

“Are You Guys *Girls?*”: Boys, Identity Texts, and Disney Princess Play

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Abstract

Drawing from critical sociocultural perspectives that view play, literacy, and gender as social practices, boys’ Disney Princess play is examined as a site of identity construction and contestation situated within overlapping communities of femininity and masculinity practice where children learn expected practices for “doing gender.” The article presents critical discourse analysis of two instances of 5- and 6-year-old children’s doll play excerpted from data collected during a year of weekly visits to one focal kindergarten in a U.S. Midwest public school, part of a larger three-year study of literacy play as mediated discourse. Through princess play, children enacted femininities and masculinities and negotiated character roles with peers in ways that enforced and contested gender expectations circulated in media marketing and enacted in play groups. Findings indicate that doll play is a productive pedagogy for mediating gendered identity texts circulating through global media and for creating spaces for diverse gender performances in early childhood settings.

It’s playtime in kindergarten and three children cluster around a huge two-story pink and lavender plastic dollhouse; the dollhouse obscures all but the tops of their head, creating a private space in the large sun-filled classroom. Katieⁱ, playing the mother doll, calls to the dolls upstairs. “Boy-oys! Come on!”

Jonathan and Zach, bouncing the doll children on the plastic beds, correct her, “Girls.” During play Jonathan and Zach regularly insisted their dolls were girls.

Katie tries again, “I mean girls, boys. Come down here. C’mere girls, girl.”

Jonathan, still bouncing his doll on the dollhouse bed, repeats, “Girls.”

Suddenly, Zach dives his doll off the dollhouse roof and proceeds to tumble the doll in large looping somersaults. The doll morphs from a daughter in the dollhouse family into Ariel, Zach’s favorite Disney Princess character, as he imitates a swimming and spinning mermaid in an imaginary sea.

Tyrell peers around the dollhouse to question the trio, “Are you guys gir-irls?” stressing and stretching the word to make his question a taunt.

Disney Princess Media as Identity Texts

This scene is excerpted from a three-year ethnographic study of children’s literacy play in early childhood classrooms in the Midwestern United States. In this article, three examples from one focal kindergarten illustrate how two boys regularly disrupted peer expectations for appropriate doll players and Disney Princess fans as they enacted feminine roles to play Disney popular media themes. As a play researcher, an experienced kindergarten teacher, and the parent of two sons, I had frequently observed young boys playing with dolls in the form of “action figures” and sports figurines; boys who were passionate fans of sports teams, Star Wars, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, Power Rangers, Pokémon, or Spiderman. However, I had

no experience with, nor adequate theoretical explanations for, boys who avidly and consistently played with Disney Princess dolls.

The global distribution of children’s media franchises—products linked through overarching brands anchored in films, television series, video games, or websites—populate childhoods with ubiquitous media characters covering everyday objects from pajamas to vitamins to school backpacks so that children are immersed in a “textual landscape” of multimedia identity messages (Carrington, 2003). Children’s media franchises communicate *anticipated identities* (Author, 2009), expectations for future users embedded in commercial product designs and circulated to young consumers through global advertising that targets children by age and gender. Franchises are anchored by popular media characters that circulate identity texts, embedded storylines that communicate idealized ways of “doing boy” or “doing girl”. For example, Spiderman is a masculine identity text that teaches boys to be active competitors through storylines with an active male hero who defeats powerful opponents through acrobatic fighting. In contrast, Disney’s Princess Ariel is a feminine identity text with a female protagonist who “wins” by attracting a powerful male hero through beauty, kindness, and self-sacrifice. Among such products, dolls are particularly potent identity texts (Carrington, 2003) that invite children to perform gendered identities through play. Thus, children’s doll play is an important identity-building site for gender negotiation and contestation as children collaborate to work out who is being whom.

The purpose of this article is to examine how two kindergarten boys disrupted identity texts with heterosexual expectations by playing hyperfeminine characters in Disney Princess media specifically marketed to girls. How did boys’ practices with feminine identity texts

mediate gender expectations in the local classroom as well as in global media, instantiated in tensions and negotiations among children during classroom play?

Gender, Children’s Media, and Play

A critical sociocultural perspective (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) provides three frames for studying gender as a set of social practices with gendered identity texts: critical discourse theories (Gee, 1999) deconstruct texts and practices for constitutive relationships between identity, discourse, and power (Foucault, 1978); cultural studies demonstrate how converging media (Jenkins, 2006) circulate gendered identity texts; and apprenticeship models (Rogoff, 1995; Wohlwend, 2007b) explains how identity texts are enacted, learned, and regulated through valued practices within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Gender as Social Practice

Discourse offers a way of thinking about femininities and masculinities as ways of talking, speaking, dressing, playing, reading, writing, etc. that demonstrate affiliation with a particular societal group (Gee, 1996). Children learn to “do girl” through membership in multiple “communities of femininity practice” (Paechter, 2003) in which girls and women model expected practices. Similar relationships and practices develop among masculinity and masculinities through communities of masculinity practice¹. Social practices simultaneously index a community’s valued dispositions and tacit rules, constituting habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and legitimated by ideals circulated through discourse (Foucault, 1978). An example from Disney Princess media illustrates these relationships. Desirable practices for enacting girlhood are circulated through beauty ideals in *The Little Mermaid* storyline. The main character,

¹ Following Paechter (2006), in this article femininities refer to girls’ and women’s practices and performances and masculinities refer to boys’ and men’s practices and performances, although the point of the article is that such distinctions blur across gender categories.

Princess Ariel, is a mermaid who gives up her swimming ability, her voice, and her underwater kingdom in order to attract a prince. However, the film also circulates a fan identity text that enables young children to affiliate with other Disney Princess fans by viewing the film and consuming products in the globally marketed franchise. Disney Princess products allow preschoolers to “be Ariel” and in the process, to take up ways of emphasizing femininity through products that stress bodily displays... with sparkly mermaid costumes, glittery seashell jewelry, pink and aqua sportswear, or shampoo, bubble bath, lip gloss, and makeup kits.

Cultural Studies and Disney Princess Media

Cultural studies critique the passive roles for girls and women in Disney Princess media storylines. The damsel-in-distress fairy tale with its beautiful princess victim and rescuing prince is a recurring trope in early childhood play. The Disney Princess brand combines eight heroines from Walt Disney Pictures’ animated films: *Snow White [and the Seven Dwarfs]* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Arielle from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Jasmine from *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocohontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998). The four billion dollar Disney Princess franchise bundles explicit hyper-feminine princess identities with implicit girls-only consumer identities. Disney Princess products are marketed to 3- to 5-year-old girls and distributed globally through licensing deals that link the movies, DVDs, and music CDs to Barbie dolls, video games, toys, clothing, jewelry, home decor, school supplies, and other consumer goods (Disney Consumer Products, 2007).

Some researchers of children’s culture problematize normative gender expectations that circulate through the popular Disney Princess toys and films (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997). For example, gender narratives in the Disney Princess animated films often portray girls as innocent ingénues waiting to marry and find a good family; women are backgrounded as loving mothers

or if powerful characters, presented as evil hags (Bell, 1995; Giroux, 1999; Haas, 1995). The concern is that when children enact Disney Princess themes, they impose, and are positioned by, power inequities in relational identities and discourses that circulate through popular culture media toys.

So one important cultural and ideological reading of the narratives of the toy industry shows the construction and repetition of a “hegemonic masculinity” and its corollary: “emphasized femininity”. Two separate, opposite gender roles are created and maintained through such images and narratives of Superman and Barbie which, by being separate and markedly different, work eventually to hold a hierarchy of male power in place.” (Hilton, 1996, p.35)

The character and consumer identity texts that converge in these products circulate an emphasized femininity discourse, a subordinate discourse that circulates notions of women as objects (of beauty) and deflects power away from girls. However, discourses intersect in complex ways:

the precise character of that femininity is a localized matter that depends on the relative positioning of other local communities of masculinity and femininity practice, including those of parents, teachers and other significant adults. Despite the commonalities . . . , there is considerable variation between local collective conceptions of femininity. (Paechter, 2006)

In the kindergarten featured in this article, the emphasized femininity discourse circulated through Disney Princess media and doll play tangled with a hegemonic masculinity discourse that circulated through sports team affiliations and team recess play. *Hegemonic masculinity* is a prevalent dominant discourse that sustains a hierarchy of patriarchal gender relations (Connell, 1987). For example, a hegemonic masculinity discourse in sports fandom achieves dominance over femininities and other masculinities through power relations based upon primarily male physical competitions and displays of strength or skill (Blaise, 2005b; Reay, 2001). A view of gender as binary categories with inequitable power relations does not capture the dynamic and

interconnected subjectivities within discourse: a discourse upholds power relations between its supporting subject positions but also produces the possibility of counter subject positions.

This is not to suggest that discourses represent lived experiences or that gender categories are somehow naturally fixed or binary. Gender identities are not innate, universal, or unified; rather we take up practices to enact positions situated in a complicated mesh of subjectivities (Butler, 1990). Subjectivities are socially constructed categories of subject positions made available through global discourses and imposed, resisted, and actively appropriated within particular and immediate situations. Through discourse, gendered identities are “constituted and reconstituted through a variety of discursive practices” and individuals take up multiple—often contradictory—identities in relation to surrounding discourses and in response to positioning by others (Davies, 2003, p. xii). In the classroom in this study, children at play simultaneously enacted identities as students, players, princesses, boys, and girls.

Further, we may or may not be aware of the ways that our everyday practices construct and maintain grids of gendered subjectivities in overlapping communities of practice at home, school, work, and elsewhere. Paechter (2006) draws a distinction between femininity and femininities: *femininity* refers to a set of shared ideals that construct a vision of what girlhood should be while *femininities* are the multiple, overlapping, and diverse ways that individuals actually “do girl” in lived situations. For example, Disney Princesses media circulates a femininity that values a particular set of beauty ideals with exaggerated physical attributes (large eyes, thick eyelashes, long hair) and coquettish posture (tilted head, arched back) and storylines with damsels-in-distress passivity. The femininities that children perform can engage emphasized femininity in any number of ways, including: emulation through “girly girl” practices such as twirling or princess play (Blaise, 2005a), resistance through “tomboy” practices

(Reay, 2001), or improvisation such as turning a princess character into a superhero (Wohlwend, 2009). Masculinities and femininities are multiple, fluid, and situational, always constructed and contested in relation to the other identities in a particular site (Foucault, 1978). Thus, rather than promoting a utopian dream of a new gender order that would reallocate power across binary gender categories, Butler (1990) advocates “gender trouble,” a chaotic mixing and intentional confusing of gender performances in rhizomatic rather than hierarchical patterns (Blackburn, 2005).

Gender Play

On playgrounds where peer culture thrives, ethnographic studies have uncovered complexity in gender play patterns. During play, children perform gender as active agents who enact “varied responses to and interpretations of gender prescriptions” (Thorne, 1993, p. 107, see also Maclean, 1999). There is considerable variability within each sex; that is, there is often less variation in gender practices between girls and boys and more variation among girls (or among boys).

Even so, gender stereotypes are pervasive and persistent in children’s play (Blaise, 2005b; Boldt, 2002). Gender performances that fall outside hetero-normative expectations and binary gender categories (Butler, 1990) have real and immediate consequences for children in school and peer cultures. Case studies of gender-bending by young children highlight dilemmas faced by teachers who seek to honor children’s disruption of gender roles and, at the same time, protect them from real or anticipated harm from peers or society (Blaise, 2005b; Boldt, 1996). In a year-long ethnographic study of play and gender in a kindergarten classroom, Blaise’s (2005a) critical discourse analysis showed that children demonstrated their ability to adhere to dominant gender identities by regulating each other’s practices, materials, and speech. One group of girls

enacted “girly girl” identities and emphasized femininity discourse through fantasy princess play and embodied practices such as: “wearing femininities, body movements, twirling (hair or skirt), curtsying, makeup, beauty, and fashion talk” (Blaise, 2005a, p. 85). Boys’ play circulated a discourse of hegemonic masculinity through embodied practices that involved competing, evaluating skills, producing visible work and getting individual recognition for accomplishments.

Boys playing princesses represents a transgressive blurring of expected gender roles that can evoke vehement opposition from peers. When Bronwyn Davies (2003) set out to discover how preschool children would interpret and respond to feminist revisions of traditional fairy tales (e.g., *The Paper Bag Princess*, Munsch & Martchenko, 1980), she found that children often rejected non-sexist stories of brave princesses and gentle princes, sometimes responding with tears and outrage. In their play, most children committed socially and emotionally to a dualistic model of male and female roles as they constructed gender in their fantasy play as well as in everyday classroom interactions.

The current article examines how play produced a different situation: here, two boys enthusiastically took up ways of “doing girl” by playing archetypical femininity texts that anticipated girls as the only appropriate fans and players. For example, in the opening vignette as Zach animated Princess Ariel, he triggered corporate expectations for girls as typical consumers that ran counter to another boy’s expectations for masculine identity performances.

Method

Research Context

Following case study methodology (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) and purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998), I asked knowledgeable informants (teachers, teaching mentors, principals, literacy professors) in three school districts in three communities in a rural midwestern state to

recommend specific classrooms with child-directed literacy-play periods. During three school years, I interviewed teachers and observed, photographed, and analyzed the physical environment and play activity in eight classrooms in three schools. I conducted pilot studies in two of the kindergarten classrooms to develop a sense of each teacher’s learning environment, to strengthen my ability to conduct fieldwork in these sites, and to work through technological issues in video- and audio-recording. Preliminary critical discourse analysis explored the gendered tensions among children on playgrounds and in classrooms (Wohlwend, 2007a).

The sampling process located a focal kindergarten of 21 students in a K-6 public school in a university community. The kindergarten teacher, Anna Baker, had 17 years of early childhood classroom experience and a master’s degree in developmental reading. Each morning, Abbie and the children negotiated a plan for the day, adjusting the schedule to include activities that children suggested. Following the opening meeting, children worked on self-selected projects during three consecutive 45-minute activity periods—literacy choices, writing workshop, and choice time centers. Activity periods were followed by short class meetings when children perched in an oversized wooden rocker called upon friends to admire their books and drawings.

Data Collection and Analysis

Mediated discourse analysis is an analytic approach that draws from neo-Vygotskian models of apprenticeship and mediated action (Wertsch, 1991) and Bourdieuan habitus and social practice theory to create a form of critical discourse analysis that foregrounds embodied actions with artifacts (The focus of this article is on Gee’s critical discourse analysis; for an expanded discussion of mediated discourse analysis, see Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Wohlwend, 2009).

Following ethnographic methods in mediated discourse analysis, I participated weekly in Anna’s

classroom during one school year, using fieldnotes, audiotapes, and videotapes to record children’s use of literacy tools, toys, materials, talk, and physical action during child-directed play periods (e.g., centers), blended teacher-directed and child-directed choice periods (e.g., literacy choices, writers’ workshop, sharing time, and inquiry projects), and teacher-directed periods (e.g., demonstrations, shared reading, shared writing, authors’ chair, and project introductions). Visits lasted from two to three hours, during morning play-integrated periods. After locating where and when children used valued practices with toys, materials, and themes, I created a coding unit broad enough to allow examination of a *collective event*, a strip of sustained, synchronous activity among a group of children at one location around a particular set of materials.

I used mediated discourse analysis to look closely at collective events where children transformed expected gender identities by manipulating tools, materials, and toys, using moment by moment discourse analysis to examine physical actions—including the interaction sequence, gestures, and manipulation of objects—as well as the social effects of speech (Scollon, 2001a). Critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) examined language in children’s play patterns and interactions for links to global discourses which constitute some of the dominant, tacitly agreed-upon ways of “doing gender,” school, and childhood during kindergarten play with Disney Princesses.

The children’s play interactions are analyzed in this article using the analytic tool *situated identities* (Gee, 1999), subject positions that make up valid ways of being and belonging in particular discourse. Language actively constitutes social subjects (Foucault, 1972), making particular subject positions available or unavailable to individuals; in this case, discourses of consumerism and girlhood at the global level and the children’s play practices at the local level

constituted the situated identities *Disney Princess fan* and *doll player*. The structured analysis of identities as discrete entities should be viewed as a useful heuristic rather than a representation of actual lived lives. Discourses operate in tension with each other, suggesting that in any classroom space, a complicated interplay of identities shapes children’s interactions. During Disney Princess play, children could be simultaneously 6-year-olds, students, peers, boys, consumers, players, and princess characters among other identities. Often a particular identity resonates with other complementary or contradictory identities creating a dynamic, multifaceted representation of self with meanings that may be imposed, unintended, or strategic. In the following section, two collective event of boys’ doll play are analyzed to uncover how children read and enacted princess character identity texts, the discourses they circulate, and the situated identities—*player*, *consumer*, *princess*, *girly girl*—they evoke.

Doing Girl

Doll Play and Emphasized Femininity Identities

As a regular practice in this kindergarten, Zach, Jonathan and three girls played with Disney Princess multimedia and dolls. While girls in this affinity group brought favorite Disney Princess Barbie dolls from home, neither Jonathan nor Zach owned a princess doll; instead they either traded for one of the girls’ dolls or, more frequently, attached an imaginary film character to available classroom dolls or toys. Favorite toys for princess play included pocket-sized dolls—a “brother” doll (short-haired “Barbie’s little brother” doll dressed in denim jeans and a red-striped shirt) and the “princess” doll (long-haired “Barbie’s little sister” doll in a long red ballgown), a plastic toy CD player that played a tinny melody, and nursery furniture that included a baby stroller and two cribs that the boys turned into spacecraft or racecars. Children animated objects as proxies to act as subjects or characters in imagined scenes, moving and

speaking for dolls or other toys and keying this activity as pretense by changing the pitch of their voices and looking directly at the object while speaking (Sawyer, 1997).

Zach and Jonathan animated dolls as characters in wild Disney Princess episodes that spiced up familiar princess storylines with flying mermaids, super-powered Cinderellas, and “scary” fairy godmothers. Zach’s and Jonathan’s play performances transgressed gender expectations that constructed girls as appropriate doll players and princess animators. Other boys (when they could be recruited) engaged in doll play at the dollhouse but emphatically refused to play female roles. Boys were more apt to engage in variants of doll play by animating small manipulatives (dinosaur counters) or action figures and animals in play sets (toy barns, airport, and various vehicles).

Shaking Up Gender: “Are You Guys Girls?”

Table 1ⁱⁱ presents an expanded transcript of the opening vignette, an example of the Zach’s and Jonathan’s doll play early in the school year. When Jonathan animated a miniature all-plastic woman doll wearing molded sandals and beachwear to play a daughter in a family play scenario and Zach animated the “brother” doll as Ariel the Little Mermaid, two other children who did not usually play with the Disney Princess dolls in the dollhouse center struggled with the novelty of boys playing female roles. Katie animated the “princess” doll as “mother,” but had trouble keeping track of who was doing what with gender. Meanwhile Tyrell, wandering over from a group of boys drawing sports team logos, stopped at the dollhouse and attempted to literally shake things up.

Table 1. Animating Dolls as Girls: Daughters, Sisters, and a Mermaid

1 Zach: ((standing, holding brother doll)) He’s her daugh::ter.

- 2 ((Zach bouncing brother doll along second floor bedroom nursery of dollhouse)):
- 3 Jonathan ((standing, holding small plastic woman doll in third floor dollhouse attic))
- 4 Jonathan: ((indicating his own doll)) And other little girl.
- 5 ((Katie stands between boys, holding "princess" doll in right hand))
- 6 ((Katie pushes button on plastic toy CD player with left hand and a music box melody plays))
- 7 Katie: Ok. ((To Zach)) What do you want: a boy or a girl?
- 8 ((Zach frowns and swipes Katie lightly on her forehead with the brother doll.))
- 9 Jonathan: Waa-ah!
- 10 Katie: ((As mother calling loudly)) Bo:::ys! Come on! I mean [gir:ls!]...
- 11 Jonathan: ((correcting Katie)) [Girls.]
- 12 Katie: I mean, girls, boys. Come down here.
- 13 Katie: Come 'ere girls, girl.
- 14 Jonathan: Girls.
- 15 Katie ((Admonishing Zach's doll who is diving off the roof into the sea)): No, girl.
- 16 ((Zach turns mermaid/brother doll end-over-end in slow tumbling motions in the air)).
- 17 ((Katie holds toy CD player in left hand))
- 18 Tyrell ((joining group, walks behind trio and stands)): Are you guys gir:ls?
- 19 Katie: [Yeah]
- 20 Jonathan: [Yeah-heh-heh.]
- 21 Katie: She's a girl and she's a girl. She's a girl ((pointing with her empty hand to Jonathan's woman doll))
- 22 Katie: and
- 23 Katie: ((pointing with empty hand to Zach's brother doll)) she's a girl.

- 24 Zach ((moving mermaid/brother doll in the air over imaginary undulating waves)): Psssh...pshh..pssh.
- 25 ((Jonathan looks at Katie and puts the fingers of his empty hand into his mouth.))
- 26 ((All three children move dolls to second floor.))
- 27 ((Tyrell walks to front of the dollhouse, puts his fingers through open window.))
- 28 ((Tyrell shakes the dollhouse lightly.))
- 29 Katie: Get your stuff and go to school, boys, girls.
- 30 ((Tyrell tries a second handhold and shakes the dollhouse again))
- 31 Zach: Psssh...pshh..pssh
- 32 Jonathan: I'm ready.
- 33 Zach ((diving mermaid/brother doll off top floor of dollhouse)): I'm swimming like a mermaid!
- 34 ((Tyrell shakes the dollhouse harder))
- 35 Zach ((kneeling on floor)): I'm ready.
- 36 ((Tyrell shakes house with both hands.))
- 37 Katie: Ok, go!
- 38 ((Tyrell swings the left wing of the house back and forth slightly.))
- 39 Zach: Bye. Bye, Mo:m. ((Zach walks away from the dollhouse.
- 40 ((Tyrell shakes the dollhouse harder and it begins to tilt toward him.))
- 41 Katie: Stop that!
- 42 ((Tyrell stops shaking house; Zach kneels on the floor and begins sliding the brother doll like a car along the carpet.))
- 43 ((Jonathan passes the small plastic woman through the window to the front of the house and moves to the front of the dollhouse. He leans both elbows on the table, placing his body between Tyrell and the dollhouse.))
- 44 Jonathan ((To Tyrell, smiling)): You (xxx) when I, when I ((Katie walks the princess doll and the toy CD player along the main floor of the dollhouse.))

45 Tyrell ((begins fishing through the tub on the table full of dollhouse furniture and dolls; he holds up a small plastic man that is missing a foot)): Aah, this is the guy.

46 ((Jonathan looks in tub and picks up a toy stroller out of the plastic tub.))

47 Katie: Bo::ys, I'm ho:me. ((Tyrell places male doll on top of dollhouse roof.))

48 Katie: Gir:ls, I'm ho:me.

49 Jonathan ((puts his woman doll in the stroller, walks around to interior side of dollhouse and flies the stroller to the upper bedroom next to Katie's doll)): Yee-hah!

50 Jonathan ((places his doll on the main floor)): I'm sorry, Mom.

51 Katie ((turns princess doll to face Jonathan and swoops the doll close to his doll)): Bad girl. ((Tyrell leaves.))

52 Jonathan: Sorry, Mom. I really (xxx) That's my crib. ((sucking fingers))

53 Katie: No, that's the baby's bed. ((Jonathan places woman doll in crib in nursery.))

54 ((Zach returns, walking on his knees, moving the brother doll in undulating movements in the air along the table's edge.)) Mommy, look. I'm swimming like a mermaid!

55 Katie: Girl, get in this house, now. You're in big trouble, young girl, young man. You're in trouble, young girl.

56 Jonathan: Young [la:dy.]

57 Katie: [Young] lady, young lady. Now get it in your room now.

58 Jonathan: I know but I wanna go to sle::p ((whining)).

59 Katie: But your brother is asleep, I mean your girl

60 Zach: You mean my sister

61 Katie: Yeah, your sister is right here asleep

62 Zach: My sister, my little sister

The episode is full of corrections as the children worked to coordinate layers of situated identities: the boys' classroom gender performances, player expectations for appropriate male character roles, anticipated user identities in toy designs, and the pretended dolls' identities.

First, Zach objected nonverbally with a light glancing rap on Katie’s forehead in line 8. He was offended by her question, “What do you want: a boy or a girl?” because he had already told her in line 1 that he would play “her daughter.” Then, Jonathan explicitly corrected Katie, saying “girls” in lines 11 and 14 and “sister” in line 60, sometimes overlapping Katie’s self-corrections in lines 10 and 12 and again in lines 29, 48 and 55. In lines 21-23, Katie answered Tyrell’s question literally, “Are you guys *girls*?” by assigning gender to the small plastic woman doll that Jonathan held and the somewhat androgynous brother doll that Zach held, “She’s a girl and she’s a girl.” However a mocking inflection in Tyrell’s question—conveyed by stretching a rising intonation and emphasizing the word *girls*—“Are you guys gir:ls?” questioned the appropriateness of Jonathan and Zach as doll players, contesting their choice to play with dolls in the dollhouse and their decisions to animate the dolls as girls. Jonathan answered Tyrell’s taunt with “Yeah” and laughed. However Katie either did not recognize the verbal jab or purposely ignored it, answering matter-of-factly in lines 19 and 21 by identifying and pointing to each doll, “She’s a girl and she’s a girl.”

Jonathan and Zach easily juggled feminine roles and demonstrated expertise in voicing discourse-appropriate feminine scripts for mothers as well as for princesses. When Katie scolded, “You’re in big trouble now, young girl,” she overcame the contradiction of boys-playing-girls and correctly used the play-assigned gender. However, her phrasing “young girl” as a feminine form of “young man” attempted the formal tone of middle-class parental scolding but resulted in a less credible performance. She immediately corrected to a more familiar phrasing “young man” but this correction reverted to mismatched gender. Next, Katie settled for “You’re in trouble, young girl,” choosing an appropriate gender label over convincing mothering discourse.

Jonathan’s correction resolved her dilemma by supplying “young lady,” the proper term to index both class and gender.

The number of corrections in this play episode reveal how gender performances intertwined with doll play and enforced an expectation that boys could animate dolls but should not animate female characters. The expectation for male character enactments in boys’ doll play appeared in other instances during the course of the school year. When children joined Jonathan or Zach in Disney Princess play, other boys insisted on animating male roles for dolls as sons, brothers, and fathers. Tyrell’s search for the only adult male doll (line 45) demonstrates the popularity of the “father” doll in this classroom. A tiny doll with a missing part seemed an unlikely choice for a prized toy but its popularity can be explained by the lack of other male dolls and the value created by most boys’ insistence on male-only roles in doll play that limited the available roles for most boys. This broken doll accrued cultural capital through its masculine plastic molded features (short haircut, sports shirt, trousers that indexed a White middle-class cultural model of fatherhood), through boys’ reluctance to use less overtly male dolls, and through its scarcity that created competition for its possession in the material microeconomy of the dollhouse center.

There are several possible explanations for Tyrell’s attempt to interrupt the scene by shaking the dollhouse repeatedly as in lines 27-28; after repeated attempts (lines 30, 34, 36, 38, 40), Katie ordered him sharply to “Stop that!” and he left the dollhouse area. One possible interpretation of Tyrell’s dollhouse shaking is to see it as an attempt to disrupt Zach’s and Jonathan’s feminine performances and re-establish a hegemonic masculinity. His persistence, however, suggests another reason: a bid to enter the group’s play through physical attempts to be recognized (Corsaro, 2003). Tellingly, once Katie acknowledged Tyrell, albeit with a reprimand

(line 41), he stopped shaking the house and searched for the father doll to join the scenario. Immediately, Jonathan performed two actions that framed Tyrell’s future participation in the group’s play scenario: 1) Jonathan smiled but positioned his body in a way that barricaded the dollhouse, effectively forestalling further potential shaking by Tyrell; and 2) he gazed into the tub as Tyrell rummaged through the toys. The smile and shared gaze communicated friendly interest and collaboration that created an inclusive space that enabled, invited, and directed Tyrell’s participation by demonstrating interest in Tyrell’s selection and by creating a moment of shared activity as the boys selected toys for continued play.

In this instance, no one took up Zach’s mermaid theme (lines 33 and 54) and Zach integrated his Ariel enactment into the existing family play scenario in line 54, “Mommy, I’m swimming like a mermaid!” But as the year progressed, Zach and Jonathan were successful in convincing Tyrell and Gavin (who more often played with a boys-only group of sports fans), and several other boys to join other Disney Princess play scenarios in male roles: as Snow White’s dwarves, or as Cinderella’s brothers.

Negotiating Identity Texts

In the following instance, Garret joined Jonathan and Zach in doll play at the dollhouse: Jonathan used a princess doll to play Cinderella; Zach turned the dollhouse father doll into a malevolent version of Cinderella’s fairy godmother, a “scary godmother;” and Gavin used the tiny dollhouse baby doll and the larger brother doll to play a karate-kicking hero. In several places, the play action came to a halt to clarify who could play with which doll, decisions that pivoted on the children’s willingness to see a doll’s gender as negotiable and to play across gender categories.

Table 2. Negotiating Doll Gender Identities: Boys, Fairy Godmothers, and Scary Godmothers

- 1 Gavin: ((Holding the dollhouse baby doll)) Well, we...Well, the BOYS have the key to the Rushtuh party
- 2 Zach: But we have the fairy godmother! Whish-tuh. (waves hand in an imaginary wand flourish))
- 3 Zach: Here she comes. ((Flying plastic dollhouse father doll, lowers pitch of voice)) Ha-ha-ha. I'm scary godmother! KEE-SHK ((Wand flourish))
- 4 Gavin: ((Bounces baby doll off roof and down the dollhouse to the floor))
- 5 Zach: Scary godmother kills fairy godmother. Yippee! ((Flies father doll around dollhouse))
- 6 Jonathan: ((To Zach)) You're not fairy godmother. You're a witch, remember.
- 7 Jonathan: HI-YA! ((Revives princess doll; all three boys bang dolls on various floors of doll house, punctuating blows with Ha! Puh, puh, puh! and other sound effects))
- 8 Gavin plays with toy CD player, interspersed with karate-like hand chops while clutching the baby doll in one hand and the brother doll in the other.
- 9 Janna, joining the group: What are you guys doing? ((Taps Gavin on the head))
- 10 Gavin: ((To Janna)) Quit it. ((But smiling; turns head away and rolls eyes))
- 11 Zach: ((To Janna, offering the father doll)) You want to be the mom or the dad?
- 12 Gavin: ((Referring to the father doll)) That's not a girl; it's a boy.
- 13 Zach: But it can be whatever we wa::nt.
- 14 Gavin: It's a boy.
- 15 Zach: But it can be a girl or a boy.
- 16 Gavin: I call it a boy.
- 17 ((After looking at the doll for several seconds, Janna puts down the father doll and leaves))

In this event, the boys transformed Cinderella’s fairy godmother into a “scary godmother” whose actions bore little resemblance to the lilting “bippity boppity boo” spell-making of the doting grandmotherly character in the film. The boys’ karate moves and scary godmother sky-diving incorporated mock-fighting and loud sound-effects frequently found in boys’ rough-and-tumble play (Pellegrini, 1991) and storytelling (Newkirk, 2002). In this way, boys appropriated dolls with anticipated identities designed and manufactured for girls and used the dolls to enact fighting scenes typical of superhero media, thus redesigning (New London Group, 1996) and blurring gender identities through their play.

Although Gavin was willing to participate in gender blurring play (albeit while playing with boy dolls to enact male characters), he was unwilling to allow a girl into the boys’ play scenario. When Janna approached, her question, “What are you guys doing?” could be interpreted as a bystander’s question or even as a reproachful response to the boys’ noisy play, but her friendly and inquisitive tone indicated an implicit entry bid to join play. Sociological research in children’s play patterns show that an implicit bid like Janna’s is somewhat more likely to succeed than an explicit request (e.g., “Can I play?”) but less likely than a comment that offers a specific role consistent with the already negotiated play theme (e.g., “I’ll be the mother”) (Corsaro, 2003). Gavin’s smile to the other boys and curt “Quit it” response to Janna, punctuated with eye-rolling, rejected and mocked her request and closed off the play. An unusual occurrence in these kindergartners’ play patterns, Gavin’s actions denied access to a popular girl in the classroom who was rarely excluded from play.

Gavin’s actions are less puzzling when interpreted as a discursive move in hegemonic masculinity that expected and empowered boys to restrict girls from their play. Zach immediately overrode Gavin’s action by responding to her implicit request by offering his own

doll, “Do you want to be the mom or the dad?” Gavin simultaneously interrupted Zach’s invitation and objected that the father doll could only be male, “That’s not a girl; it’s a boy.” Zach objection, “But it can be whatever we want,” voiced an agentic play stance and a poststructuralist view of gender, arguing that players could co-construct and agree to a shared meaning through play and that the doll’s gender was open for negotiation. His use of the pronoun “we” included Gavin in the gender-deciding process. However, Gavin upheld a distinct gender separation and refused to acknowledge the possibility that the gender of an adult male doll could be detached and reassigned. He used his own authority as a boy to make a final assertion that removes the potential for further negotiation and leaves Janna holding a father doll. She drops the doll and leaves, perhaps responding to the implicit rejection of her participation in Gavin’s refusal to create a mother role but also upholding gender boundaries herself by refusing to play a male role as father in the boys’ play scenario.

“Doing girl” and “doing boy” as a set of practices within the context of a gender apprenticeships implies that gender is learned, albeit implicitly, and that gender practices are subject to improvisation and appropriation, suggesting a certain amount of agency. However, apprenticeships are also regulatory, maintaining a set of expectations by sanctioning practices regarded as unexpected or inappropriate. Within discourses of schooling linked to histories of normative ranking of learners, children who resist dominant practices risk being constructed as novices in need of remediation or as “abnormal” and positioned on the outskirts of a community. In this classroom, play provided an insulating and productive space for “doing boy” through princess play.

Doing and Redoing Gender through Play

Jonathan and Zach’s interactions with Tyrell, Katie, Janna, and Gavin demonstrate that play creates especially fluid sites where meanings of proxies, props, and identities are continually contested. Elsewhere I have argued that Disney’s design practices layer identity texts into the characters that they produce and the commodities that they authorize so that Disney Princess products offer strata of anticipated identities. When children play with these toys, they animate hyperfeminine character identities and player roles situated in fairy tale narratives and marketing expectations for ideal consumers (Wohlwend, 2009). As children in this kindergarten replayed Disney Princess films and played favorite storylines and characters, they activated anticipated identities—gendered character roles and consumer expectations sedimented through production and distribution processes—in Disney Princess film images, texts, and products.

Play relationships are inherently multiple and dynamic, as are the shared meanings and cooperative talk that they elicit. Play actions that are consistent with children’s expectations sustain and build shared meanings while play actions that are incongruous with the imagined characters or player identities challenge players to negotiate their meanings or alter the direction of play (Sawyer, 1997). As fans of the Disney Princess films who frequently used the dollhouse, dolls, and accessories to act out stories, Zach and Jonathan challenged other boys’ gender expectations in the peer community of masculine practice (Paechter, 2003). Although Katie, Tyrell, and other children seemed disconcerted by boys playing female roles, Zach and Jonathan appeared to have no qualms about transgressing the dolls’ implicit expectations for girls as the only appropriate players. Part of this willingness to upset the characters’ normative texts may be the boys’ ability to work as a *with*, a pairing in which subjects carry out social actions they would not normally do if alone (Goffman, 1971). Together, the boys were able to nimbly

negotiate play meanings and, importantly, to generate inventive and engaging play themes that attracted more players, constituting an embodied capital.

Play is never an innocent site; its elasticity can be used to challenge gender stereotypes but also to reproduce them, to include peers but also to exclude them. Although the boys were able to create play spaces in the classroom for gender trouble, these spaces shifted quickly in and out of patterns that enforced gender boundaries, as seen in Gavin’s move to maintain boys-only exclusivity. Children still maintained masculine/feminine hierarchical relationships by excluding a girl from their play, by using princess dolls for rough-and-tumble play valued by other boys, The global marketing of commercial media to preschoolers means that millions of young children engage with hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine gender discourses in play spaces—however these engagements take place primarily outside schools. Literacy education in elementary grades has typically not provided opportunities for children to play, read, respond to, or produce media texts; popular culture themes and toys are especially suspect (Marsh, 2006). Some teachers and school administrators object to the messages in toys and video games and discourage children from bringing Barbie dolls, Pokémon cards, or SpongeBob Squarepants toys to school, believing that the popular culture toys are inappropriate or too frivolous for school. A recognition of play as productive pedagogy that imagines sites of contestation for children to explore, test, and transform their relationships with powerful global discourses suggests the necessity of resituating play as a critical literacy and reinstating play as a central component in early childhood curricula.

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ⁱ The names of the children and teacher are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱ Transcription conventions

(()) Nonverbal actions (gesture, handling objects, gaze) and sounds (sound effects, changes in voice pitch)

:

Stretched phoneme

(xx) Unknown word

CAPITALS Louder than surrounding words

[] Speech that overlaps with bracketed speech in adjacent turn