Princesses and Pirates
Complexities in Gender Identity
By Kim Atkinson

One day there was an evil stepmother and there was a cottage and there was 4 princesses and there was a castle. Then they went to their cabinet where they had treasure. And then the evil stepmother tied up the 4 princesses and then they escaped deep deep in the forest. Then the evil stepmother goed in her van and she wanted to get the princesses out of the forest. And then all of the princesses walked home and then they went in the princess car and drove to the mall. And then the princesses after they went shopping and then they catched up with the evil stepmother and then they got her out of the van and throwed her in the garbage. The evil stepmother got out of the garbage and she pulled the 4 princesses and took them to their house then tied them up. They got untied and danced with the prince. Then after the ball they throwed the evil stepmother in the garbage again and they lived happily ever after.

This story was dictated to me by 4 four year-old girls in my preschool class. I have been hearing stories like this for months, watching as the girls drape themselves in shiny fabric, don lace and high heels and dramatize princess tales. Princesses are clearly an important, even necessary part of their play, and I need to listen more closely. I decide to document images and words of the 'princesses' as way of focusing, observing, and questioning the play. Through the use of pedagogical narration I hope to deepen my understanding of what princesses mean to these girls, to broaden the conversation about princesses, and to further support the play.

I suggest to the girls that they dress up and act out their princess story and they enthusiastically agree. One girl takes on the evil stepmother role and is deliciously evil, while the others are regal princesses. They act out the story in front of the rest of the 4 year-olds. When the performance concludes, Lance and Colin inform me that the story needs pirates, and they add to the narrative.

Pirates stole the treasure from the princesses and took it to their castle. They hid it. Then they (the pirates) went to a special castle and they hided the treasure and then the pirates were watching because they were in the castle. They stole the treasure. They took the treasure to their boat. They fighted the princesses with a sword.

We act out the story again and again. More boys declare themselves pirates, more girls become princesses, until, within a group of 18 children, 15 are now part of the story. It is played out with great vigor, and roles are clear- girls are princesses and evil stepmothers who go shopping, dance and drive vans, while boys are pirates who use swords ride boats, and steal treasure. They are definitely not princes. Dramatic roles are empowering; princesses walk with dignity and pirates scowl menacingly.

As a student of feminism in the 1970's, I am puzzled and frustrated by this strict adherence to stereotypes. In my training as a primary teacher I was taught that we merely needed to provide a non-sexist environment and model non-traditional gender roles. Children were assumed to 'absorb' the social environment in which they lived, and unquestioningly acquire identity as it was presented to them. So it followed that by changing the physical and social environment, we could reshape how children learned gender. But, as Hughes and MacNaughton (2001) so aptly note "Despite nearly 40 years of such advice, early childhood classroom teachers and parents remain perplexed about why so many young children still actively seek and construct traditionally gendered ways of being, despite adults' efforts to offer alternatives" (p. 114)

As the play continues to evolve I want to challenge the children to see if their 'understanding' of gender is different than their 'acting' of gender. I gather them together and ask "What do princesses do?" What do pirates do?"

Princesses	Pirates
Live in a castle Wear pretty dresses Put on jewelry Go in carriages Dance with the prince Wear pretty shoes Put on make up Walk daintily Wear crowns	Steal money Fight Live on a pirate boat (No! They live under the ship and have creaky doors and live inside there) Wear ugly shoes and belts Run faster than anything Have swords Wear torn clothes

The roles are clear, the group has no difficulty coming to agreement. As Anne Hass Dyson (1997) observes, "such taken for granted knowledge allows children to negotiate a shared world, in which each player has a clear identity, a place among others." Are clear roles necessary to maintain the 'community of players' ?

I show the pedagogical narration to some of the parents, all are struck by the clear gender roles. They relate similar tales of girls wanting to "go to the mall" as a treat, even though that is not part of their family values. Disney is seen as a big influence, but I wonder at the simplicity of this assumption. There are many books about female pirates, why do girls not take on the role? Popular culture offers alternatives to gender stereotypes; there are non-aggressive males, as well as powerful females, and some princesses are more complex. Are children rejecting these less traditional images? Or is 'acting out gender' a way of trying on a role, testing out meaning?

I want to give voice to alternate ways of being, to open up other possibilities, to make room for the "other." So I ask:

Kim: Are pirates good or bad?

Lance: They're good and sometimes bad.
Aiden: They're good and bad.
Luke: They're only bad.
Lance: Pretend life and real life. The pirates are pretend life, but in far water.
Felicity: (clearly and with great authority) Actually real pirates live on the ocean and every one is bad.
Luke: They're only bad, but if they're not bad, then they're good.
Chris: There were pirates in the olden days. They were born in the olden days.

Kim: What about evil stepmothers, are they always evil?

Nadine: Evil means evil and betrayed.
Astia: Maybe she doesn't like princesses cause they always run away from her.
Kurtis: Because they're evil and they don't like people well.

Kim: 'Are princesses always good? What about pirates?'

Princesses are always good.
Pirates are bad.
There are good ones and bad ones!
The nice ones help the princesses. And boys and girls.
No they don't!
Nice pirates don't yell.
Pirates fight princesses.

Kim: Do princesses fight?

Princesses are never mean.
Sometimes princesses fight, when the dragon comes.
Sometimes princesses fight, but not always. Sometimes they have swords.
They fight pirates and dragons only (disagreement on this point, some maintain that princesses never fight.)

Kim: Do pirates dance?
NO!
Only to pirate music.

Kim: Do pirates wear jewelry?
Pirates only put on ugly earrings.

Luke: Mostly boys are just pirates. Girls just dress up as pirates, they put sand on their face because they're girls and if they don't dress up as boys that's against the law.

These conversations are filled with contradicting views and opinions. The identities of princesses and pirates is clearly complex, far more complex than how the roles are acted in the play. The evil stepmother is viewed with some compassion, there may be reasons for her evil-ness. Princesses may in fact fight, and pirates may have a good side to them. But there also is an implicit understanding that pirates are male, and girl pirates are imposters. The children are fusing their understanding of good/evil and princesses/pirates with understandings of their experiences. Social complexities on the playground, in their families, in their world influence and inform their view of gendered images. It does appear that children understand gender differently than they act it.

The children are eager to perform the play a few times a week, and the momentum grows each time. The role of the evil stepmother has been abandoned. All the girls are princesses. When I ask if anyone would like to be the evil stepmother, the response is ‘she’s invisible’, and that seems to satisfy everyone. Then one day Kurtis said he would take on the role, and chose as his costume a pair of high heels. No child comments on his new role, and Kurtis is happily evil.

Mada, formerly the evil stepmother and then a staunch princess, one day tells me a shark is needed. She assumes the role ferociously for a short while, and then reverts back to being a princess. However the addition of the shark creates a new opening for the boys. Once Mada is done being the shark, the boys take it over. The next time we act out the play there are no pirates, just sharks. And thus a space opens up and Felicity becomes a pirate. She takes on the role with relish, and no child comments on this new development. I find it fascinating that after all my unsuccessful attempts to challenge the children to act outside of their predetermined roles, it is the children themselves who create a space for the "other."

Poststructural theorists suggest that children construct identities through interaction with the social world (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005). “We learn identity through several interrelated theatrical processes: telling stories, playing roles, critiquing our performances and being critiqued

by others. We reshape our stories and our roles as we interact with others and with ourselves.” (MacNaughton 2000, p. 27). I wonder if the medium of the play is an opportunity for the children to take on a role that is commonly understood to them, try it, explore it, absorb the reactions and dialogue derived from it, test it out. What did they perceive of themselves in their roles? Perhaps they were gauging their performance and the performance of their peers, watching, evaluating. I suspect they were all carefully observing Felicity’s role as a pirate, and Kurtis’ role as evil stepmother, checking to see what the consequences might be to step out of the gender pattern. Did they, as Gilligan says, define themselves “by gaining voice and perspective and known in the experience of engagement with others.”? (Gilligan, 1988, p.17 as cited in MacNaughton, 2000, p. 26)

I am filled with wonder at the children's sheer joy in acting together, "the experience of engagement with others". They reach shared understandings in fantasy play effortlessly. Enid Elliot (personal communication) says:

"Parts are established that are clear in order for the satisfying play with others. And creating community. I think that children do understand that there are complex roles for real people. But in order for a satisfactory development of community and pulling individuals into the group a broad and crude theme is agreed upon. We can challenge, but the joy of being together is more complex and more satisfying”.

Certainly a 'crude theme' is clear to everyone, is understood and accepted by everyone, and thus welcomes all into it. "The joy of being together" as community of players is evident. However within the constructs of the 'crude theme' are places for dialogue, for complexities. Children are not merely mimicking a movie or a book. They do not mutually agree to a predetermined narrative. Instead the play evolves, expands with a spirit of generosity. New characters are introduced and welcomed. Plot twists are suggested, songs are sung and accepted unquestioningly. One day a pirate is in tears because he doesn't like the song lyrics he contributed. Girls and boys are equally compassionate, solemnly reassuring the pirate that his lyrics will be left out. Evil stepmothers can be invisible, or a boy in heels. Every suggestion put

forth is accommodated. The play belongs to them all, and they all know it.

I have recognized that children's understanding of gender is far more nuanced than it appears at first. A simplistic view of learning gender by absorbing the social environment fails to explain the complexities evident in the children's play, and denies children's abilities as agents in their own learning. There are many contradicting messages in the childrens' world, and they negotiate their way with dialogue and interaction, by hearing and being heard. Our job as teachers and caregivers is to facilitate the dialogue, to question and to listen. We need to challenge our own assumptions and theirs, and to help create spaces for the 'other'

Using pedagogical narration as a tool for listening, for observing children as they construct knowledge has led me on a fascinating journey. What began as a story dictated by four girls grew into a play involving 18 children that continued energetically for six months. By reflecting on the words and images of the children, by sharing this with parents, children and colleagues, I became more attuned to the children, to how they might be thinking and learning. I was challenged to rethink my own theories of identity and gender, and to introduce provocations that would challenge the children's understanding of identity and gender. The thoughtful discussions, the questions, and the learning that arose for all involved was both unexpected and gratifying.

The more I listen to children, the more they are willing to share. From me they need a loose structure, an organizational hand, a repository of their ideas, and they can do the rest. The more competent I believe them to be, the more competent they are. No curriculum, theme or project that I bring to the children could compare with what the children bring to me. They have shown me creativity, sensitivity, humour, courage, a spirit of willingness to work together, diligence to pursue a project for months, and a feistiness to be heard. I am , as usual, humbled by them.

References

Dyson, A. H. (1997). Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy. New York: Teachers College Press.

Hughes, P., & Mac Naughton, G. (2001). Fractured or Manufractured: Gendered Identities and Culture in the Early Years. In S. Grieshaber & G. S. Cannella (Eds.), Embracing identities in early childhood education diversity and possibilities (pp. 114-131). New York: Teachers College Press.

MacNaughton, G. (2000). Rethinking gender in early childhood education. London: Paul Chapman.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Pence, A. (2005). The reconceptualizing movement in Canadian early childhood education, care and development. In V. Pacini-Ketchabaw & A. Pence (Eds.),Canadian early childhood education: Broadening and deepening discussions of quality (pp. 5-20). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Child Care Federation.