children actively engaged with gender discourses present within traditional fairytales and applied these messages to their own lives.

Building upon the work of feminist scholar Davies (1989), I incorporated a 'non-traditional' or 'feminist fairytale,' into my study, *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch (1980). Using this storybook provided me the opportunity to explore how children interpreted messages and themes that contradict normative representations of gender within conventional fairytales. In this article I also include observations from a classroom production of *The Paper Bag Princess*, which functioned as a tool to explore how children engaged with, and took up, the gendered messages within the story. Prevalent themes found throughout this study focus on children's understandings of societal standards and expectations for each sex with an inquiry as to how these normative understandings serve to perpetuate the existing gender order and gender inequality. Results of this study provide a call to re-evaluate current curricular choices and consider how teachers might utilize existing cultural products in the classroom (such as traditional fairytales or their more progressive renditions). This process encourages a forum through which children can offer their thoughts regarding current dominant gender discourses, hopefully leading to more inclusive learning environments.

Popular culture is a powerful distributor of discourse, circulating ideas and values about social identities and categories, as well as gender in/equality (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009). Children's literature—particularly fairytales, which have served as the basis for an entire enterprise of movies, television shows, toys, and products (Mollet, 2013)—is perhaps one of the most salient sources through which young children learn socially accepted definitions of what it means to be a 'boy' and a 'girl' (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Marshall, 2004). By mastering particular dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity, children are able to adopt, maintain, and play with particular gender identities in

order to negotiate local understandings of gender. As with other popular texts, it is important to recognize children's literature as producer of gender discourse, one that informs young readers of societal expectations and values. Traditional fairytales, for instance, are rife with depictions of male superiority and female subordination. These representations cohere to reinforce the belief that men and women have a set of oppositionally defined traits and capabilities. Researchers have noted the power of children's literature in shaping children's views of the world, themselves, and those around them (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Uttley & Roberts, 2011; Zipes, 2006), underscoring the need to explore stories that reify narrow and traditional understandings of gender, as well as how children interact with, and negotiate, these messages themselves.

An analysis of gender in fairytales, as well as children's literature in general, is not a new endeavour (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Gooden & Gooden 2001; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006; Taber & Woloshyn, 2011a; Taber & Woloshyn, 2011b; Zipes, 2006). Over the past thirty years, scholars have identified the sexist and gendered content within children's stories and the potentially harmful effect of these messages (Hamilton et al., 2006; Kuykendal & Sturm, 2007). Davies (1989), for instance, has done extensive work in the field of children's literature, particularly with *The Paper Bag Princess*, and emphasized both the profound impact children's stories have on children's constructed views of the world around them, as well as the vast and differing ways they interpret these texts.

Munsch's (1980) 'progressive' fairytale, *The Paper Bag Princess*, is an excellent example of how texts are understood by different readers, and has received much attention over the years due to its dramatic departure from that of the traditional fairytale narrative (Davies, 1989; Evans, 1998; Kuykendal & Sturm, 2007). Princess Elizabeth, armed with knowledge and brainpower, rescues Prince Ronald from the dragon that has captured him. The Prince, rather than expressing his gratitude, demands that Princess Elizabeth tidy up her unruly appearance before he can marry her. With a final twist in the plot, Elizabeth rejects her prince, calls him a bum, and dances off into the sunset by herself. However, as Davies (1989) observed in her study, in what may initially appear to be a story of female-empowerment, ends up revealing nuanced understandings of male and female gender roles when interpreted and taken up by young readers. She states, while "the intention here [in *The Paper Bag Princess*] is to present a female hero who is not dependent on the prince in shining armour for her happiness nor for confirmation of who she is.... The story that is heard is subtly different for each child" (pp. 59-60).

Though my study was conducted twenty years after Davies' (1989), much of the data shared within the present article, particularly with regard to *The Paper Bag Princess*, corroborates her findings. This suggests the continuation and reinforcement of traditional gender discourse. The pervasiveness and ubiquity of children's fairytales in popular culture and mainstream media, particularly those stories that perpetuate ongoing gender disparities, highlights the "need for nuanced understanding of the complex ways that young children take up, replay, or revise the gendered messages designed into their favourite media" (Wohlwend, 2012, p. 594). Though a number of scholars have examined gender in fairytales over the years, the ways in which children position themselves within these storybooks, bring prior expectations of gender to their interpretation of the story, and interact with the story's content deserve more attention in relation to how they construct meaning through these texts. My study emphasizes that there is still a pressing need to examine the use of fairytales in the elementary classroom, particularly as a tool and method to prompt explorations and discussions of gender with young students.

Results show how traditional understandings of gender may be challenged and negotiated through the use of fairytales, and in doing so, opens up opportunities for greater inclusivity in the elementary school classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses a feminist poststructuralist lens to recognize the discursive ways children take up and interact with the messages present within fairytales. This perspective underscores the power of literary texts to construct gender discourses, highlighting the power of language to *construct*, rather than *reflect* reality. Discourse is the combined effect of language that provides shared cultural narratives and a framework for making sense of the world around us (Foucault, 1978). Poststructural theorists such as Foucault (1978), Butler (1990), and Weedon (1987) suggest we are constantly performing within discourse, strengthening, reifying, reproducing, and negotiating dominant understandings and messages. Over time, the repetition and reinforcement of discourse results in common sense understandings of the world, with certain beliefs and behaviours becoming naturalized and part of what is considered to be 'true.' It is in this way that discourses of gender regulate and define understandings of what it means to be men and women or boys and girls, and offers constrained 'subject positions' for individuals to take up (Weedon, 1987).

A feminist poststructuralist stance illuminates how conceptualizations of the world are thus reliant upon the use of language and, consequently, the implicit or apparent 'truths' derived from these constructions. Language is instrumental in both constructing the social world, as well as dictating what is possible within those frameworks (Weedon, 1987). For example, it is apparent that language is constructed in children's literature so as to define and reinforce normative understandings of gender. The discourses produced and reified through children's literature are, in part, a reflection of what is accepted and valued within contemporary society. By presenting children with storybooks that represent men and women as adhering to traditional gendered categories, certain possibilities are constructed for them.

According to Baker-Sperry (2007), children "rely heavily on traditional normative structures to make sense of the world, and they often accept gendered expectations as truth" (p. 718). However, it is also important to acknowledge that children are by no means passive social actors that simply absorb information (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Blaise, 2013). When engaging with material, children draw upon previous understandings, interpretations, and expectations of gender, all of which are reliant upon the discourses that they have had access to. As Hall (1993) suggested, children's literature holds cultural codes that have become "profoundly *naturalized*" (p. 132, emphasis in original) and repetitive as part of recurring discourse. When engaging with text, readers take part in 'preferred readings' in which the dominant, explicit messages within a story are easily noticed by the reader due to the fact that these "preferred meanings have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures" (Hall, 1993, p. 134). Children's interpretation of messages within literature should not be construed as a linear or static process, rather, dominant or preferred readings of the text may be revealed, while still leaving open the possibility for a multiplicity of understandings.

As this paper explores, cultural products or texts provide children the opportunity to interact with information about the social world and can contribute to shaping their own perceptions of gender and how they might perform that gender identity. Butler's (1990) theory of

performativity reveals a complex understanding of the relational aspect of gender in which she argues, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time” (p. 45). She explained that this repetition shows that what is taken to be an internal feature of ourselves, gender, is actually something “that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts” (Butler, 1999, pp. xv-xvi). It is evident, then, how gendered appearances, characteristics, and behaviours not limited to those represented within children’s stories are often perceived as natural, inherent and inevitable due to the constant repetition and consequent naturalization of these traits.

Boldt (1996) additionally recognized that when children perform gender, it “indicates their participation in, and reiteration of, systems of power relations that produce us all as gendered subjects” (p. 118). The constant repetition of traditional gender roles and relations provides the sense that they are, in fact, natural and ‘normal,’ which often takes place within a very limited framework. By opening up space in the classroom for children to engage and interact with fairytales in unique ways, dominant discourses and understandings of gender may be challenged, possibly leading to *new* discourses and ways of being that are not contingent upon gender dualism and traditional stereotypes.

Research Study

The overall purpose of my study was to explore how using fairytales in the elementary school classroom may open up discussions of gender with young children. To collect my data, I conducted reading group interviews with fourteen six and seven year old students as well as informal classroom observations, including a classroom production of *The Paper Bag Princess*. The study took place over a period of two months in a grade one/two elementary school classroom within a predominantly white, middle-class neighbourhood in a major urban city in Alberta, Canada. This particular location and grade were selected due to my previous position as a volunteer within the school, affording me access to the classroom. A combined recruitment/consent letter was distributed to all parents/guardians of students in the class. This letter described the details of my study and clearly stated that participation was voluntary and parents may choose to withdraw consent at any time. Students were also required to provide verbal consent to participate in my study, and pseudonyms were provided to all students involved.

My experience as a volunteer provided me the opportunity to work with the teacher and integrate my research with her curriculum that included a unit on fairytales. I selected the sample of fairytales to use in my reading groups from books that were already present in the classroom and school library. In order to collect my data, I utilized the teacher’s pre-determined daily storytime to conduct reading group discussions with the class in which I read the selected fairytales and facilitated a discussion of the story with basic question prompts:

- If you were the main character, what would you have done?
- If you were the main character’s best friend, what would you say to him/her?
- What was your favourite part of the story?
- What was your least favourite part of the story?
- How might you change the end of the story?
- How did being a boy/girl (depending on the story) help (whatever the main character had to

overcome)?

- (For neutral/unclassified gendered characters): What do you think is the gender of this character? What makes you think they are a boy/girl?

The class' predetermined story time provided a familiar and flexible environment to conduct my reading groups. I ensured that the sessions were short (approximately fifteen minutes), and spread out over several weeks so as to not disrupt regular classroom activities. All students were welcome to listen to the reading of the fairytale and participate in discussions, regardless of whether or not they had parental consent, so as to not exclude any children from their usual classroom activities. The small class size allowed me to easily distinguish which few students were not given consent and therefore what responses I had to exclude from my data. Due to ethical guidelines, sessions were not audio-reordered, and I transcribed student responses by hand into my field notes. This research complied with the ethical codes and procedures as outlined by Mount Allison University's Research Ethics Board and the school district's Research Ethics Board.

Informal classroom observations took place over the duration of the study in which I observed the behaviours and interactions of the students as they worked together in small groups, listened to instructions from the teacher, or participated in activities within or outside their classroom. I concurrently volunteered in the classroom while collecting my data, which enabled me to closely follow the students and their routine, as well as granting me the opportunity to become a welcomed member of their classroom. Observations within the classroom provided the opportunity to understand how the students engaged with the fairytales we read and how these interpretations may have been carried over into their everyday activities.

As part of the teacher's fairytale unit, she and I collaborated to create a classroom production of *The Paper Bag Princess*. Using the book, *Munsch at Play: Eight Stage Adaptations for Young Performers* (Watts & Munsch, 2010), the project we developed included reading and discussing the story, practicing lines, designing sets and costumes, and concluding performances. Students were able to read lines for many different characters, and were encouraged to practice and act out these characters in front of the class. Students were additionally assigned character roles for the final performances (of which there were four, so students could have the opportunity to perform many different characters), as well as roles in set and costume design, and supporting characters. This activity was a critical element to my data, as it served as a tool to inform how the students engaged with, and took up the gendered content within *The Paper Bag Princess*.

Overview of Findings

Reading group discussions and classroom observations offered insight into children's understandings and expectations of gender in relation to the characters and plotlines within each fairytale. *The Paper Bag Princess* was included in the selection of books to explore how children in this study interacted with a non-traditional text that offers contradictory understandings of traditional gender roles. Responses from students, as well as their behaviours and interactions within the classroom, particularly during the production of *The Paper Bag Princess*, indicated a strong understanding and importance of accurately performing one's gender. The children's actions were frequently controlled and policed by social peer pressure, or modeled after the actions and expectations of others in the form of 'gender policing.' Though

part of a much larger research project (Paterson, 2013), findings in this article were selected with the intention of revealing how children in this study negotiated gendered messages and interacted with the stories in ways that made sense to them, while also indicating that despite nods towards gender equality and progression, the elementary school classroom can still be heavily imbued with, and guided by, strong expectations of gender.

Expectations of gender in traditional fairytales. Throughout the reading of the traditional fairytales and discussion of each book, the children exhibited a keen awareness of pre-established gender expectations for both males and females. In working with the children it appeared that most of them were already familiar with the stories (especially those stories that have been reproduced over time, such as *Cinderella* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*) and could therefore anticipate what was going to happen. Their understandings and assumptions of gender were most evident when responding to questions about the characters within each story. For example, in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Brett, 1987), gender pronouns are not used anywhere in the text when describing the bears. Rather, the reader must rely upon understandings of the traditional, nuclear family and visual gender cues in order to determine the gender of each bear. When asked if they thought the three bears in the picture were a family, the children's responses indicated an expectation—as well as an assumption—that the bears must belong to a family with a mother and father:

KP²: Is this a bear family?

Chorus: Yes!

KP: What makes you think this is a family?

Jessica³: Because there's a big bear, middle bear, and little bear so that's the dad, mom, and baby.

Josh: The big bear is the father because he's bigger than the mom, tough, strong, and he's playing with the little bear. [Nods of agreement from classmates]

Liam: I do that with my dad! [In the picture the big bear is flipping his cub in the air]

Rachel: The middle [sized] bear is the mom because she's wearing a headband.

Chris: She's wearing an apron and moms wear aprons.

As demonstrated in the above exchange, children were quick to identify each character based on their gender and generational cues both in terms of actions (i.e., the father bear is flipping the cub in the air—an activity Liam related to his own life experience), and appearance. Not only did the clothing worn by the middle-sized bear suggest a female gender, it also had implications for the bear's perceived duties, presumably within the domestic domain—"moms wear aprons." Additionally, it is interesting to note the children's fixation on body size and associated traits. The children immediately asserted that men are bigger than women and, therefore, "tough and strong," alluding to traditional understandings of traits associated with masculinity (Connell, 1995).

KP: But have you ever seen a mom who's bigger than a dad in real life? [Children paused to consider then nodded]

Chloe: My grandma is bigger than my grandpa.

Amy: My mom is taller than my dad.

Although the students agreed that they had experiences in real life that contradicted what they saw in the book, including their previous responses, they still relied upon their preconceived notions as to what it means to be male and female to make sense of the story.

Students also had strong gendered expectations when it came to roles, abilities, and traits of male and female characters. I frequently asked the children what might change in the story if the gender of the main character were reversed:

KP: Do you think Goldilocks could have been a boy? Would he have done the same things?

Liam: He would fight the bears with a metal pole.

Josh: I think he would have kept walking in the forest [instead of going into the bear's house].

KP: Why wouldn't he go into the house?

[Overlapping comments detailing that the boy would not feel the need to go into the house]

Jasper: [He] wouldn't go in the house, he would keep going into the forest because he was not afraid.

Similar gendered assumptions were made when discussing the fairytale *Red Riding Hood* (Williams, 1995) in which Little Red and her grandmother are eaten by the wolf and saved by a local woodsman. I asked what might happen if Little Red Riding Hood had been a boy:

Kristina: He would have been brave.

Josh: He would have been smart enough to tickle the wolf's stomach and make him jump out without needing the woodcutter's help.

Chris: The boy would have been brave enough not to get caught or tricked.

Kristina: Then they would have to change the name because he couldn't be Little Red Riding Hood.

Chris: Yeah, it would be *Mr* Red Riding Hood.

From the examples above, the children's expectations for both males and females are revealed, providing insight as to their perceptions of, and adherence to, the gender order. The assumption that if the character's gender had been male, he would have been more aggressive ("he would fight the bears with a metal pole"), brave and smart enough to neither get captured nor require help to escape, provides a counter perspective on expectations for female characters. The parallel interpretation is that female characters are weaker, and lack the bravery, strength, and intellect necessary for survival. There was, perhaps, no clearer example of these understandings as demonstrated from our discussion and classroom production of *The Paper Bag Princess*.

Expectations of gender in a non-traditional fairytale. Consistent with Davies' (1989) findings, the children's interpretations of *The Paper Bag Princess* in my study were varied. Some children viewed Princess Elizabeth's disruption of the existing gender order as inherently wrong and in need of restructuring to fit the scripts and narratives that made sense to them, while others appreciated and enjoyed how the original story unfolded. However, rather than applauding Princess Elizabeth for defeating the dragon through trickery instead of physical force or violence, most children revealed that they thought Elizabeth was too weak and kind, with ensuing acknowledgements of male physical strength and ability. In a discussion of the story, four children demonstrated clear understandings surrounding dominant ideas of gender:

KP: In this story the prince is captured by the dragon. Why are princesses usually the ones captured?

Jasper: Because it's harder to catch a boy because they're tougher.

Josh: Because the prince wants to marry her.

KP: How does the Prince in fairytales usually defeat the dragon?

Chorus: A sword!

KP: Then how come Princess Elizabeth didn't use a sword?

Kristina: Because she's too nice and didn't want to hurt the dragon.

Chris: She might hurt herself.

KP: Do princes ever hurt themselves when using their swords?

Chris: Well no, but they're tougher and stronger [than Princess Elizabeth] and wouldn't hurt themselves.

As demonstrated above, the children held very strong expectations for each gender, reiterating attributes of strength, ability, and adherence to qualities associated with femininity ("she's too nice and didn't want to hurt the dragon"). Their belief that Princess Elizabeth did not use a sword, as is the traditional way to defeat dragons within fairytales, was due to her lack of strength, as well as her kindness towards animals. This holds significant implications for how the children conceptualized physical and emotional capabilities for both men and women. For example, while qualities of nurturance and kindness should be embraced and encouraged for all sexes, these traits are generally only associated with females and do so in such a way that constrains them.

From the students' responses, it is additionally shown how these feminine qualities are rarely, if ever, associated with men, which again, serves to limit and define the sexes. Furthermore, the physical differences between males and females as noted by the students (recalling in particular the earlier conversations regarding *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*) now denote differences of strength and power, tying directly to the performance of gender in which male characters are seen as physically competent and can utilize their strength and abilities to control their environment and circumstances. Kristina's claim that Elizabeth did not use a sword to defeat the dragon because "she's too nice and wouldn't want to hurt the dragon" and Chris's comment that "she might hurt herself" hold stronger implications as to the female character's perceived competence in terms of physical abilities and capacity for strength and bravery, rather than emphasizing the general importance of being kind towards others. Finally, when asked what would happen if Princess Elizabeth had been a boy, the children speak about how a boy would have defeated the dragon in a different way, one more in line with masculine traits of force and aggression, again, indicating a strong understanding of the physical and emotional differences and competencies between the sexes.

The majority of students were content with the original ending of *The Paper Bag Princess*, particularly Elizabeth's decision to venture off on her own, rather than marry the prince:

KP: What do you think about Princess Elizabeth's decision not to marry the prince at the end of the story?

Rachel: It was good because he was rude to her.

KP: So do we think it was a good decision for her not to marry the prince?

[Majority of children nod]

Kristina: Mhm... and [because] you don't identify by your clothes.

Students thought Elizabeth made a good decision to leave Prince Ronald because he was very rude to her, particularly when he demanded that Elizabeth clean herself up and return to him looking like a "real princess." As shown from the above, Kristina commented on the latter point, perhaps indicating that she disagreed with the emphasis and importance placed on Elizabeth's physical appearance. However, another participant frequently sought out traditional gender and heteronormative scripts when responding to my questions. When I asked Jessica how she might have changed the end of the story, she responded: "I would run back to the castle

really fast and change [clothes] and come back...because I would want to marry the prince." As corroborated by Davies (1989), it should not be assumed that all children who hear this story would have similar interpretations or responses to the shift in traditional narrative. As found in Davies' (1989) study with *The Paper Bag Princess*, most children had a difficult time considering Elizabeth to be a hero and believed she should have cleaned herself up in order to marry the prince. It is perhaps the finely entrenched notions of gender dualism and corresponding traits and values associated with men and women that are preventing children from seeing Elizabeth not as a strong, independent woman in charge of her future, but rather, a woman who has failed to perform her normative duties and expectations in her role as a princess.

Gender boundaries: Working within and negotiating. While students frequently and explicitly worked to maintain gendered categories, resistance and negotiation of gender boundaries were much more nuanced. These moments usually took place during conversations in which they would offer slight alternatives to the fairytales, indicating possibilities for reconceptualizing traditional gender roles. There were times when the children directly resisted the messages within the fairytales, though these responses usually only surfaced when prompted with questions. One example took place after reading the popular fairytale *Cinderella* (Craft, 2000) in which I asked the students what they would have done if they were the title character. Jessica, in another effort to work within existing gender boundaries, stated that she would "wait for the prince," as did Cinderella in the story. Kristina, however, while laughing and punching her fists in the air, asserted: "[I would] punch the [step]sisters in the face...then I would jump out the window at midnight and drive far away." After making her statements, she laughed and glanced around the room, looking for a reaction. This may have been a moment in which Kristina actively and purposefully resisted Cinderella's passivity, or was perhaps simply a desire to draw attention. Regardless, this moment also indicates Kristina's ability to interpret the messages and events within the story and to make sense of them in her own way.

Another example of resistance took place when I asked the students if they thought it were possible for *Cinderella* to be a story about a poor man meeting a princess at the ball. The majority of the class was very adamant that such a thing could not conceivably happen. Josh replied, "No, because the prince is the hero [pause] but sometimes the girl can be the hero like in *The Paper Bag Princess*." This statement hints at understandings surrounding heroism, strength, and bravery—perhaps also implying that while women are *sometimes* allowed to be strong, men should never exhibit weakness—and also indicates a moment of transcending traditional gender boundaries and narratives in which students are able to interpret and negotiate information within texts and apply them to new situations.

The class' production of *The Paper Bag Princess*, while in keeping with the teacher's curricular aims, provided the students ample opportunity to interact with the story and provided me insight as to how they interpreted its content and messages. The many steps involved in creating and implementing this classroom project—including set and costume design, practicing lines, and acting—required a great deal of teamwork and coordination from the students. These pre-production efforts afforded me the opportunity to observe their actions and behaviours with each other as they worked through each task, as well as how they created meaning out of the story itself. In preparing for our production of *The Paper Bag Princess*, I assigned roles to each student independent of the gender of the assigned character in an intentional effort to disrupt expectations about who would be assigned which role. This served to gently test gender boundaries, as both boys and girls had the opportunity to read lines for Prince Ronald, Princess

Elizabeth, and the Dragon.

The assignment of roles was met with varying reactions from students. When Sarah was assigned the role of Prince Ronald, a few students giggled at the idea of her playing a male role but were generally supportive and offered little resistance. Sarah reacted well, smiled and seemed genuinely pleased with receiving one of the lead roles. Chris, however, had a very strong, negative reaction to being placed in a minor female role—the ‘lady in waiting.’ He became very distraught and expressed anger towards me. While there was little reaction from his peers, Chris’ discomfort with entering a place of femininity was evident. Chris’ reaction is indicative of how female roles are often degraded, and how dominant discourses of gender tend to devalue traditionally feminine traits and the prevailing notion that such qualities are deemed as being lesser, weak, or undesirable. When practicing his lines and actions, Chris was very careful and reserved in his performance, perhaps ensuring to maintain his masculine status by reading his lines with little emphasis or engagement, and sitting in place on the carpet, rather than using physical actions. Chris’ anxiety with crossing gender boundaries was further evident when he accidentally emitted a high-pitched sneeze and his friends claimed he sounded like a girl and started laughing. Chris was noticeably upset and uncomfortable with this interaction, again, perhaps because he thought his masculinity was being questioned. Furthermore, when rehearsing one of our scenes, Chris took part in gender policing, asserting his classmate’s gender pronoun:

KP: Where’s Prince Ronald? [Prince Ronald was being played by Sarah]

Liam: He’s backstage.

Chris: No! *She* is backstage.

Chris was visibly agitated by Liam’s misuse of gender pronouns, further indicating Chris’ adherence to traditional male and female roles and his reluctance to venture outside of those boundaries.

By contrast, when I asked Josh to read Princess Elizabeth’s lines and act as if he were on stage in front of an audience, I was privy to his understanding of what it means to ‘act like a girl.’ Immediately, and without inhibition, Josh took on a different persona while reading his lines, incorporating stereotypically ‘female actions’ that might be something a princess would do: sticking his nose up in the air, turning out his hands with his fingers pointed, and walking with a swish of his hips. While I acknowledge Josh’s acquisition of stereotypically feminine characteristics could be viewed as problematic, this observation also indicates Josh’s willingness to push gender boundaries and challenges notions of masculinity, when males are not generally permitted the freedom to easily transcend into the feminine, particularly when doing so in front of their peers puts them at risk for gender assessment (West & Zimmerman, 1991). The rest of the class watched this performance and, while I had anticipated students might make fun or laugh at Josh, as is a common tactic when policing gender boundaries (Dutro, 2001), there was very little, if any, reaction from Josh’s peers. In this regard, the class’ production of *The Paper Bag Princess* opened up space for the story’s characters to be taken up by students—reluctantly by Chris, and more exuberantly by Josh—and demonstrated how both masculinity and femininity can be tested, negotiated, and played with in the classroom setting.

Other students were pleased with being assigned roles that matched their own gender and utilized these moments as opportunities to retell the story in a way that made sense to them. When I assigned the role of Princess Elizabeth to Jessica, she indicated her excitement with the

idea of being a princess. She jumped up, twirled on the spot, cupped her cheeks in her hands and flashed a bright smile while batting her eyelashes. "My mother would be so proud!" she exclaimed. "And I'm already wearing a dress!" While *The Paper Bag Princess* is perhaps attempting to disrupt traditional narratives associated with feminine beauty, passivity, and subservience, Jessica viewed Elizabeth as a flawed princess, one who did not follow the traditional feminine script. Her role as the main character provided her the chance to rewrite the story and take up the subject position that she most clearly identified with—that of a feminine princess.

For female characters in many fairytales, kindness and compassion for others often result in submissiveness and reliance upon men for rescue or survival. Even more disconcertingly, emphasis placed upon female physical appearance and beauty as a source of power can be interpreted as diminishing a sense of control over their lives. During a reading group discussion of *Cinderella* (Craft, 2000), I asked the students about the stepsister's use of a corset, as well as the importance of attending the ball. With little prompting, one female student stated, "you pull the strings to get thin." I was surprised at not having to explain the concept of a corset to a group of six and seven year olds, whom I would assume would have little knowledge of this clothing item.

KP: Why do you think the stepsisters needed to use a corset?

Marie: Because maybe they were fat and needed to get thin so they could be pretty for the prince.

KP: Why was it so important for them to go to the ball? Why did they worry so much about getting ready?

Marie: Because they wanted to look good for the prince so he would like her.

Rachel: And so they could marry the prince and get rich!

The resoluteness of these statements indicates very strong understandings of how one achieves feminine beauty, as well as the reasons for doing so, always relating back to being pretty or attractive for the prince. These sentiments were repeated throughout other stories, including *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* (Helborough & Luraschi, 2008), in which the king locks his daughters in a tower so they are 'seen and not heard.'

KP: Why do you think the king wants his daughters to be seen and not heard?

Marie: Because they're princesses, they have to be looked at to be pretty for the prince.

Sarah: Maybe the girls were really rude or said bad words.

KP: Do you think if the king had twelve sons, he would lock them up too?

Marie: No, but they're princes so they aren't chosen to be married so they don't have to be looked at.

Chris: Also, boys probably don't talk as much.

The students revealed numerous understandings surrounding the ideal female character, not only terms of the value of one's appearance (again, to be pretty for the prince), but also in terms of silencing oneself, remaining passive and submissive. The notion of utilizing one's physical appearance to please men was a frequent and recurring theme. In the same story, the king holds a 'royal challenge' for all men across the kingdom in which the winner of his challenge is rewarded with marriage to the princess of his choice.

KP: Why do you think the prize was to marry one of the princesses?

Jasper: Because then the prince would get really rich and be the king.

Marie: Yeah, and princesses are really pretty and they [the men] would want to marry them.
Kristina: So they wouldn't be lonely.

As shown in the above example, Marie and Kristina indicate the importance of physical beauty in attracting men and appealing to their desires, while Jasper indicates the social benefit that may come from marrying the princess. Using the female characters as a prize for the 'royal challenge,' combined with Marie's statement surrounding feminine beauty, provides an understanding of objectification taking place within the story, in which the women are bartered and married off without their consent. When asked what they might change about the story, Sarah stated, "[I would change it so that] the princesses could speak [and] so the princesses weren't chosen because right now they don't have a choice." Sarah chose to resist the current plot of the story and indicated that her least favourite part of the story was "when the princesses were told they couldn't speak." In doing so, Sarah actively resisted the messages within the story, offering a much more equitable ending to the tale, in which the princesses are not chosen by the winner of the challenge, and are given a voice and a choice.

Princesses in these stories, as well as many others, are seen enduring pain and suffering—particularly in *Beauty and the Beast* (Osborne & Pels, 1987), a traditional fairytale in which the main character remains passive in the hopes that if she is kind and gentle enough, the Beast will eventually change his abusive ways—until they can enter a life of perceived freedom with a Prince. Strong links can be made between these stories, as well as students' responses to them, to current accounts of sexism, sexual harassment, and women in abusive relationships (Olson, 2013). By opening up conversations with students about the stories that they read, and utilizing fairytales in the classroom as gateways for discussing gender, perhaps these arguably harmful and sexist notions can be challenged. While not the main focus of my study, an important component of my time in the classroom was encouraging dialogue in response to the books and during our time performing *The Paper Bag Princess*. After reading the fairytales and conducting the reading groups, the teacher and I utilized our time with the students in an attempt to challenge the problematic content of the stories as a group. After reading *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* (Helborough & Luraschi, 2008), for example, the teacher and I discussed with the students why the king might have wanted to lock up his daughters, which opened further conversations about how women are often silenced. The teacher's willingness to discuss these issues and challenge traditional understandings of gender within the fairytales is a testament to the openness, affability, and progressive nature of her classroom and pedagogy. Such moments of teaching and reflexivity provided a strong sense of negotiation and resistance within the classroom, and opened up the possibility for change.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this article demonstrate how children in this study understood traditional fairytales, including how they navigated a non-traditional story, as well as my questions and prompts that, at times, sought to disrupt the original plot. The children frequently directed these conversations to a place that made sense to them given their existing knowledge and understandings of the social world and gender order. As Davies (1989) has maintained, "children use their own experiences in the everyday world and their knowledge of other stories in relation both to characters and plot to make sense of the stories they hear" (p. 47). This study reveals that children's understandings of gender are part of a complex and relational process

where they actively take up the discourses available to them, particularly those that reflect their existing knowledge. Blaise (2005a) has additionally acknowledged, "children take an active part 'doing' gender by socially constructing meanings about femininities and masculinities from the gender discourses available to them in their everyday worlds" (p. 85). For instance, Jessica's reaction to, and interpretation of, *The Paper Bag Princess* underscores her ability to negotiate the content within cultural products, even though she did not do so in a 'progressive' manner. In this case, Jessica moved to a place that was in keeping with her own ideology and expectations of what she believed *should* have taken place in the story. This finding also highlights the importance of providing space for discussion—as even texts that may have been deemed 'feminist' such as *The Paper Bag Princess*—that can provide learning opportunities.

Although the majority of children in this study worked within existing gender boundaries that support normative understandings of traditional feminine and masculine roles and traits, it is important to note the moments of resistance and negotiation that also took place. Josh's willingness to perform femininity and enter the female domain stresses the value of play and performance. By including a classroom production of *The Paper Bag Princess* as part of my data collection, the students were offered an opportunity to adhere to, or challenge, existing gender boundaries (both their own and their peers'). Wohlwend (2012), referring to a different kind of 'play,' (as opposed to theatrical performance), stated, "through play, the children [create] their own versions of figured worlds where plots unfolded 'as if' boys could be princesses, stretching gender identity expectations for characters and players within imagined worlds" (p. 607). Wohlwend has additionally suggested that by allowing space in the classroom for open engagement and interpretation of cultural texts, children are permitted the opportunity to take up discourses in new and exciting ways. From these glimpses of learning and interplay in the classroom, there is evidence of reproduction of gender roles and expectations along with a sense of agency where children choose to actively take up a variety of subject positions.

Through an exploration of how gender discourses in traditional fairytales are taken up by young children, this article exposes the reiterative power of discourses at play in serving to construct certain normative understandings of the existing gender order. I suggest that the gendered content within children's traditional fairytales proffers a powerful tool for opening up discussions of gender with young children. Children are active participants in their learning and are constantly working through a process of interpretation and negotiation when interacting with the information presented to them, emphasizing that they are anything but passive learners. The children's ability in this study to actively construct and resist gendered messages within traditional fairytales underscores the importance of recognizing how students interact with material, rather than simply viewing learning as a linear, one-dimensional process. This study additionally demonstrates the potential for educators to create an environment through which children are afforded the freedom to engage with gendered messages.

The overall sentiment throughout this study is that there is profound potential to dispel the prevailing gender rhetoric in the classroom and to effect meaningful change. Using both well-known fairytales and *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch & Martchenko, 1980), this study investigated children's preconceived expectations of gender and provided a useful way to observe how the children took up the messages within the stories through their own understandings and experiences. This article highlights how students' engagement with fairytales can serve to reflect pervasive and dominant understandings of the existing gender order, and how discussions of these stories also provided the opportunity for negotiation and mediation of these messages. The responses from grade one and two students (as illustrated

within this article) indicate that traditional understandings of gender are held at a very young age and it is crucial that educators create opportunities within the classroom to explore and challenge normative gender with their students, promoting greater inclusivity and acceptance of gender variance within the classroom.

It is my hope that results of this study may provide the impetus for seeking pedagogical innovation by way of opening up discussions of books read in the classroom, or the incorporation of theatrical performance as a means to explore and test gender boundaries. As well, I suggest the use of 'anti-oppressive' children's literature⁴ in schools, such as storybooks that hold positive portrayals of gender non-conformity. The use of this particular genre may challenge and disrupt current, pervasive understandings of gender by introducing new narratives and plotlines that are noticeably absent in children's traditional fairytales. Implementing anti-oppressive children's literature may additionally offer young readers the opportunity to "question restrictive social systems, think more inclusively about gender expression and identity, and apply this knowledge to other experiences" (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013, p. 83).

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Notes

- 1 The research presented in this article is from my undergraduate Honours thesis (Paterson, 2013) at Mount Allison University.
- 2 KP indicates researcher.
- 3 Participants' names have been changed.
- 4 My recent work has explored how children make sense of 'anti-oppressive' children's literature in the elementary school classroom, and how these books may be useful in opening up discussions of gender and sexual diversity with young students (see Paterson, 2015).

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