

# Exploring Gender Identity in Early Childhood through Story Dictation and Dramatization

*Jeff Daitsman's thorough data collection and sensitive analysis show the multivocal experiences and perspectives of boys and girls in their story dictation and dramatization. His study highlights the central role of narrative in play and how it can be a rich venue to explore the ideas of difference and similarity, particularly relating to gender preferences and expression. Daitsman shows how the children's stories reveal the influence of cultural stereotypes yet harbor the potential to move beyond rigid gender boundaries as well. At a time when the art of storytelling and of stories has diminished in early childhood education, Daitsman's piece reminds us of the power of story to empower children to honor both their own voices and those of their peers.*

—Daniel Meier

**It is story time and the children are seated around a rug. The boys are sitting to my left and the girls are sitting to my right. It is time to dramatize Lionel's story, "Batman." As I tell the children that Lionel will be Spiderman in his story Mandy breaks in, speaking for all of the girls. "We don't wanna be in Batman."**

**S**tory dictation is an enriching literacy activity, and opens up a world of insight for both teacher and children (Daitsman 2009). I noticed that when my preschool students dictated and dramatized stories in the classroom they tended to use gender stereotypes and segregate themselves by gender. I became interested in helping the children move past their stereotypes and in encouraging gender mixing. I discovered that the process of children telling stories can be a medium for their expression of gender identity and social relationships in the classroom. During an 18-month period, I collected data on children's dictated and dramatized stories, deeply examining gender content and characterization. I analyzed discussions about gender roles, observed how children assigned roles in story drama, and reflected on my position as teacher and guide in the story dictation and drama process.



Courtesy of the author

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Jeff Daitsman

From a very early age children attempt to categorize the world around them. One of the most obvious ways that they are able to categorize people is by gender. “Children have absorbed gender stereotyping by the time they are two years old because the clothing and toys a baby is given are chosen by adults ‘with an eye toward gender’” (Flatter, as cited in Hinitz & Hewes 2011, 25–26). As they reach pre-school age, children begin to develop their sense of self in relation to others. Fine reveals that “even before they reach school, children can go well beyond the surface of gender associations and make inferences about nothing less than male and female inner nature itself” (2010, 224).

Couchenour and Chrisman state, “When boys or girls are overly concerned about gender-specific behavioral expectations, they may be unwilling to consider befriending a child of the opposite sex” (2011, 200). In the opening example the children have categorized themselves, sitting with the boys on one side and the girls on another. We also see, in Mandy, a further common attempt at categorization as she tries to define the type of play that girls will not engage in. I wanted to find out more about gender segregation at this early age and how my role as a teacher influenced this.

Estola suggests that “it is important that all play domains are not culturally divided into separate ‘boys’ or ‘girls’ games since this narrows children’s possibilities to develop their full potential” (2011, 48). Despite the fact that her kindergarten boys and girls preferred to be separated for activities, Paley discovered that, “Playing together makes the girls livelier and the boys more agreeable” (1984, 37). This is consistent with Vygotsky’s social-constructivist concept that “children are capable of doing much more in collective activity” (1978, 88). Given the strong role that collaborative play has in children’s development (Vygotsky 1978), I wanted to create an environment where boys and girls were more willing to play together.

Eckert & McConnell-Ginet indicate that “[w]ith differential treatment, boys and girls eventually learn to *be* different” (2003, 18) and de Groot Kim demonstrates how children can be “at a very early, impressionable age, exposed to gender-related messages in classrooms run by competent, caring, and conscientious teachers who seemed to be unaware of sending these messages” (2011, 245). Jacobson reveals that teachers “have the power to reinforce gender stereotypes or we can choose to abandon those stereotypes and develop more humane, just, and fulfilling ways of relating to one another. . . . Self-reflection, therefore, is key to unlearning systems and traditions that are no longer useful for us and that cause discrimination, social inequality, and injustice” (2011, 18). Given that children pick up on subtle environmental cues that lead them to prefer play with children of their own gender, I wanted to develop new strategies to encourage boys and girls to collaborate. I decided to use the process of story dictation and enactment to explore the children’s thinking about gender and help children expand their understanding of gender.



Courtesy of the author

## Methodology—collecting children’s stories

### Setting and Process

Our center featured four full-day preschool classrooms as well as an afternoon activity room for those children who did not nap. I conducted much of my research in this activity room, with children between the ages of 3 and 5. I kept a sign-up sheet on a convenient table for children who wanted to dictate a story. Paley describes storytelling as “play put into narrative form” (1990, 4). I used Paley’s ‘storytelling curriculum’ that consists of two interdependent activities. In the first, a child dictates his or her story to the teacher. In the second, the story is dramatized by the class” (Cooper 2005, 230). A colleague of mine who observed my classroom described our dramatization process as follows:

Everyone came to sit on the outside of the rug to act out the stories. Jeff sat in the chair. For each story he would first read off the list of characters in the story and then ask around the circle for volunteer actors (I was included). Usually the girls only wanted to take the girl roles and the boys only wanted to take the boy roles. One child volunteered whenever asked. Jeff would start reading the story verbatim, and as soon as a child recognized his/her part, she or he would jump up and act it out. There was no judgment by Jeff or the children about how the parts should be played. They all seemed to enjoy each other’s stories. (Junge 2009)



Courtesy of the author

I recorded each child’s story by hand as it was dictated, then read it back to the child afterward to see if he or she wanted to make any changes. I later read it to the class when we dramatized the story. At the end of the day I typed up each dictation, which I later returned to the children. I also made audio and video recordings of the story dictation and dramatization process.

I facilitated story dictation in other classrooms in the center as well, though usually without the dramatization component. After the first year of the project I also volunteered in a parent-run Very Young Authors (VYA) program at a nearby elementary school, with children in kindergarten through second grade. The majority of VYA participants had attended preschool at my center.

### Participants

During the year and a half of this project I worked with a total of 112 children, ranging in age from 33 months through second grade. Although the children were from multiethnic backgrounds, all stories were dictated in English.

- Afternoon Naptime Activity Room (ages 3–5): 71 children, 1,085 total stories.
- Other classrooms (ages 2–5): 42 children, 113 total stories.
- VYA (grades K–2): 20 children, 121 total stories.

## Analysis

Personal reflection was an integral part of my research process, and I made a regular practice of writing up my reflections at the end of each day, sometimes while listening to an audio recording of that day's story time. My reflections contained questions such as "Is there something I'm doing different this year to make it more acceptable to play roles of this type?" or comments like "I discovered today that children will pay attention to stories regardless of whether they seem to be actively listening or not," along with descriptions of the specific behaviors I noticed that drew these things to my attention.

I reread each story multiple times, reviewing the dictations and dramatizations in the preschool setting as many as five times. During these readings I analyzed the stories for gender themes and reviewed the gender roles the children chose to portray in the dramatizations. I also examined my audio and video data, which revealed insights into the children's gender construction as we occasionally discussed the stories during the dramatization process. I transcribed about a dozen of these recordings and looked for gender-related comments from the children that revealed what they believed to be "boy" or "girl" stories. I edited the video clips and then watched them with the children, paying close attention to their personal evaluations of the videos. I used this information to inform my understanding of how the children interpret gender in stories. In addition, I watched the complete videos on my own to see how the children responded to the stories, including not only the authors and players but those who turned down roles as well. Later I discussed my data with the children's regular classroom teachers, parent coordinators at the elementary school, the children's families, and my Reflective Early Childhood Educators' Social Seminar colleagues (RECESS 2009).

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### Findings: Discovering gender through story content and influences

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Together, the children and I experienced the medium of storytelling as a powerful vehicle to explore preconceived notions of gender. I found gender to be a social construct generated by overgeneralizations and assumptions.

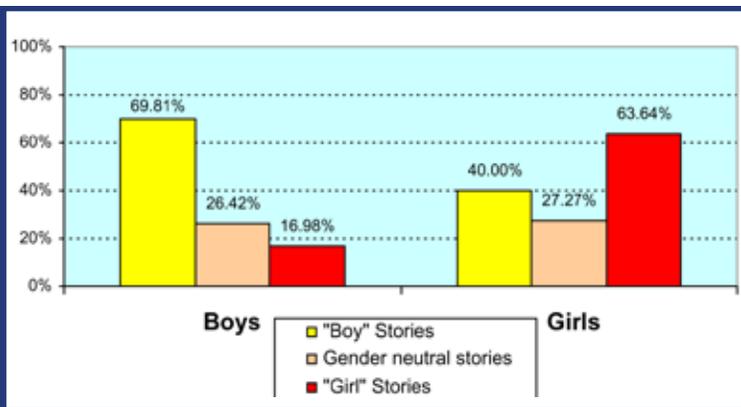
### The children's gender themes

While gendered patterns in the story dictations did appear, a significant number of children did not conform to stereotypical expressions of gender in their dictations. I allowed the children to define the characteristics by which I categorized "boy" and "girl" stories. According to the children, "girl" stories contain princesses and/or fairies, and "boy" stories contain combat and/or superheroes. Even though many children told stories with these themes, it was significant that slightly more than a third of the girls (36.36%) never dictated any "girl" stories, and slightly less than a third of the boys (30.19%) never dictated any "boy" stories. In fact, more than a quarter of children of both genders never dictated any stories that overtly pertained to either gender (See Figure 1).

According to the children, "girl" stories contain **princesses and/or fairies**, and "boy" stories contain **combat and/or superheroes**.

FIGURE 1.

Dictations  
by Gender  
of Author



I found that the children's early stories were "pregendered," meaning that the children had not yet developed obvious gender preferences. As 3-year-old Marcello's "School Bus" story indicates, such stories feature neither "boy" nor "girl" themes:

#### SCHOOL BUS

*My dog bite my ball. And then I go in the house. And then I play with girl again. And that's the end.*

This is consistent with Gadzikowski's findings that gender differences are "not likely to be especially noticeable when children first begin telling stories as two- and three-year-olds" (2007, 127). However, I found that the children in my study did not necessarily conform to her follow-up statement that "the differences are usually very significant by the time they're four or five" (127). My research showed that gender differentiation in stories is not necessarily cor-

related with age, but rather with experience.

The older children with less storytelling experience also tended to avoid gender themes in their early stories, as demonstrated by Marcello's older sister Elizabeth, who only dictated one story to me in preschool at age four. That story, along with her first nine stories in VYA her kindergarten year, were all gender-neutral. Her first "girl" story didn't appear until she was six years old and was very much influenced by that week's book, *When the Root Children Wake Up* (Wood & Olfers 2002), which features fairy characters:

*The magic spring fairies flew to pick some flowers. There was a festival and they wanted to bring the flowers. They waited for a long time and then they came home and took a long nap for the winter. After winter they woke again for the festival.*

When I looked at the data in Figure 1, I was somewhat surprised to find that girls were more flexible than boys in their gendered behavior. I discovered that this is typical of patterns found in other gender research (Bjorklund 2005, 382). Boldt believes this tendency is rooted in a male-dominated society where "To be a girl called a 'boy' often carries with it the promise of increased opportunities. But to be a boy associated with girls' interests and desires is construed as a step away from power and possibility" (1996, 119).

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## Stories and stereotypes

When princesses, fairies, combat, and superheroes first appeared in the children's stories, it was not always in keeping with what we might think of as typical "boy" and "girl" stereotypes. Certain stories can be viewed as "counterstereotypical," or in direct contradiction with common stereotypes. In fact, though some children vehemently insisted that superhero stories are always "boy" stories, the very first superhero story ever dictated to me came from a girl. It was 3-year-old Mary's third story, dictated around Halloween:

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### BATMAN'S STORY

*Once upon a time it has a Superman. And Batman killed him away. And then he put him in jail. He locked him up in a cage. And then he saw the pumpkin. And then a mouse come in a cage and a mouse come sneaking on. And then he fall down. And then he eat him up, saying, "Yummy lunch. Yummy lunch. Yummy yummy mouse lunch." And then the Batman locked him up and he started fight him up. And then he started to fight. And then a monster came and everyone go home. And then a dinosaur come with the monster. And then jump jump in a house in a roof. And then fall down and kid say, "Very scared." THE END.*

Early stories dictated by boys were also sometimes in keeping with "girl" themes. For instance, 3-year-old Cameron featured Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* in one of his stories:

### ARIEL AND ME

*Cameron was playing in the woods. And Ariel stopped by. And I jamming in the water. And I went out in the woods. And I told my Mommy. And I played in the water with Ariel. And I went to bed. And I played with Ariel again. And then went night-night. And I falled asleep again.*

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Although there also were many stories with no direct gender bias, the children often made gender-based assumptions about their peers' stories as they were dramatized. Two months after "Ariel and Me," Cameron dictated the following story:

### A KNIGHT

*Once upon a time there was a knight. And he woke up on the third morning. And he went to bed on 10. He woke up on 30. And he wrote all the books. And he knowed how to write. And he went to bed on 30. And he also did something too. And he did something good. THE END.*

Based on the context of the story and the style of Cameron's other stories during this period (which also contained bedtime themes), I later concluded that I had perhaps incorrectly transcribed "knight" for "night." However, when dramatizing this story, the children made the same assumption as I had, and began a fight sequence when the "knight" came on stage. Cameron decided at this point to alter his story and added, "And he fight," to his story after the first sentence. I transcribed this change as the children dramatized the addition and pretended to fight. On his next visit to my room two days later Cameron dictated his first superhero story:

## SUPERMAN

*Once upon a time there was Superman. Then Batman fight with Superman. And then they both went to bed. And they did something too. And Batman drive his motorcycle. And Superman fly. And he went to bed. Then he did something. And Batman came back. And he did something. THE END.*

Cameron continued to incorporate his nighttime theme in this story while at the same time primarily focusing on the male themes of superheroes and combat. He seemed motivated to create a new story more in line with the expectations of his peers. As Fine points out, “Peers’ responses appear to act as reminders to children that their behavior doesn’t follow gender rules” (2010, 218).

### Popular media

The impact of television and movies extends far beyond the screen, leaving behind images that influence the children’s storytelling in a gendered fashion. Popular media can have a tremendous effect on gender in children’s stories (Jones, 2002). Fine states that “social structure, media, and peers offer no shortage of information to children about masculinity and femininity” (2010, 216). In my preschool classroom, Craig’s stories tended to be very much superhero/combat oriented. His first grade sister Eira also tended to write “boy” stories at this time. By the time winter arrived Craig tended to center around a Star Wars theme (which he continued throughout the year) while Eira’s stories by this point were of the gender neutral variety. After watching *Star Wars* at home, 5-year-old Craig dictated the following story:

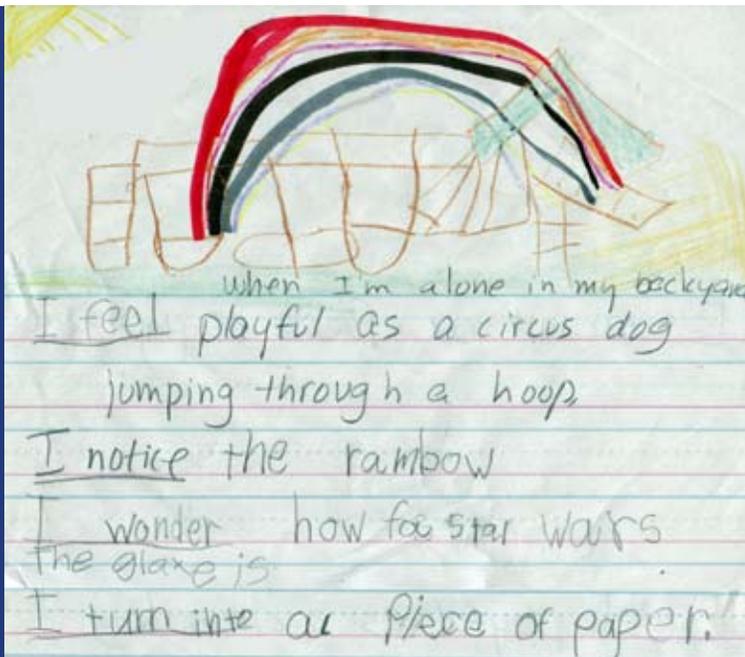
## STAR WARS GALAXY

*A long, long time ago far, far away was a galaxy. And in the galaxy there was 7 planets. One of them was filled with buildings. And one of the buildings was the biggest one. And in that one was where all the Jedi lives. The first Jedi had a blue light saber and the second Jedi had a purple light saber. And that was called the Jedi temple. THE END.*

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FIGURE 2.

Eira’s Poem



A week later, Eira (who had viewed the movie with Craig) wrote a poem with some elements similar to her brother’s story (see Figure 2).

When I read this poem to a group of Craig’s classmates they insisted that because of the incorporation of *Star Wars*, it had to have been written by a boy. They maintained this assertion even when I mentioned Eira’s name (whom they were familiar with from Craig).

Nor are boy themes the only ones that find their sources in popular media.

Regardless of gender, “Children adopt fashion, hairstyles, music, and other popular culture images easily” (Estola 2011, 54). As previously indicated, Mary’s early stories tended to center around “boy” themes. Occasionally she would include elements of popular culture; Mary particularly enjoyed reading books by Disney about Sleeping Beauty and other Disney princesses. The day after dictating a story entitled “Bad Guys Bad Guys” Mary dictated the following story:

#### SLEEPING BEAUTY SLEEPING BEAUTY

*Once upon a time it was Sleeping Beauty. And then he saw the castle. And then he go to sleep on the floor. And then he eat. And then he waked up. And then they play trucks. And then it play that. This one. And then it played trucks. And Elmo. And THE END.*

Sleeping Beauty became a common theme in Mary’s stories, and for two months thereafter she wouldn’t go more than three days without giving at least a passing mention to what had become her favorite princess. One week I decided to introduce alternative versions of Sleeping Beauty to the class (Keller 2003; Grimm & Grimm 1995; Osborne & Osborne 2005). The first day of that week her story was entitled “Princesses,” but did not include Sleeping Beauty, and for the remainder of the week she explored alternative themes (“Lion King,” “Cheetah,” “Doctor Octopus,” and “Rainbow”). Sleeping Beauty was not featured in any of Mary’s dictated stories on days we had books in the classroom that did not conform to the popular media image of Sleeping Beauty. However, after I had returned these alternative books to the neighborhood library, Sleeping Beauty returned as a prominent theme in Mary’s dictations, as indicated by the following story dictated a week later:

#### CINDERELLA

*Once upon a time Cinderella came to the ball but the bad girls broked her dress. And then and Sleeping Beauty came to Cinderella and then go to swimming pool. And then and angels camed and there was and then bunny rabbits. And then sheeps camed. And a rainbow came. And then giraffes camed. THE END*



Courtesy of Laura Lopez of Truman College

#### Gender debates

I found that engaging children in discussion about gender stereotypes in the context of the storytelling curriculum helped them negotiate identities and potentially expand their conceptions of gender. In 5-year-old Mandy’s comment “We don’t wanna be in Batman” I saw a common attempt at categorization as she tried to define limits on girls’ play. In addition, the question “Is it a boy or a girl?” arose almost daily when the gender of the author was different than that of the child being asked to portray a certain story character (though the question rarely arose when the author and actor were of the same gender).

My initial response was to ignore the question. I believed that if I let the children dwell on the issue it would reinforce gender discrimination as children turned down perfectly good roles because they weren’t the appropriate gender. But I now see that I discouraged potentially rich social discourse on the

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issue. I gradually learned to trust the children's group dynamics to inform their problem solving. As children's questions about story characters' gender persisted, I addressed the issue by turning to the authors of the stories for answers. More often than not, the author assigned the character the same gender as the child asking the question, regardless of the author's original intention.

However, at other times an author responded with the gender originally intended for the character. In these situations, many of the children once again surprised me by accepting the role regardless of its gender. While this sometimes led to conflict, it also stimulated valuable discussion of stereotypes. For example, as I have discussed in an earlier work (Daitsman 2009) "when Jeremy requested that he play Ariel [in Mary's story], Mary was very adamant that Ariel must be played by a girl. This started a debate in the classroom about whether boys should be allowed to play girls and girls be allowed to play boys. The children concluded that since it was just pretend, it was fine for boys and girls to take on opposite-sex roles in the stories" (116). As Serriere (2010) suggests, cross-gendered play can be "enticing . . . interesting, even tantalizing" to young children when the classroom environment allows and welcomes such play. Dramatizing the stories became a gateway for children to become more open-minded toward alternative gender constructs and gender mixing.

### Gender acceptance and children's problem solving

Many children stopped asking about characters' gender assignments and simply accepted a role. This was especially true of those children whose stories had progressed past the "pregendered" stage common to children who have yet to feature overt gender biases in their stories. Before they establish their own gender identities in their stories, children can explore identity vicariously through dramatizing other children's stories. Once these identities have been established firmly enough to create their own stories, children can then explore identity alternatives and potentially move beyond stereotypes.

The video from the 3- to 5-year-olds portraying Lionel's "Batman" story revealed how some children's desire for inclusion in their peers' stories overcame the conflicting strictures of gender segregation. Despite Mandy's earlier pronouncement that no girls would want to be in the story, Mary grinned widely at Lionel as she accepted the role of Batman. Here is a snippet from our drama, as I narrate:

#### BATMAN

*"Once upon a time there lived Spider-man." Lionel smiles as he looks at me for teacher approval and pats himself on the chest. I nod. Lionel nods back and comes onto the rug where he begins punching in random directions, saying "Psh" with each punch. "And then bad guys came." Cameron gets up and growls as*



Photos courtesy of the author

he holds two fists out toward Lionel, who begins focusing his punches in Cameron's direction while remaining on the opposite side of the rug. Cameron drops his left fist but continues to hold his right one out toward Lionel. "And then Batman came." Mary stands up and comes about halfway to Cameron's left side, then delivers one quick punch in his direction while saying "Psh." Cameron exaggeratedly falls to the ground. Mary says "Psh" as she delivers another quick pretend punch when he lands.

As previously indicated, by this point in the study Mary was a regular author of princess stories; her involvement in dramatizing Lionel's story provided her with the opportunity to portray a more active character than was usual for her. Mandy had raised Mary's awareness that Batman wasn't a "girl" character, yet Mary's desire to be part of the story took precedence over her standard preference for princess characters.

Cameron also demonstrated this sort of flexibility in the face of conflicting peer pressure. Over a month after Cameron had gotten into the habit of creating "boy" stories, he was observed accepting nonstereotypically representative roles, such as a baby and Sleeping Beauty. He also accepted stereotypical roles such as Jedi Knights and (in his own story) Jedi Luke. As is evident in previous anecdotes, not all of the children were as open-minded as Mary and Cameron about portraying characters of a different gender. Though not nearly as frequently as I had predicted, this sometimes resulted in disappointment for the author when not every role was cast. The challenge of obtaining actors for their stories led some children to remarkable problem-solving strategies. Meier reveals that "In learning to recognize and manipulate these scripts for acceptance by adults and inclusion by peers, the children experience a performative process of social acceptance and literary expression" (2000, 55). For example, as 4-year-old Andrew was about to start his story dictation, he paused and looked around the room, noting that there were more girls than boys. He then dictated his story to appeal to the group's demographics:

#### SUPERMAN AND SUPERGIRL

*Once upon a time a long time ago in Africa there was a man that knew how to fly. His name was Superman. He also had a friend of his, that name that she had was Supergirl. They always tried hard to save the world from mean. THE END.*

Andrew sensed he needed a female character to appeal to his mostly female audience. His story became more than just telling something that appealed to him. Our dramatization process raised his awareness that his story was a public work subject to criticism by his peers in the form of refusal to choose a role. When it came time to dramatize Andrew's story, no children turned down a role.

This was not an uncommon strategy, and it was employed twice as often by girls as by boys. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet refer to this process as *marking*, in which "female activities and behaviors emerge as *marked*—as reserved for a special subset of the population—while male activities and

behaviors emerge as *unmarked* or *normal*. . . . One way or another, most boys and girls learn that most boy things and boy activities are more highly valued than girl things and girl activities" (2003, 21). Four-year-old Lori discovered this strategy after she had dictated two princess stories that were unpopular with the boys. Every princess story of hers thereafter also included superheroes, such as this one:



Courtesy of Laura Lopez of Truman College

## PRINCESS

*Once upon a time there was a Belle. And then Snow White. And then came Batman. In a Speed Racer car. And then Father came. Then they walked back home. And there was a sister and a brother. Then there was balloons. We take them home. THE END.*

The mixed genre nature of this story, with the inclusion of both princesses and superheroes, made it one which happily engaged both male and female peers.

### Conclusions and next steps—Overcoming Gender Stereotypes

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My teacher research shows that teachers can help children construct more open views and actions about gender through the storytelling/dramatizing process, an engaging and collaborative activity that invites children into discussion about their beliefs. This process has caused me to reexamine what it means to be predisposed to gendered behavior. Much of what I observed has led me to the conclusion that such predispositions come from a culture which emphasizes gender differences. Yet children do not begin by making gendered stories. As demonstrated in early stories such as those created by siblings Marcello and Elizabeth, this is not merely a reflection of children's age, but rather a common thread throughout all of the children's early stories.

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I also realized that my attempts early in the study to prevent gender discrimination by ignoring the children's tendencies toward stereotyping succeeded only in polarizing them further. In fact, it was only upon welcoming these discussions that the children's interactions became more accepting of the opposite gender. The children still believed that stories must be categorized by gender, but open discussion and dramatization helped them recognize that such stereotyping isn't always necessary.

Based on the children's responses to each other and myself, I now see the value of changing how I envision and implement story dictation and dramatization. Denying the existence of stereotyped perceptions succeeds only in perpetuating and manifesting gender-based polarization of children's behavior. To help children become more open-minded, we must begin with ourselves as individuals and as teachers. As Boldt puts it, "it is the teachers' responsibility to challenge the narratives that confirm that gender means exclusion and to provide alternatives both in action and in story in our classrooms" (2011, 85). Teachers need to reflect carefully on how we may inadvertently promote gender stereotypes. We also need to listen to children and provide opportunities to play through and discuss the stereotypes they may hold. When stereotypes are brought to the level of conscious thought there is a greater chance that they can be overcome. By dictating, dramatizing, and discussing issues that may make us as teachers uncomfortable, we help children make discoveries and develop the social and language skills necessary to build a more inclusive community.

I plan to continue using the powerful inquiry elements of close observation, collecting data over time, audio and video recording, daily reflection and analysis, and formalizing data through writing in my future research on children's stories and gender construction. Since I did not analyze children's spontaneous play in this project, I plan to take a closer look at how gender stereotypes impact children's play beyond written and dictated and dramatized stories, examining how their gestures reveal a degree of implicit gender knowledge beyond what I examined in this study. I am also interested in examining how interactions between children and adults of varying genders and perspectives influence and are influenced by stereotypes.

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