"Boys don't wear dresses!": Deconstructing gender representations in an elementary school classroom

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Abstract: Critical literacy pedagogy suggests that by developing skills of questioning, critiquing, and inquiring, students are able to apply a critical perspective to their lives in order to recognize and actively deconstruct socially developed norms present in the world around them. A critical literacy perspective provides a lens to address social justice issues, such as those pertaining to gender, gender representation, gendered norms, and identity. This paper presents action research conducted in my all-girls elementary school classroom and my students' interactions with identity and the gender representations presented in the picturebook "10,000 Dresses" (Ewert, 2008), in which a transgendered boy dreams about wearing beautiful dresses. The pedagogy of critical literacy was applied during the discussions and activities documented. By using critical literacy pedagogy during the discussions and activities, the students' understandings of gender were challenged, deconstructed, and reconstructed.

Keywords: Critical Literacy, Picture Books, Gender, Identity

Introduction

Members of the dominant majority in society participate in the maintenance and production of socially constructed norms, which come to be taken for granted and unquestioned. Ideologies pertaining to wealth, beauty, culture, and gender are presented to us daily, though often subtly, in the media, in books, and through peers. While these norms are not necessarily right or wrong, it is important to recognize and question them, and be empowered to reposition ourselves if necessary. Giroux (1997) stated that "ideologies can be either coherent or contradictory; they can function within the spheres of both consciousness and unconsciousness; and finally, they can exist at a level of critical discourse as well as within the sphere of taken-for-granted lived experience" (p. 75).

As a teacher in an all-girls private school in a large, metropolitan city in western Canada, I often have the opportunity to witness children express their beliefs about gender. Frequently, I hear my students making comments that show their understandings of what it means 'to be a boy' or 'to be a girl.' Such comments can be as simple as "you skip like a boy!" or "I saw a boy crying on the weekend!" Many adults would see these comments as innocent and not consider the implications behind what was said; however, these comments speak more broadly to my students' socially constructed beliefs about gender and how gender should be played out.

The students I am presenting in this paper were 7 years old at the time of the study, and they showed very well developed ideologies about gender and particular ways of presenting their gendered identities. This concerned me, particularly as we were learning in a single-sex environment. I wondered whether my students felt compelled to behave in a way that they felt was 'like a girl,' and if they were subconsciously constrained by this social norm. Additionally, many of my students had limited exposure to boys other than their male siblings. How realistic were the understandings of male identities to these girls? How did they learn or decide what 'girls do' and 'what boys do'? I challenged myself to act on comments my students made, and act on issues they raised to help them develop skills for recognizing socially constructed norms related to gender and identity. Using a critical literacy framework and the picturebook *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008), I engaged the students in a critical discussion and related activities to help them deconstruct gender norms.[1]

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is the act of consciously deconstructing texts in order to identify the inherent social constructions found in language.[2] Traditionally, the term *literacy* has been viewed simply as the ability to read or write. Searle (1993) stated that many educators and schools approach literacy education simply as "teaching children to read and write" (p. 169), and that generally speaking, it is still viewed as "a routine, unpolitical, non-consciousness-raising

[1] All identifying information has been removed, and all names presented in this action research are pseudonyms or generic titles to ensure anonymity.
[2] Note that I am using a broad, critical theory understanding of "text" that goes beyond the printed word to include other expressive mediums and languages (art, film, even conversations). For Vasquez (2010), for example, everything around us is a text that can be deconstructed and reconstructed.

process, just a phase of learning" (p. 167). Comber, Thomson and Wells (2001) added to this, and stated that when introducing the idea of literacy as being *critical*, "[s]chool versions of critical literacy have tended to emphasize the importance of text-analytic work or critical practices" (p. 453).

Critical literacy theory is not simply a set of skills, knowledge, or the ability to read, write, and develop aural skills (Giroux, 1993). Many theorists (Gee, 1992; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Vasquez, 2010) have stated that critical literacy practices involve a critical reading of the world, and that the world is a text intended to be read, because it is not created neutrally. Therefore, critical literacy involves actively de- or re-constructing socially developed beliefs, and renegotiating power hierarchies embedded in language. In relation to the action research undertaken in my classroom, I worked with my students towards deconstructing their understanding of what it meant to be a boy or a girl, to discover where they had learned these beliefs, and to question the power behind the labels 'boy' and 'girl.' Finally, we discussed how words can be used as a means of self-empowerment.

Critical literacy in the primary school classroom

How does critical literacy theory translate into practice with young students in an elementary school classroom? Vasquez (2004), a teacher-researcher, suggested that a critical approach to teaching deliberately attempts to expose inequalities in our society and thus raises and deconstructs social justice issues related to culture, gender, poverty, and class. Similarly, Aaron et al. (2006) stated that applying a critical perspective to literacy "allows students and teachers to make their own meanings of the world and to consider themselves and their identities in relationships to larger social, political, cultural and historical factors around them" (p. 13). Therefore, within an elementary school classroom context, a critical literacy framework could help marginalized students become empowered as they develop a repertoire of words and practices for deconstructing texts. Furthermore, classroom structures, which perpetuate undemocratic life, can be transformed.

Before describing the action research project that I did, it is necessary to note that my students were familiar with questions that could be used to deconstruct images and storylines, such as "Whose perspective is being told in the story?" and "How would you change the story?" More importantly, the students had been working on using a critical lens to see how females were portrayed in literature and everyday texts. Theories of critical literacy suggest that texts used for analysis and deconstruction need to be authentic and relevant to the children in order for a meaningful and critical discussion to occur.

Action Research Model

Action research in the classroom is undertaken by teachers for themselves; it is not imposed on them by someone else. According to Mills (2003), action research engages teachers in a four-step process:

1. Identify the area of focus.
2. Collect data.
3. Analyze and interpret data.
4. Develop an action plan (p. 5).

Rapoport's (1970) influential definition of action research explained that the approach "aims to contribute to both the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework" (p. 499). Additionally, action research has the potential to be a powerful agent of educational change. The goals of action research should be improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved (Mills, 2003), and to help the individual to improve or refine his or her actions (Sagor, 2000).

In this action research study, I was working with my students to help them deconstruct their current understandings of gender characteristics, to help them understand that gendered norms are socially constructed, and to help them reconstruct these beliefs through language (e.g., using words and phrases, such as "boys can cry" or "it's okay for girls to have short hair"). In the examples provided, carefully selected picturebooks were used to launch a discussion, which I actively facilitated. I should note that the one word spelling of the term 'picturebook(s)' has been chosen purposefully to highlight the integration of both image and word in order to convey meaning (Nikolajeva, 2003; Nodelman, 1988; Sipe, 2006). A picturebook requires the reader to make meaning from both modes of communication, without emphasis of one mode over the other.

Grade 2: Classroom Background

The grade two class I was teaching had 18 female students, aged 7 to 8 years old. The majority of the students came from families of higher socio-economic status, and were paying an annual tuition fee of $19,000. Most of the students' parents had attended university, and many had graduate or post-graduate degrees. Fewer than half of the students had brothers, suggesting that those who did not have a brother developed their understanding of being a 'boy' from other sources, such as fathers, uncles, or male cousins.

During the time of this action research project, my students were working on making inferences by reading the images of wordless picturebooks. One such book was *Leaf* (2009) by S. M. King. The book presents a simple story of a child planting a seed. Throughout the book, students shared and discussed their interpretation of the story.

> *Student 1:* The girl planted the seed, and it's sprouting out of her head!

Although the student inferred the main character was a girl, the character presented was in fact a boy who happened to have longer, scruffy hair. This comment led me to ask whether or not the other students in the class also thought it was a girl and what made them think so.

> *Teacher:* Oh, I noticed you said it was a girl. How did you infer that?
>
> *Student 1:* She's got long hair.
>
> *Student 2:* Yeah, and she's gardening. Gardening is usually something girls do.
>
> *Teacher:* Are there any other clues telling you the child is a girl?
>
> *Student 1:* She's wearing a green shirt. Our tunic is green [in reference to their uniform].

This initial, spontaneous dialogue presented the students' strongly developed ideas of the gendered characteristics of girls, including their interests, behaviours, and appearance. The exchange led me to act on these beliefs by presenting them with a picturebook the next day that would challenge their current understandings of socially constructed gender stereotypes.

10,000 Dresses

Vasquez (2004) stated that as teachers, we need to create space for students to discuss social justice issues by deliberately exposing inequities in society. The conversation I had with my students the previous day suggested that these girls already had strongly developed ideologies about "being a girl": interests (such as gardening), colours associated with being a girl (green, like on their uniform), and overall appearance (the character's long hair). The conversation revealed their understandings of gender, and I felt it was pertinent to further discuss and deconstruct these socially constructed norms.

It is important to note that I had hesitations about reading the book *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008) with my class because I was not sure the story of a transgendered child would be appropriate for my 7-year-old students. The book challenges common beliefs about gender, and I wondered whether my principal would support me in reading such literature, or whether my students' parents would be unhappy with my choice. Nevertheless, I felt that my initial instinct of "it's too much for a 7-year-old" was part of the reason I needed to engage in this discussion. I also believe that children are capable of discussing sophisticated topics with an adult facilitator.

Data Collection and Analysis: Pre-Reading of 10,000 Dresses

Careful reflection on the discussion that evolved while reading *Leaf* (King, 2009) helped me to develop a lesson that I thought would allow for an organic conversation to take place. The lesson I planned also created an opportunity to question beliefs about gender and introduce my students to the notion that beliefs are socially constructed. Before reading or even showing my students the book, I asked them to individually complete an O-W-I (Observe, Wonder, Infer) chart. An O-W-I chart is a pre-reading activity the student had done before when learning to make inferences. Above the chart was a picture of Bailey, the protagonist of the book, wearing a beautiful crystal ball gown. When they saw the picture, the students immediately had burning questions:

Student 1: Why does this girl have short hair?

Student 2: Is this a boy or a girl?

These initial questions led me to believe that their understandings of gendered identities were already being challenged. I asked my students to complete the chart before we read the story. I did not answer any of their questions or guide them in completing the chart; rather, I used this as an opportunity to determine the lens they were approaching the book with, and how their understanding of socially constructed norms challenged the picture I showed them. I documented the students' spoken comments on my laptop as they were completing the chart.

Analysis of their individual O-W-I charts confirmed that this book would certainly challenge their beliefs about gender. Their written comments showed which of these socially-constructed norms most challenged their current beliefs. I noticed a dominant theme in all the students' work; namely, that the short hair (which they typically associated with being a boy) conflicted with the beautiful dress (which they typically associated with being a girl). I categorized the responses into those who thought the child was a boy and those who thought the child was a girl.

Some of the written comments and questions from the O-W-I charts suggested to me that they concluded the child in the picture must be a girl because she was wearing a dress, and that they were trying to make sense of why the child's hair was short:

"Does this girl have cancer?"

"Is her hair pulled back in a bun?"

"I think she got a haircut."

"It's a girl with short hair. Maybe she's going to a party because she's wearing a dress."

The protagonist's clothing choice seemed to be the predominant indicator to these students of the child's gender, and they were therefore attempting to justify the reason for the child having short hair. Several students even coloured longer hair onto the picture, further stressing their socially-constructed belief that girls have long hair.

Other students inferred that the protagonist was a boy, likely due to the short hair, but questioned why the boy would be wearing what they considered to be girls' clothing, or justified why they believed the protagonist to be a boy.

"I think he's a boy, because he has spikey hair."

"I infer he is crazy, because boys do not wear DRESSES!"

"I infer the boy is trying to be a girl."

"Maybe he's a secret spy and he's in his secret spy costume."

"Maybe the boy wants to try out a girl's dress."

"[I think he's wearing a dress] because maybe he's on stage and he is going to perform?"

These responses are a clear example of individuals' positionality as readers (Vasquez, 2010). That is, readers interpret texts from a particular position; therefore, readings are never neutral. Past experiences inform the way one reads the social constructions of the world, and students need to be taught how to interrogate or challenge their own positionalities and their own readings. Evidently, my students were bringing in their own past experiences into reading this image. Their biases towards gender identities would guide me in facilitating the critical discussion while reading the book.

Data Collection and Analysis: Reading of 10,000 Dresses

My students were very keen to start reading the book. I had them verbally share some of the things they brainstormed during the O-W-I chart exercise, and asked them to keep the ideas they had in their mind while reading. During the discussion, I had my laptop open and documented their comments in a simple document, in order to later look for salient ideas that emerged and categorize them.

The initial pages of the story reads "Every night Bailey dreamed about dresses ... [w]hen Bailey woke up, she went to find her Mother" (Ewert, 2008, pp. 2-3, 8). These pages caused two reactions among my students: some students said that they knew she was a girl, and that they were right in their inferences. Another student made the following comment:

> *Student 4:* Ms. Birner, would you please stop saying "she"? It's driving me nuts!
>
> *Teacher:* What do you mean?
>
> *Student 4:* Why do you keep saying 'she' when it's a guy?
>
> *Teacher:* Well, that's what the book reads! It says "she"!
>
> *Student 4:* What?!

Evidently, this student had come to the conclusion that the character was a boy, and was not expecting the book to read "she."

The next few pages of the picturebook show Bailey awake. Bailey expresses her dreams to her mom, who responds by saying, "Bailey, what are you talking about? You're a boy. Boys don't wear dresses!" This sentence left my students silenced at first, and then they became confused about the fact that Bailey identified herself as a girl, even though she was biologically a boy. The class erupted in discussion and were asking questions amongst themselves. I used this moment to ask them why they thought the author wrote 'she" and 'her,' when Bailey was actually a boy.

> *Student:* Maybe the author wrote 'she' because the author wants us to know how much Bailey feels like a girl, even though she's a boy!

Throughout the book, I facilitated a critical dialogue about where Bailey's family (or where anyone) got the idea that boys should not wear dresses, and how we have come to believe that boys should behave a certain way. I pushed them further and asked them where their own ideas about being a boy or a girl came from, and as girls, were there things that they like or do that were not presented in this book:

> *Student 1:* Yes, I'm a girl, and I don't even like dresses.
>
> *Student 2:* Yeah, and Mrs. Henderson (the school's principal) is a girl and she has short hair. And that's okay!

Data Collection and Analysis: Post-Reading of 10,000 Dresses

This picturebook helped my students empathize with non-dominant groups who do not fit in with socially-constructed norms. It appears that it also helped them recognize that there is not necessarily a correct or incorrect way to play out gender identity. However, it was easy for them to interpret Bailey's family as being antagonistic. I wanted my students to consider the multiple perspectives presented in the book: why was Bailey's family so resistant to her fondness of dresses? Why were they so set on discouraging Bailey from identifying with stereotypically female things? My students grappled with these questions, and shared the following ideas:

> *Student 1:* [Bailey's father] was embarrassed, because he thinks boys shouldn't be wearing dresses. But I have a friend who is a boy, and he likes pink. That is sort of the same thing.
>
> *Student 2:* He wants his son to grow up big and strong, and wants his son to believe girls are weak.
>
> *Student 3:* He wants girls to like his son [and they won't if he wears dresses].
>
> *Student 5:* Maybe he's worried and wants to protect his son because he doesn't want him to be bullied when he gets older.

Despite feeling empathy for Bailey not being accepted by her family for who she is, these comments suggest that the students realize that the father has been conditioned into thinking a certain way.

Action Research Findings

The comments, work samples, and questions my students had while reading *Leaf* and *10,000 Dresses* suggested that they have very strongly developed ideas about gender, and that young children are heavily influenced by dominant social norms presented to them. The powerful statement that Bailey's mother made in response to his desire to have a dress "[y]ou're a boy. Boys don't wear dresses" was coincidentally exactly what one student wrote on her O-W-I chart prior to reading the book. This suggests that society is conditioned to follow dominant social norms, and that words evoke certain beliefs. My students were developing the understanding that there is power behind language; for instance, there is a certain level of meaning and power associated with the terms 'boy' and 'girl.' Language is used to shape our understandings of the social issues within our community, and the manner in which we use language to talk about social issues connects to access to power (Vasquez, 2010).

Development and Future Implications

Vasquez (2007), a teacher-researcher who works with young children in the field of critical literacy education, commented that she is frequently asked about young children's ability to engage in issues pertaining to social justice or equity. She stated that children consistently prove that they are not only capable, but willing to participate in challenging conversations around hard topics. My experience with my students echoed her comments; my students demonstrated both a willingness and ability to engage in a sophisticated conversation.

This action research reinforced how important it is that students learn to use language and words as tools to deconstruct gender binaries. It is important to ensure gendered norms are not further enforced in school environments and for children to realize that there are many ways to play out gender. Having the language skills to interrogate dominant societal norms is empowering, because gendered norms are at their most limiting when they are unexamined. Teachers can contribute to this goal by ensuring students have the language abilities to recognize, deconstruct, and reconstruct ideologies they encounter, and by giving students opportunities to explore activities that are not normed as for their gender (e.g., boys having the option to try ballet or cooking, and girls to use coding software or woodwork). Although I currently teach in a single-sex environment, comments pertaining to gendered norms could arise in any school community. As educators, we need to be aware of these comments, and use them as opportunities to expose inequalities in our society. Using a critical literacy framework could help marginalized students become empowered by helping them recognize that words such as 'boy' or 'girl' are loaded with meaning constructed by society, and that they should not necessarily determine how they identify themselves.

Another area for investigation would be to explore my students' beliefs about girls identifying as boys. Books such as *Princess Smartypants* (Cole, 1997) or *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980) could be a starting point for these critical discussions. Additionally, further action research into how critical literacy frameworks can be used in the classroom to deconstruct gender stereotypes is necessary. Teachers using a critical literacy approach are encouraged to share their work with their colleagues and if possible, other teachers and researchers. Through this sharing process, both within and beyond the school context, others can learn how this teaching pedagogy can have a positive impact on student learning and student empowerment.

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