Barbie princesses and dinosaur dragons: narration as a way of doing gender

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In this article, young children’s narration in words and pictures is discussed from a gender perspective. The article is based on a project in which eight pre-school children made their own books. In their stories, the children reused narratives picked up from different media, both traditional fairytales and popular cultural products. The reuse of those narratives gives children opportunities to explore gender positions in a playful way. The narratives produced by the children had, in certain respects, a gender-stereotyped content. The girls and the boys selected gender-specific themes for their stories. But in their stories, the children also made reinterpretations of traditional stories and gender patterns. The girls let the female characters play the active roles and the boys let their heroes become friends with the enemies. In this way, the children used the stories creatively, reshaping them to fit their own purposes.

Introduction

The prince asked: What are we going to eat?
The princess answered: We’re having soup.

These rejoinders are found under a picture of a prince and a princess sitting at a table, opposite each other. This is the last picture in a book produced by Gabriella, age 5:3. In the rejoinders, stereotypical gender positions are reproduced. It is the man who is served, while the woman is responsible for the menu. The personages in the narrative could have been taken from a traditional narrative genre—the fairytale. They could also have been fetched from children’s popular culture or from media accounts concerning real royalty. Through the reuse of different cultural stories in their own production of narratives, children have the opportunity to explore, in a playful way,

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different ways of being a woman or a man. In this article, the narratives produced by some children in a pre-school are analysed as a way of doing gender.

Children as co-constructors of a gendered childhood

During recent decades, we have seen increased interest in childhood as a social phenomenon. An interdisciplinary framework of childhood studies has been developed drawing on insights from anthropology, sociology, educational studies, geography and history. Within this framework, children are seen as active co-constructors of their own childhoods and of the surrounding society (see James & Prout, 1990; James et al., 1998). Alanen (2001) discusses ‘childing’ practices and states that when taking children’s standpoints, we will find different ways of being a child. This perspective implies that children act within a social and political context and that we acknowledge the plurality of childhood. Within childhood studies, age and generational order have been in focus. Gender has been recognized, but not emphasized (Alanen, 1994). Gender, however, is always present in children’s everyday experiences. Being a child also means being a girl or a boy, and children are in that way constructors of gendered childhoods. In this article, children’s ways of doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in a pre-school practice are analysed.

To explore in more detail how gender is constructed, we need to draw on feminist research. Davies (1993) claims that people actively take part in the production of their gender identities in their everyday lives. Language and other forms of expression are imbued with gender discourses. These discourses are connected to different subject positions, which people actively relate to when they take part in discursive practices. When people talk and act, they use the discourses as if they were their own. In that process ‘... gender is constituted through the discourses with which we speak and write ourselves into existence’ (Davies, 1993, p. 1)

A comparison of the way in which Davies (2003) and James et al. (1998) discuss this issue indicates important similarities in the way they describe children as actively involved in constructing their own childhoods and identities.

Davies (2003) considers that children born in our society become aware quite early that humanity is divided into two kinds of people—men and women. To be apprehended as acceptable members of society, children have to choose the ‘right’ sex and behave in a way seen as suitable for that sex. Children learn to think of masculinity or femininity as if it were an unchanging part of their personal and social selves.

In her own research, Davies (2003, first published 1989) shows that children have a great capacity to maintain the idea of a bipolar division. When Davies read feminist storybooks to four- and five-year-olds, the children used different strategies to maintain the bipolar pattern. They ignored deviances or reconstructed the stories so that they would fit into the expected frames. Deviant characters in the book, meant to give children alternative opportunities, were instead used by the children as contrasts to support the bipolarity and make it clearer. Davies also found that the children’s accounts and opinions were sometimes contradictory. Contrary to adults, children at this age have not yet learned that their accounts or their presentations of themselves
are expected to be unitary and free from contradictions. Furthermore, children who express ideas about gender while playing do not do so to provide accounts for gender-stereotype theories. Their ideas are evolving in relation to the play activity and the other persons involved.

As mentioned above, this article deals with a specific form of agency, namely children’s production of narratives. Mouritsen (1996) regards narration or story telling as a central part of children’s culture. When children play and create narratives, a variety of cultural products like children’s books, films and toys are used as the ‘raw material’. Children do not passively reproduce the material offered by the culture, they make interpretations and are, in that way, creative. The interpretative activities are not mainly individual, but instead collective processes in peer groups where children create their own peer cultures (Corsaro, 1985, 1997; Mouritsen, 1996, 2002).

Mouritsen (1996, 2002) emphasizes that children’s play and narratives are fictions. Their intent is not to represent reality, but to play or tell a story, and this does not bring about any obligations. Mouritsen’s reasoning concerns children’s war play, but it can also be applied to children’s exploration of gender discourses, which are immanent in the cultural products children reuse. Using these products gives children the opportunity to play with, explore and reshape some of the discourses on femininity and masculinity that are available in the society where they live their lives.

Of interest for this article is an ethnographic study that Dyson (1997) conducted in a classroom with seven- to nine-year-olds. Observations were made during the children’s Grade 2 and Grade 3 years. In this classroom, the children had a daily ‘free writing time’. As the children were free to choose the content of their stories, the popular culture was let into the classroom, which contributed to a productive meeting between the children’s and the teacher’s interests. The children were allowed to write stories inspired by media figures that engaged them in their peer cultures. They could, accordingly, with the support of the class organization, write about themes and characters they found interesting. The ethnographical approach allowed Dyson to analyse how the children appropriated popular culture to explore social identity. The stories were important in the social interaction in the classroom, and the social dimension was reinforced by an optional practice called ‘Author’s theatre’, where those children who wished could choose classmates to act out their stories. One of the boys found his entrance ticket to the social world of the classroom by writing exiting stories. The boys’ stories were often about superheroes, while the girls’ stories were often about relations in families and with friends. But there were also exceptions—some girls made up superhero stories and some boys’ stories were inspired by girls’ relational themes. Dyson shows how the children, while appropriating the stories from popular culture, do so in creative ways related to the social interaction in the classroom. For example, two girls who were angry because they were not allowed to play in the boys’ stories wrote their own superhero stories. Those stories were not merely about fighting, but also about relations and feelings.
The study

This article is based on data derived from a broader study (Änggård, 2005) exploring the social and cultural dimensions of children’s art activities. The study includes 36 children aged four- to six-years in two pre-schools located in a Swedish town with approximately 100,000 inhabitants. Each of the two pre-schools was visited during five weeks in 2002. The study has an ethnographic approach, and data were gathered through participant observations, video recordings and conversations with the children. Drawings and other art products were documented in different ways.

In this article, data from one of the two pre-schools are used. This pre-school is situated in an area with mixed housing types in which the rate of low-income earners as well as the rate of inhabitants with ethnic origins other than Swedish is high. The children in the pre-school came from families with mixed social and ethnic backgrounds. About 50% of the children in the pre-school had immigrant parents. The divisions made by the children themselves were tied to age and gender. The oldest boys in the group (the same ones who participated in this project) played together in different constellations, and the five oldest girls in the group (of whom three participated in this project) played together. Ethnicity did not seem to be a matter of concern. Because the children’s different social backgrounds did not seem to be important for the way they chose friends, I have not taken it into account in my analyses. Furthermore, I am interested in how the children are acting, not in identifying background variables that can explain why they are acting in certain ways.

In the project analysed in this article, eight children produced their own storybooks. Three girls (Jenny, 5:8, Linda, 5:3 and Gabriella, 5:3) and five boys (Fredrik, 6:1, Elias, 5:8, Erik, 5:7, John, 5:4 and Benjamin, 5:3) participated in the activity, which was led by their teacher, Anki.1 The proposal to make storybooks came from one of the children. My data include 10 video recordings from episodes in which children drew in their books or talked about them. The analyses are based on the different kinds of ethnographic data as a whole, the books with pictures and text as well as the process whereby the books were produced. While working with the books, the children used multiple ways of expressing themselves—they talked, they made gestures and so on. These expressions, captured by the video camera, give much more information than do the pictures and the text in the books alone.

In the episodes led by Anki, I had a non-participant position, while in other episodes, when children worked on their own, I was more active and posed questions about the stories.

The storybook project

At the first occasion, Anki introduced the task. The children then chose which themes they wanted to use for their books and drew the front pages of their books. During the following weeks, the children worked on the books at several occasions, both with Anki and on their own. Anki helped the children to write the text they wanted in their books. Sometimes she wrote the text in advance and the children drew afterwards and...
sometimes the children drew first and asked Anki to write afterwards. At the second occasion, one of the children came up with the idea that templates available at the pre-school could be used. These templates were of different kinds of dinosaurs, shellfish, fish, flowers, stars and hearts, etc. The children also used stickers depicting hearts, stars and the Swedish flag in their books. The children in this project, similar to the children whom Dyson (1997) describes, had the opportunity to make stories about popular cultural figures that were important in their peer cultures. Support from their teacher allowed them to make up more advanced stories, including written text, than they would have been able to do on their own.

At the first occasion, as mentioned above, Anki asked the children in turn what they wanted their books to be about. Elias and Benjamin decided to make books about knights and dinosaurs. Erik’s book was to be about dinosaurs as well. It was obvious that these three boys inspired each other in their choice of themes and actors for their stories. Another boy, John, wanted to make a book about dragons. Also this theme has a connection with the knight and dinosaur themes. Dragons are often found together with knights in fairytales. Furthermore, dragons and dinosaurs are similar in several ways. There is a physical similarity between dragons and some kinds of dinosaurs, and they are both associated with strength and force. There is also, which is probably more important, a symbolic similarity. Both dragons and dinosaurs can be used to symbolize frightening and dangerous aspects. Fredrik was the only boy who chose a different theme—he wanted to make a book about trolls. In Swedish fairytales, trolls are sometimes dangerous and sometimes kind. The book Fredrik made later on was about a nice troll who rescued an ant.

At the first occasion, two of the girls were absent and Jenny was the only participating girl. When the boys had chosen themes for their books, Anki asked Jenny what she wanted her book to be about.

Jenny: I don’t know.
Anki: Maybe you want to do something completely different?
Fredrik: Horses, horses!
Erik: Barbie.
Benjamin: Barbie princess.
Elias: Have a king and a Barbie!
Anki: What do you like to play with Jenny?
[After a while, Anki asks Jenny if she wants to make a book about her Barbies. Jenny starts to draw a Barbie.]

The episode above shows that all participants—Jenny herself, the teacher and the boys—consider that Jenny, being a girl, could be expected to choose a different theme for her book than the boys have chosen. Davis and Harré (1990) claim that every narrative about ourselves must be understood as negotiated collaboratively in joint action. In this episode, we have seen such a joint action in which Jenny is positioned and positions herself in a girl discourse. The choices made by the children at this first
occasion remained during the subsequent work with the books. The boy’s books entail a variety of themes, but they all have in common that they are about heroes who are in some way active. Some of the heroes are involved in struggles (Elias’ and Benjamin’s books), one is chasing a thief (John’s book) and two are rescuing someone (Erik’s and Fredrik’s books). The boys’ books could be seen as part of a hero genre.

The girls’ books have different themes compared to the boys’. Jenny’s book is about a Barbie and her friends. When the two girls who were absent when the project was introduced, Linda and Gabriella, started their books, they also chose to make stories about their Barbies. Their Barbies are also princesses who meet princes with whom they live their everyday lives. The girls’ stories could be seen as belonging to a relational genre.

To sum up, the children selected themes for their stories similar to those of other children of the same gender. They also chose themes that can be seen as boys’ and girls’ separate genres.

Genres for narratives

The cultural products that children appropriate and reuse are available for them through different media such as comic papers, storybooks and TV programmes that could in turn be sorted into genres. In the analysis of the children’s stories in words and pictures, Bakhtin’s genre concept will be used (Bakhtin, 1986). Bakhtin’s interest concerns speech genres, both talked and written, but he claims that the same reasoning could be used to discuss other forms of communication that are based on some sort of signs, for example pictures (Bakhtin, 1984).

Bakhtin considers that communication would be impossible if there were not genres. We always, consciously or unconsciously, use established genres when we talk. Genres are composed of utterances similar to each other with respect to:

- Thematic content.
- Style.
- Compositional structure.

Utterances can be oral or written, short (they can consist of a single word) or long (they can consist of a novel or a dissertation). Different kinds of genres are used in different spheres of human activity. Some examples of such spheres are everyday life, science and the literary field. Genres connected to everyday life, like private letters or dinner conversations, are called primary genres. In this study, the children’s storybooks could be considered primary genres. More complex genres such as novels or scientific publications are called secondary genres. In this article, different kinds of media are discussed as secondary genres. There is an interrelation between primary and secondary genres and between genres in general. This flux leads to a constant restructuring and renewal of both primary and secondary genres. Every utterance is linked to earlier utterances—a response to what other speakers have said, things that can be agreed with, completed or contested. Accordingly, the utterances include echoes from earlier utterances, they are ‘filled with dialogic overtones’ (Bakhtin, 1986,
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p. 92, emphasis in original). Other authors drawing exhaustively on Bakhtin’s reasoning have called this dialog intertextuality (Kristeva, 1986).

An important feature of utterances is their adressivity—they are directed to someone present or to an imaginary listener or reader. They are produced within social spheres and in that way they always have a social dimension.

Even if we always talk in genres, there is some scope for the individuality of the speaker. Some genres are more rigid, while others are more flexible.

Bakhtin’s genre concept is particularly useful in the analysis of children’s narratives, because it includes everyday (primary) genres, more complex (secondary) genres as well as the interrelation between different genres. It contributes to our understanding of how children in their everyday lives appropriate and reuse stories available in their cultural surroundings. It is plausible that children produce their own narratives in dialog with secondary genres like traditional fairytales, film and TV programmes for children. Furthermore, between these secondary genres there is intertextuality. In Disney films, for example, fairytales like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty are reused. When a new popular product, like a film, is launched, spin-off products such as toys, T-shirts, computer games, etc, follow it. In this way, a network is created in which pictures and texts concerning products belonging to different media refer to each other. This phenomenon is called transmedial intertextuality (Kinder, 1991).

Imbued in genres are special discourses concerning, e.g., femininity and masculinity. When children reuse secondary genres, they have opportunities to explore and reshape these discourses.

Below, some examples of how different genres are used by the children will be accounted for. Two of the girls’ and two of the boys’ books will be presented in more detail: Linda’s, Gabriella’s, Benjamin’s and Elias’ books. These books have been selected for several reasons. First, these books are the most gender-specific of the books produced in the project and accordingly a good starting point for the discussion of gender. Second, there is an obvious dialog between, on one hand, the girls’ stories and, on the other hand, the boys’ stories. This is interesting in that it shows how children choose to make stories in dialogue with children of the same gender. Furthermore, these four children have reused several different types of secondary genres in their stories, thereby illustrating how children can use secondary genres in their exploration of gender positions.

The girls’ and the boys’ books will be treated separately, as the purpose is not to account for differences between girls and boys, but to analyse what is specific to and characteristic of the girls’ and the boys’ stories in their own right. In the analysis, the three aspects that constitute a genre—thematic content, style and compositional structure—will be used to derive the specific features of the stories. The theoretical area of interest concerns how narrative genres are used to explore and construct gender.

The girls’ stories—romance and everyday life

The stories that Linda and Gabriella produced are about love between Barbie princesses and the princes they meet.
The text in Gabriella’s book reads as follows.

The Barbie Basima met a prince. When it was raining Basima came to the prince’s house. In the morning they went out for a little while and took a walk. The prince and Basima walked almost the whole way to the city. They were hungry so they went to McDonald’s. Then they sunned themselves and bathed because it was summer and sunny.

The prince asked: What are we going to eat?
The princess answered: We’re having soup.

The rain and the flash of lightning Gabriella drew on the first page of her book could be interpreted as a hardship. Perhaps Gabriella thought that the princess saved herself by entering the prince’s house to avoid the storm. In the story, there is another dramatic component that is not visible in the text. Gabriella and I looked at the page depicting the princess and the prince sunbathing near a swimming pool. Gabriella showed me that she had drawn something in the water—their necklaces that had fallen into the water. She also told me they got them back later on. Gabriella worked a great deal on the design of the decorative details. On the front page she drew flowers, a heart and a butterfly. She also drew raindrops shaped like big circles painted in different colours. The clothes of the princess and the prince were also carefully coloured. On some of the pictures she drew non-figurative decorative details.

Linda’s book has a similar content:

One day there was a Barbie who went out of the door and found a prince. She was in love with the prince. The prince said: May I come inside? What are we going to have for a snack, said the prince. It was evening and the moon was rising. The princess said: We’ll have buns and cakes and coffee.

Linda’s story also includes some dramatic elements that are not present in the text. While she was drawing she said, pointing at the prince: ‘Now he has an injury, his workmates sawed a plank, and it happened to touch him here, but it didn’t hurt him’. On another occasion, she told Anki that a dinosaur had dressed up as a prince while the (real) prince was at work. In the story, everyday life—coffee at home, work at a building site—is mixed with romance, the princess falling in love with the prince. A balloon over the head of the princess indicates, Linda told me, that the princess is thinking she will marry the prince. The romantic theme is underlined by the rising moon and decorative figures such as stars, hearts and flowers, which Linda drew, using templates, around the princess and the prince.

In both the girls’ books, the actors are occupied with everyday activities, things that people generally do. They eat, go to McDonald’s, walk and so on. These are activities familiar to the girls themselves. It could be assumed that they used the stories to give shape to some of their own experiences. The everyday activities that are accounted for are not the monotonous, dull ones, but pleasant activities connected with leisure time. Going to McDonald’s was highly appreciated among the children, and trips to a swimming pool are associated with summer holidays.

The dramatic incidents like the storm, the lost necklaces and the prince’s injury contrast with the pleasant activities. However, these incidents do not seem to be seriously threatening. They are used to create some excitement, but they are not
crucial to the stories. The central theme of the stories is a romantic element—the love that occurs between the princesses and the princes. The romances could be seen as something extraordinary, elevated over ordinary life. In the stories, consequently, everyday life is mixed with extraordinary elements.

The stories have elements that are reminiscent of traditional role-play in which the mother is the person who makes decisions concerning the home (Hallidén, 1994, 2004; Steedman, 1987). Such stories can be seen as an exploration of traditional, female positions. On the other hand, the stories are not about ordinary housewives, but princesses who are at the same time Barbies. Kalliala (2002) has observed the play themes used by girls aged six in today’s Finnish pre-schools and compared these with girls play in the 1950s. The play themes that predominated in the 1950s, in which children had the roles of mother, father, child, are not played to the same extent today. Many of the play themes concern relations between men and women, who, for example, go to balls, marry or divorce. The girls in Kalliala’s study did not want to be mothers or shop assistants when they played, they wanted to be Miss Universe, pop stars or models. Analogous to this, it is possible that princesses and Barbies were attractive objects of identification for Linda and Gabriella. Stories about princesses who meet princes could be interpreted as an expression of unconscious desires: girls’ longing for something that can give them positions and make their lives fulfilled (Walkerdine, 1997). This desire could be realized through becoming a model like Barbie or by being chosen by the prince.

There is an obvious dialog between the girls’ stories and fairytales in which princesses and princes are traditional characters. A plot in which different problems occur is also common in fairytales. Even more obvious is the dialog with popular cultural products like weekly women’s magazines, comic papers, films, TV programmes and so on. The idea for creating stories about princesses and princes may have come from media reports about real royal personalities. The accounts of royal weddings and balls available to children via TV and the press are often as fantastic as fiction. The themes of the girls’ books are also reminiscent of the stories in Barbie magazines and advertisements, where Barbie often goes on a picnic or to the beach with Ken and her friends. Barbie is also busy with domestic work and she sometimes invites her friends to drink coffee and eat cookies. The mix of princess and Barbie is also found in the popular culture. Fairytales are reused in products produced for children. There are Barbies that are at the same time princesses, for example the princess in Beauty and the Beast, which is sold with a doll that can be transformed from a beast into a prince. Since 1999 there is also a magazine called The Princess with pictures from Disney’s films. The princesses in this magazine remind one of Barbie in their appearance—the pages are decorated with flowers, hearts and stars. The frame of figures that Linda drew in her book is suggestive of the style of this magazine.

An interesting feature of the girls’ stories, which contradicts the traditional storyline with a passive princess waiting for the prince, is the fact that the princesses are the active parties. The stories include male actors, but they play subordinate roles in comparison with the female characters. The princesses have the power to decide what they are going to eat, while the princes have to ask about it. Walkerdine (1990)
discusses how girls, in nursery schools, reproduce practices where women are relatively powerful, e.g., as mothers and housewives in homes. By becoming the controlling mother in a play situation, a girl can be more powerful than a boy. The authority given to the princesses in Gabriella’s and Linda’s stories could be interpreted as connected to this housewife discourse. Even more important is the fact that it is the princesses who find the princes and not vice versa. In Gabriella’s book, it is Basima who meets a prince and in Linda’s book the Barbie goes out and finds herself a prince. This constitutes a difference from traditional fairytales like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, where the prince finds the princess. The princesses in the girls’ stories remind us more of how Barbie is portrayed in Barbie magazines—as an active young woman.

The boys’ stories—heroism and action

On the front page of his book, Elias has drawn a dinosaur, a knight and a small figure, which he comments on as follows when talking with Benjamin:

Look at him [points at the small figure] little scaredy-cat that he [points at the knight] is going to kill.

The text in Elias’ book is as follows:

Once upon a time there was a knight who met a dinosaur. They wanted to have a wrestling match. In the middle of the night, in the middle of the game, a Pokémon comes flying. Shall we wrestle against each other the three of us? After the game they said forgive me to each other. So they made up. The giant lizard and the dinosaur were fighting. The sea horse spurted water on the two of them. And then they fought with the sea horse. The sea horse jumped away. The longhead and the Tyrannosaurus Rex were fighting with the giant lizard and the dinosaur. The crab was going to crush the star but then the ceratops and the dinosaur came and disturbed them. The crab took them with his claws. The ceratops hit the crab with his tail. The crab fell on the spikes of the dinosaur so that he fell on a rock. The rain poured down on all the animals. The animals were totally wet.

Benjamin’s book contains the following text:

Once upon a time there was a dinosaur that was about to eat a knight. But then another knight came and rescued the blue knight. The knights went to a restaurant. Then they went to go swimming. There were fishes coming. Than a crab and a crayfish came. They were fighting about the Swedish flag. The dragon eventually was allowed to take the crab. The knight and the dragon became buddies. They fought the big monster.

The boys’ stories resemble each other in the choice of actors and themes. Just like the girls do, the boys draw on different secondary genres in their stories. The genres reused by the boys, however, are different from those used by the girls. The boys’ books are partly reminiscent of traditional fairytales with hero themes. They both start with the phrase ‘Once upon a time …’. Furthermore, knights and dragons, traditional actors in fairytales, are found in the stories. There is also a transmedial dialog with media products such as TV programmes, films, computer games and toys. Elias’ and Benjamin’s stories include fights between heroes and other combatants as main themes, and they also include complications like enemies turning up. The hero
theme is common in boys’ narratives. Jordan (1995) discusses the warrior discourse in boys’ accounts, where masculinity is described in terms of ‘the warrior, the knight errant, the superhero’ (p. 76). This discourse, according to Jordan, has power over boys and is manifested in the stories they tell, pictures they paint and play they engage in. Using characters that are weak and cowardly, as Elias does in drawing ‘a little scaredy cat’, is also a means used in the warrior discourse. They serve as counterparts to the heroes who are identified by being different from the cowards (Jordan, 1995).

The choice of themes in hero stories is, according to Jordan (1995), eclectic—it depends on what the children have watched on TV recently. Kalliala (2002) reasons in a similar way. She claims that boys living in different historical periods have chosen those heroes available in their cultures and that those heroes do not differ a great deal from each other. The heroism and stories about evil and good that are available for children vary, and children pick up the narratives where they can get them. Before TV, fairytales and comic papers were sources of inspiration.

The composition of the boys’ stories, with repeated struggles, is reminiscent of cartoons and video films about Pokémon, which these boys used to watch at home. In these films, fights between the Pokémon characters and their trainers, on one hand, and different enemies, on the other hand, are repeated time after time. The Pokémon are also trained to fight by their trainers. The pattern of repeated struggles is used in many popular culture products, e.g., in computer games with adventures and action as central themes, where fights are repeated in an eternal cycle. Nobody ever dies, death has been replaced by disappearance, and those who have disappeared return on another occasion (Johansson, 1996).

The drawings in the boys’ books are composed in a characteristic way—the fighting parties are positioned on the paper in a decorative style. Strong colours make the pictures expressive, and stickers are used both for decoration and as parts of the stories.

The content and composition of the pictures and the way the boys talk when they are accounting for the stories give their narratives a character of action. When Elias dictated the text that he wanted Anki to write on a page he had already drawn on, he talked in a fast tempo and made gestures and noises to illustrate.

In the struggles in the boys’ books, nobody gets hurt or dies. I do not apprehend the fights as very serious. In Elias’ book, the first fight is called a ‘wrestling match’. After the match, they even asked each other’s forgiveness and made it up. In Benjamin’s book, the knight and the dragon became mates. The choice to let the combatants make it up and become friends can be interpreted as a way for the boys to make frightening narratives manageable and to disarm dangerous actors. Boys in our society live with a male discourse implying that boys should grow up to be strong, brave men, prepared for battle. Creating narratives about warriors who make it up may be a way of making this threat less frightening. The choice to let the combatants make up could also be understood as an influence from the norms in pre-school, where children are often told to make up after fights.

There is also a dialog, even if it is not so striking, between Benjamin’s and Gabriella’s books—the actors go to a restaurant and they go swimming in both of the books,
spending some pleasant time together. Thus, Benjamin’s book is not only concerned with fighting, but also with relations. In his book, the boys’ warrior genre is mixed with the girls’ relational genre. This is reminiscent of boys’ ways of making connections in narratives, as described by Halldén (1997).

The boys’ as well as the girls’ stories have traditional themes, at the same time as they are innovative at reworking the genres they use. In both the boys’ books, the combatants become friends after the fight, and in Benjamin’s book, a relational theme is included.

Conclusion

When the children chose themes for their stories, they also chose genres with an imbued order concerning thematic content, style and composition (Bakhtin, 1986). They used genres for narration collected from different media such as fairytales, comic papers, TV programmes, films, toys, etc. The girls and the boys chose different genres for their narratives. The girls’ stories are about romance and everyday life. The boys’ stories are about heroes and dangerous creatures involved in action-hero-like fights. In the girls’ books, relations are the most important aspect, while action is central to the boys’ books.

The choice of thematic content seems to be an important way of positioning oneself as a girl or as a boy. All the boys chose similar themes and actors for their books. Fredrik certainly picked out a different actor—a troll—but his story is still a hero story. The only girl who was present when the storybook project was introduced chose a different theme from the boys, a theme dealing with relations. In a collaborative act, she, the boys and the teacher positioned her in a girl’s discourse.

In the boys’ stories there are no female characters. On the first occasion of the project, Benjamin asked Fredrik if the troll he had drawn on the front page was a girl. Benjamin laughed while he asked. Fredrik shook his head. Benjamin asked if it was a boy and Fredrik nodded. Benjamin’s laugh suggested that it would be ridiculous to draw a girl. Fredrik’s and the other boys’ choice to draw exclusively male actors can be interpreted as a way to create a distance to girls and everything that is female, thereby constructing masculinity by ‘différance’ (Jordan, 1995). Including female characters creates a risk of being teased, as Benjamin’s laughter indicates. In her classroom study, Dyson (1997) saw that the boys avoided including female characters in their stories. The presence of female figures was often connected to romance, something that aroused teasing in the other boys. In Gabriel’s and Benjamin’s stories, there is no need for female actors to complete the narratives. The stories are about male, active persons with whom the boys can identify. In the girls’ stories, contrary to the boys’, male actors are needed, as the stories are about romantic relations. The male characters, however, play subordinated roles. The princesses, with whom the girls identify, are the actors who carry the storyline forward.

A factor that may have influenced the stereotypicality of children’s narratives can be found in the fact that both fairytales and popular culture for children have strongly gender-stereotypes features. In traditional fairytales, as already mentioned, the prince
is most often the acting subject while the princess is passive. Within popular culture, the market is divided so that different products are produced for girls and for boys. Cartoons, toys and other products are designed for either girls or boys. In the toyshop there are different departments for girls and boys. On the girls’ shelves, dominated by pink and other pastel colours, there are Barbie dolls with attributes associated with female consumption. On the boys’ shelves, male action figures and other heroes are found, equipped with attributes like weapons and vehicles. The range of colours often is dark and drab (Kline, 1993; Seiter, 1993).

Perhaps this gender-stereotyped feature as well as the black and white division between evil and good is an aspect of popular culture that attracts children and gives them the ‘raw material’ for their narratives. Marsh (2000) claims that children seem to have a need to explore the world in terms of contradictions such as good/evil, female/male, wrong/right. She refers to Derrida (1967), who considers Western thought to be characterized by binary oppositions. Davies (2003) points at the contradiction found in the fact that many adults accept the binary division into two genders, but at the same time want to change the gender roles so that their children do not adopt what is seen as the negative aspects of these gender patterns. Such patterns include, for the boys, threats like aggression and violence and, for the girls, faults like shyness and excessive interest in looks and family life. These adults are surprised when their children adopt exactly these traits. Davies considers it unsurprisingly, as these traits are most visible in the division made in the society in which the children live. As children learn early on that the world is divided into men and women, and that they have to choose the ‘right’ gender to be accepted, it is not surprising that they use the most characteristic traits when they position themselves.

Even if the children’s stories can be considered gender-stereotyped, this does not imply that these children always think in a gender-stereotyped way or that they will be gender stereotypical adults. A story is, as stated before, fiction. It is not told to copy reality, but to create a good story (Mouritsen, 2002). Narration can serve as a means of exploring different positions in discourses of femininity and masculinity without having to be held accountable for what happens in the stories.

The features of exploration and the playfulness are also visible in the way that the children use the genres. The genres have an immanent order, but at the same time it is possible to alter them and to mix different genres. In their stories the children make reinterpretations of the appropriated stories. At the same time, as traditional and gender-stereotyped positions are displayed, those positions are reshaped in a way that transcends and dissolves the division. When the girls let the princesses play the active roles, they extend and reshape the traditional fairytale genre in which the princess is passive, waiting for the prince. The princesses, the female objects of identification for the girls, are in that way given more agency and power. And when the boys let their heroes ask for forgiveness and make it up, it can be interpreted as a way of rewriting the hero tale and taking the sting out of a frightening theme. The children in this way use the stories in a creative way, reshaping them to fit their own purposes. The narratives also work as a means to take control over and reshape gender discourses. Dyson
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(1997) found, in a similar way, that the children elaborated and reformed the cultural stories they used when writing their own stories.

Why is it that the children reshaped the stories? When children appropriate cultural stories, they do not merely reproduce them, but they interpret them in creative ways (Corsaro, 1997). Children (like adults) are not one-dimensional or unitary, and they have not yet (contrary to adults) learned to formulate accounts that give the impression of being free from contradictions (Davies, 2003). For children, it is probably not problematic to mix stories that refer to different discourses. Furthermore, as in the classroom that Dyson (1997) studied, it is important to take into account the social aspect of the stories. As showed earlier in the article, themes for the books were chosen in a collaborative act. In the same way, the stories were evolving in a process in which the children sat together. The striving for social inclusion, doing something together with ones friends and making a story that peers found engaging and fun, was an important part of the project.

Notes

1. All names are synonyms in order to assure the participant anonymity.
4. See http://www.tonakaistudio.com/disneyania/serier/. This magazine is published by Egmont Kärnan AB.
5. See, e.g., the film Pokémon the first movie: Mewtwo strikes back (1999); the video was released 2001 from Warner Home Video

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