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ABSTRACT

A study examined how critical literacy activities within a homeschooling education project sustained or transformed the participants' awareness of gender identities and inequities in texts. Subjects were two brother pairs who had been close friends for over 4 years at the time of the study. The older brothers (13 years of age) attended a rural county middle school in Northeast Georgia as seventh graders prior to the study. The younger brothers (ages 11 and 10) attended the same elementary school, in fifth and fourth grades respectively. Primary data sources included audio tapes and transcripts of the boys' participation in the critical literacy activities, including 10 that were videotaped to capture the nonverbal actions of the participants. Field notes were taken. Results indicated that one of the older boys thought that gender did not matter, believing that anyone could be or do anything that he or she wanted, although he acknowledged that boys have more sports and job opportunities. The second older boy saw himself as opposite to a girl, and said that if he was a girl he would hate himself. The 11-year-old thought that if he woke up as a girl he would want to be sexy and look like Cindy Crawford. The 10-year-old's view of masculinity was his thinking about heterosexuality. Findings through critical discourse analysis suggest that the four boys were aware of the chameleon-like nature (or loopholes) of the "Discourses" of gender. (Contains 39 references.) (CR)

CRITICAL LITERACY: YOUNG ADOLESCENT BOYS TALK ABOUT MASCULINITIES WITHIN A HOMESCHOOLING CONTEXT

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Introduction

Before I begin this formal paper, I will start with an aside. An aside in the theater is an actor's lines that are supposedly not heard by the other actors on stage. I used asides throughout the paper to provide a temporary release from the constraints of academic writing (St. Pierre, 1997a) and to tell my personal feelings and thoughts as a writer, researcher, and mother. I wrote them when I needed a space to vent or to pause. However, I have begun each section with an aside, although that does not necessarily represent when I wrote it. I am hoping that the asides will add context to the study and tell another story.

- **Aside.** *I must tell you that this is a story about my sons and their two best friends. It is hard for me to tell it to you. I love them very much and do not want to embarrass them in any way. It is also about me as a mother, teacher, and researcher. I think I am trying to hide in the prose that I write–hide me and my children. When I read over what I write, it seems so distant and cold. But when I think and talk about our experiences it makes me feel happy and warm inside. I also know that the so-called critical literacy activities did make a difference. Peyton's comment about the social class differences he observed in the movie, Titanic, and Marshall's critique of a sub sandwich advertisement led me to believe that the boys were beginning to think critically about texts. What I want to do in this research report is to interpret what we did through a critical lens and through academic theory, but I also want to tell the audience that what the boys and I did was hard and at times very uncomfortable for me and for them. And I want to write in such a way that the audience knows that this project–homeschooling my two sons–was one of the most important and wonderful experiences in my life. I got an opportunity that many parents do not ever take or have. Homeschooling is so different from helping your children with their homework after*

school when everyone is tired and following the school's required curriculum. We experienced learning together and exchanging ideas about things of interest to them and to me. We were able to pursue topics that were not part of the school curriculum. But that is another story that won't be told here. Here you will read about critical literacy and the boys and my talk about masculinities.

The purpose of this study was to describe, interpret, and explain the changes in the participants' (four boys aged 10-13) awareness to how masculinity constructs and is constructed by texts–written and spoken. To do this, the participants–Peyton and Marshall Young (my sons); Blake and Dylan Smith (pseudonyms)–explored critical literacy activities within a homeschooling education project. Specifically, the research question that guided my study was: How do the critical literacy activities within a homeschooling education project sustain or transform the participants' awareness of gender identities and inequities in texts? This paper is limited to an analysis of the boys' participation in critical literacy text-based discussions that examined practices of masculinity.

In my study, critical literacy activities provided a framework in which to examine how language is used to inscribe practices of masculinity in written and spoken texts. A grasp of critical literacy necessitates an understanding of how social contexts and power relations work together to produce unequal practices of masculinity (or femininity) in texts (Gilbert, 1993). The word "critical" is derived from critical theory, a social transformation theory that assumes that we live in a world of unequal power and resource distributions. Critical theory also rejects the notion that there can ever be objective and neutral productions and interpretations of texts due, in part, to these unequal distributions of power and resources (Commeyras, 1994). Critical theory explains the production and interpretation of texts as mediated by hierarchical social institutions and relations of power. It also assumes that if people understood how the unequal distributions operated, they might resist them and work toward a more just social order (Lenzo, 1995). Critical literacy activities are a means

to this end.

The aim of critical literacy is to get readers to question texts and see how texts provide selective versions of the world (Jongsma, 1991). Critical literacy is an explicit awareness of the plurality of meanings that are determined by the knowledge, assumptions, values, and beliefs of the reader (Davies, 1996). It offers opportunities for readers to gain new insights about their personal and social relations, about how they are positioned by texts, and about how they position texts. Critical literacy activities encourage an awareness of how social practices become normalized within everyday talk and action (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997). This awareness leads readers to an understanding that their responses to texts are not ideologically neutral, but instead are shaped by the text, by institutionalized literacy and language practices, and by the larger society (Kempe, 1993). Critical literacy activities enable readers to produce and analyze alternative readings, instead of passively accepting the dominant readings that tend to support particular social relations and institutions.

Rationale

As a literacy teacher, I explored many instructional and evaluation options in an effort to find ways to encourage my students to become readers, writers, and learners. As a mother, feminist, teacher, and researcher, I am concerned with the limited view of gender that my sons are learning as they participate in written and spoken literacy practices. I would like my sons to be aware that they have legitimate choices about their identities as boys and men. Like Davies and Banks (1992), I believe that humans are not passively shaped, but that they actively take up as their own the practices of the Discourses[1] that have shaped them. In order to make choices, we must develop a critical awareness of the constitutive force of the dominant Discourses of gender and how our

1. Gee (1996) defines Discourse (with a capital D) as our ways of being in the world. Each Discourse has a tacit theory as to what counts as a normal person within the Discourse and defines what the right way is for each person to speak, listen, act, think, feel, dress, read, write, and on and on. In other words, Discourses are "ways of being people like us" (Gee, 1996, p. viii).

actions and beliefs, in turn, can and do shape the practices of the Discourses of gender.

This study was designed to combine my interests in alternative educational options and literacy practices and gender. I explored alternative literacy practices, specifically critical literacy activities within the contexts of homeschooling, a growing alternative educational option in the United States and Canada. This exploration provided opportunities for me as a teacher and researcher to develop new insights about how critical literacy activities work to question practices of masculinity. For example, critical literacy activities asked the boys to explore and question practices of heterosexuality, dominance, aggression, competition, and bravery. Like Davies (1996), I believe that unless we develop strategies with which boys and young men can work toward destabilizing hegemonic masculine practices that define men in opposition to women and subordinated males (e.g., gays, "weenies", and "wimps"), gender equity will be only superficial, at best. Critical literacy activities have the potential to become such strategies.

This study also provided me with opportunities to develop insights into how critical literacy activities could be facilitated. The boys' and my experiences and reactions to these activities and my previous experiences as a school-based literacy teacher served to inform and stimulate such insights so that I could contribute to the current discussion aimed at reconceptualizing and reinventing adolescents' literacies (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Luke & Elkins, 1998).

Theoretical Perspective and Related Literacy

- ***Aside.*** *I never felt comfortable facilitating critical literacy activities during homeschooling. As I read over my field notes, I am sure that part of my discomfort was related to the stance I was taking as a feminist. My past teaching beliefs haunted me as I fought the urge to remain neutral as I conducted critical literacy activities. Neutrality, I now believe, is an impossible goal–one I could never achieve as a classroom teacher. Pretending to be neutral*

only perpetuates the status quo or "common sense" beliefs about gender that we bring to texts. Another source of discomfort was the boys' resistance and their stated disinterest and dislike for talking about gender. The boys said gender was my interest not theirs. Part of me hated pushing my agenda on the boys; another part of me felt it was my social obligation. And another part of me knew in order to complete my research the boys and I had to talk about gender.

Language as a Social Practice

Central to my study is a focus on language as a social practice. Thinking about language as a social practice challenges the assumption that language is a neutral tool for communication (Kress in Kamler, 1994). It enabled me to see how gendered identities are constructed by interactions with texts (written and spoken) and with text images (visual and aural). Language as a social practice draws attention to what language does and how it functions to represent and construct gender. From this perspective, language is seen as both a practice that shapes gender and one that is shaped by gender. Through language the boys learned how to "do gender" correctly in different social contexts (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Relations of gender, power, and difference operate in and through language practices (Kamler, 1994) and affect how gender "gets done".

Critical literacy assumes that language is a social practice (Fairclough,1992). It encourages readers to become aware of how texts are produced and interpreted as they draw upon their backgrounds (Fairclough, 1989). In my study, critical literacy practices facilitated talk about gender that questioned common sense notions of masculinity and encouraged an awareness of how practices of masculinity become normalized and are regulated within everyday talk and action (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997).

Masculinities

During the last decade, there has been new thinking about the concept of masculinity

(Jackson & Salisbury, 1996). This thinking questions the notion of a unified definition of the term and challenges the notion that there is one way to "do" masculinity. The concept of a natural or essential way to do masculinity has given way to a notion of masculinities, signifying multiple Discourses or ways of doing masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995, 1996; Hearn & Morgan, 1990). This concept allows one to think about the relational nature of the practices of masculinity to race, class, sexual orientation, and social contexts.

Critical Literacy and Discourses of Masculinity

Masculine identities and practices are also constructed, defined, and sustained in and through the language of texts (Walkerdine, 1990). These practices become common sense and naturalized as they are constantly repeated within social contexts (Butler, 1990; Gilbert, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Critical literacy activities open up possibilities for boys (and girls) to explore how their gender identities are defined by texts and, in turn, how their gender identities influence their interpretations of texts. Gilbert (1997) suggested that critical literacy is a way to explore and denaturalize the language that constructs and maintains dominant Discourses of femininity and masculinity.

Methods

- ***Aside***. *Things left out:*

  Marshall learned to do the laundry

  Peyton began cooking for himself and doing the dishes

  Blake became a "great communicator"

  Dylan loved to bake chocolate chip cookies

  Sometimes, homeschool looked like school

  I found Peyton and Marshall reading and writing in their spare time

  In April, I worried about not covering all the school's required curricula

Marshall became a more confident reader

Context of the Study

The homeschooling project took place at the residences of the Young and the Smiths during the second semester of the 1996-1997 school year. Over the 18 weeks of the project, the two brother pairs withdrew from public school and participated in a thematic, inquiry-based program of study. The four boys met together in a mixed-aged group at Young's house 3 days a week and at Smiths'(pseudonym) 2 days a week. The critical literacy activities took place exclusively at the Young' home and were embedded in the reading, writing, and social studies curriculum at least once a week. For instance, critical literacy text-based discussions occurred as the boys read and talked about biographies of Thomas Jefferson and Jimmy Carter. These discussions provided the boys an opportunity to contrast how practices of masculinity were represented in texts with how the boys had experienced them. The boys also participated in weekly book club discussions that often focused on a critical analysis of how masculinity was constructed in the self-selected fiction books they were reading (e.g., Where the Red Fern Grows, Dune, Stranger in a Strange Land, and Stewart Little). Questions guiding such critical literacy text-based discussions included (a) What characteristics or actions does the author use to describe the male characters ? (b) What does the text tell you about being a boy and how does this relate to your own experiences of being a boy? (c) Why do you think the main character was portrayed as male? Would it have made a difference if he had been female instead?

The Participants

The two brother pairs had been close friends for over 4 years at the time of the study. The older brothers, Peyton Young and Blake Smith (both 13 years of age) attended a rural county middle school in Northeast Georgia as seventh graders prior to the study. They were in advanced placement classes together and played soccer on the same competitive club team. The younger

brothers, Marshall Young (age 11) and Dylan Smith (age 10), attended the same elementary school. Marshall was in fifth grade and Dylan was in fourth. Although they were in different grades, they often played at recess together and considered themselves best friends. Like their older brothers, they were also teammates on a competitive club soccer team.

Data Sources

The primary data sources included audiotapes and transcripts of the boys' participation in the critical literacy activities. Ten of the critical literacy activities were also videotaped to capture the nonverbal actions of the participants. I noted these actions directly on the audiotaped transcripts of the same critical literacy activity. Field notes were also written the three days I was responsible for instruction. On the days that a critical literacy activity had taken place, I listened to the audiotape of the activity as I typed my field notes. Secondary data sources included participants' written surveys, a parent survey, the boys' written reflections about their participation in critical literacy activities, artifacts of the boys' participation in activities related to gender identities or inequities (e.g., autobiographies and collages) and transcripts of audio-taped parent interviews.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Theoretical framework. Fairclough's (1989, 1992) critical discourse analysis (CDA) provided a guide for analyzing the boys' talk about gender. As a method, CDA allowed me to look at the relationships among texts, participant interactions, and social contexts. CDA considers language as a social practice and assumes asymmetrical power distributions within and among three different social contexts–an immediate local context (e.g., homeschooling), a wider institutional context (e.g., family, youth sports, school), and the larger societal contexts (e.g., Discourses of gender and social class). CDA permitted a study of how the boys' local interactions interrelated with their personal knowledge, beliefs, values, and assumptions. Further, CDA enabled me to explore how institutionalized social practices of family and school, and the larger societal Discourses of gender,

influenced the boys' local interactions as they talked about gender.

CDA procedure. Fairclough (1989) laid out three dimensions of CDA–description, interpretation, and explanation. The nature of the analysis, which shifts from one dimension to another, is not linear. The descriptive dimension provided an initial starting point for my analysis. I examined the textual features of the transcripts and visual records of a discourse event (discourse with a lower case "d" denotes connected stretches of language, such as the boys and my participation in a particular critical literacy activity). Then I wrote descriptions of discourse events that included the textual features (e.g., vocabulary, tone, turn-taking, directness of speech, and facial expressions) as well as what the boys and I said or did. I included selected transcripts of talk about gender identities or inequities. I returned to this dimension often to clarify, add, or delete as I wrote my interpretations and explanations.

After I had begun a description, I started to interpret the boys' and my interactions. Interpretation is concerned with how the texts and interactions are mediated by the participant's backgrounds, beliefs, values, and assumptions. This meant that I used what I knew about the boys and their families to make inferences about why they said or did certain things. Fairclough (1989) proposed that the purpose of interpretation was to make explicit how the participants' knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and values mediated their understanding of texts. I was able to do this because I knew the boys well.

Finally, I wove into the analysis an explanation of how the Discourses of masculinity and social class shaped the boys' interactions during the critical literacy activities. Explanation connects the description and interpretation to the larger social contexts. The objective of this dimension is to portray a Discourse as part of a social practice. That is, explanation seeks to show how the practices of a Discourse are determined by social structures and how, in turn, shape those structures. A focus on relations of power is the key to explanation. In this study, explanation was guided by

questions adapted from Fairclough (1989) such as: (a) How did the relations of power between the boys and me and among the boys affect our interactions within the homeschool contexts? (b) How did the institutions such as family or youth sports influence the boys' participation in critical literacy activities and their thinking about masculinities? and (c) How did the local, institutional, and societal contexts work together to sustain or transform the Discourses of masculinity for the boys? My explanation was enhanced as I compared my data to the existing literature on masculinities and critical literacy. Often what I read in the literature inspired me to return to the original data and add to my description, identify another discourse event, or revise my explanation.

On-going analysis procedure. During data collection, I reread all my field notes and transcripts and selected a discourse event that I wanted to think more about. This event became the focus of what I called a CDA vignette. The purpose of writing a CDA vignette was to interpret the event by relating the textual features of the boys' interactions to the local, institutional, and societal contexts. I incorporated the three dimensions of CDA–description, interpretation, and explanation–into the written vignettes. I built upon these written vignettes during my final analysis. In order to do so, I used the following analysis procedures.

Final analysis procedure. After data collection was completed and all transcripts were typed and corrected, I coded the data. The purpose of the coding was to identify traces of the three social contexts–local, institutional, societal–in the data. For example, when reference was made by Blake about the influence his father had on his beliefs about masculinity, I coded that "institutional" (i.e., family). Coding helped me trace how the different social contexts influenced the boys' participation in the critical literacy activities and ultimately their talk about gender.

Coding led me to conduct a textual analysis. The purpose of this examination was to understand the boys' and my role in the critical literacy text-based discussions. I selected four transcripts that were representative of the critical literacy discussions the boys and I had about the

specific connection between how masculinity was represented texts to how they had experienced masculinity in their lives.

Next, I sorted the data into different word processing files based on specific criteria. For instance, prior to writing about the boys' understanding and critique of gendered stereotypes, I sorted all the data that related to this topic into a file labeled Stereotypes. This technique helped me organize and reduce a rather large data set. Another way I sorted the data was by making a data wall. I taped four large sheets of brown paper to the walls in my office. Each sheet represented one of the boys, and as I reread all the data, I wrote on each boy's wall any written or spoken comments he had made about himself or the other boys. I also taped photographs and artifacts the boys had produced on their respective walls. This graphic representation served not only as a sorting strategy, but also as a way to make the boys become real again. I had read and reread the data so often that the boys had simply become objects of study to me.

Finally, I followed Fairclough's (1989) suggested CDA procedures as outline above to build upon or write new CDA vignettes. As I wrote, I moved within the three dimensions (description, interpretation, explanation) and focused on answering my research question: How do the critical literacy practices within a homeschooling education project sustain or transform the participants' awareness of gender identities and inequities in texts?

Interpretation and Discussion

- ***Aside.*** *The tea party. After our guided tour of places of interest in Plains, Georgia, home of Jimmy Carter, Mary and I took the boys to tea at the Magnolia Tea Room. We were welcomed in the tearoom by a lovely African American woman wearing in a yellow dress. To our surprise, she invited us to select a hat to wear during tea from the many that were arranged on tables, chairs, and shelves around the room. The room was full of hats, gloves, lace, and furs. Quickly, the hostess showed the boys where the boy hats were and they*

selected one from that group. Marshall choose a brown fedora and looked a little like a gangster; Peyton looked like a man in Renoir's painting, Boating Party with his straw boater's hat; Dylan looked like my Virginia gentleman grandfather in his straw panama; and Blake in his captain's white cap had the look of the skipper on Gilligan's Island. Mary selected a feathered black velvet hat, and my navy hat had a wide brim and veil. We all looked elegant! We laughed and teased each other as we made our selections and found our seats at our reserved table. As we waited for the fresh scones to come out of the oven, Marshall left for a few minutes. When he returned, he was decked out in mink from head to toe. He had found a mink hat and a mink cape that he donned for the occasion. What a sight! After much laughter, Marshall changed back into his fedora.

Using CDA as my analytical framework, I offer an interpretation and explanation of the boys' participation in the critical literacy activities in which they examined practices of masculinities. Participation in the critical literacy activities led the boys to recognize practices of masculinity and to question the practices of hegemonic Discourses of masculinity. This section consists of three parts. First, I present portions of each boy's profile. These profiles represent what the boys said and wrote about themselves. Next, I provide a CDA analysis of the critical literacy activities that focused on the dualistic and oppositional representation of gender identities in texts. Last, I reflect upon how the boys began to question the rigidity of the practices of masculinity and began to consider the instability and uncertainty of gendered identities.

Masculinities Through the Eyes of the Boys

Peyton. At 13 years old, Peyton believed that he could do or be anything that he wanted. He extended this belief to everyone else in the world regardless of race, class, or gender. He commented on at least one occasion [Field notes 3/6/97] that gender did not matter. Although he said he believed that everyone could be what they wanted to be, he acknowledged that boys had

more sports and job opportunities. He wrote, "I would rather be a boy because boys still get more opportunities to play sports. Like there is no women's soccer leagues or baseball or football. And there are more job opportunities" [Written survey 2/4/97]. This insight, however, did not seem to hold steady throughout the project. For instance, during a discussion about the unjust working practices of the Nike Corporation oversees, Peyton defended Nike saying that the women and children did not have work for Nike if they did not want to. Although Peyton did not agree with the practices that Nike seemed to condone, he believed that it was the women and children's free choice whether to work for Nike or not, "If they didn't want to do it, they could look for another way of income" [Transcript 4/4/97 p. 11]. What Peyton did not believe (or want to believe) was a possibility that I brought up–that individuals who worked for Nike in Vietnam may not have had other work choices available to them due to their race, social class, or gender. Peyton had every reason to question my perspective based on his own experiences as a blond-haired, blue-eyed middle-class boy.

Blake. Thirteen-year-old Blake saw himself as opposite to girl. Reflecting on how his autobiography represented him as a boy he wrote, "I'm 100% boy because I do not want to be a girl. I did not actually say that in my book [Short Stories of My Life] but it is true"[Artifact, 4/18/97]. Blake was adamant that he not look like a girl in anyway. My first inkling of this was in his response to the survey question, "How would your life be different if you woke up as a girl?" He wrote,

> If I woke up as a girl I think I would hate myself. Everything would go down the drain. I would have to quit my soccer team...I couldn't play for A.C. Milan or Ajax when I grow up or anything. I would have to be a teacher or secretary. Luckily, they do have a women's national soccer team. Committing suicide would be right along the line...[Survey 2/4/97].

Perhaps one of the reasons for Blake's thinking was his perception of gender inequities in

sports and in the job market. For Blake, his goal [Artifact 4/22/97] of being a world-class soccer player was closely tied to him being male. Being a girl, Blake thought, would limit his ability to reach his goal of playing professional soccer in Europe. This would be devastating to him given that much of his life was centered upon achieving this goal.

Marshall. Even though 11-year-old Marshall's gendered identities were closely tied to soccer, he wanted people to think of him as "cool" [Survey 2/4/97]. Part of "doing" cool for Marshall was displaying an interest in girls' and women's bodies. For instance, when I asked the boys to write how their lives would be different if they woke up as a girl, Marshall immediately began laughing and said that he would "be sexy!" He then wrote if he had to be a girl (though he would prefer not to be) he would want to be sexy and look like Cindy Crawford. He could hardly wait to share his written answer with the other boys [Field notes 2/4/97], and in turn the others anxiously waited for him to share. They laughed as he read his answer, especially the part where he described that he "would have jiggly things on his chest" [Survey 2/4/97]. Similarly, during a critical examination of teen magazines, Marshall made lots of comments about "the babes" that made Peyton, Blake, and Dylan laugh. He shared the pictures of "the babes" with them and held them up to the video camera. The boys seemed to expect Marshall to make comments about girls' bodies, and many times, Marshall lived up to their expectations. Through his interactions with others, Marshall constituted himself and was constituted as heterosexual male (Cameron, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Dylan. Dylan was the youngest of the boys at 10 years of age. He is a gentle and quiet child. Like the other boys, playing soccer was very important to him. However, it seemed less important to him than the others. One example of Dylan's view of masculinity was his thinking about heterosexuality. After the boys wrote autobiographies, Dylan noted that his autobiography represented him as a heterosexual because "...I am a boy who wants to get married to a girl when I

grow up..."[Artifact 4/18/97]. Peyton concurred and said that Dylan had described himself as a heterosexual because, "he wants to have a wife; he doesn't want to have a husband"[Transcript 4/18/97].

Like the other three boys, his experiences as a family member influenced his views of masculinity. As he participated in the Smith family, he learned how to be a son, as well as a father. His goals included going to college, having a big house, having two great kids, and later being a grandfather [Artifact 4/18/97]. Dylan imagined that his adult life would include marriage and children and be similar to his present family life.

In summary, CDA revealed how the boys' ways of doing and thinking about masculinity were shaped by the Discourses to which they had access. These Discourses were located within the middle-class structures of family and youth sports and aligned themselves with the more hegemonic practices of masculinity–heterosexuality, power, dominance, privilege, and competition. They also created positions from which the boys were "invited to speak, listen, act, read, write, think, feel, believe, and value..."(Gee, 1996, p. 128).

Recognizing and Questioning Practices of Masculinity

The division of people into male and female categories is fundamental to much of our talk and understanding of identities. It is hard to imagine a world not so divided (Davies, 1993). However, such division is far too simplistic as the literature on masculinities suggests. The practices of masculinity differ within and between social contexts and throughout history. In other words, there are multiple ways of doing and thinking about masculinity. This section focuses on how a variety of texts portrayed the way "boys are supposed to be" (Peyton Young, personal communication, 1/25/98). It seemed to the boys that, the minimal requirement for being a boy was not being a girl or "not being a wuss like a woman" [Field notes 2/14/97].

Marshall knew right away that the character, Stewart Little in the book Stewart Little (White,

1945) was male even though he was a mouse. He said that he could tell Stewart was a boy because "the mouse had to be pretty brave to go down into the drain, something could go wrong, probably lots of bugs and it would be pretty scary and dark..."[Transcript 2/7/97]. As indicated earlier, according to Marshall "boys are more braver than girls" [Transcript 2/7/97]. This belief was only briefly questioned by Blake when he asked, "Are all boys and girls like that?" [Transcript 2/7/97]. Marshall decided that most girls were in fact, not as brave as boys with the exception of maybe "redneck girls, they aren't afraid of spiders" [Transcript 2/7/97]. Here Marshall recognized a practice of hegemonic masculinity–bravery. It appeared to be common sense to Marshall that bravery was a masculine practice. He also hinted at an awareness of how social class affects practices of gender when he said that redneck girls were not afraid.

Bravery also made the character Billy in Where the Red Fern Grows (Rawls, 1961) recognizably male to Dylan. He recognized Billy as a boy because, "... he likes dogs and hunting, he lives in the mountains and he is not afraid of the mountains" [Transcript 2/7/97]. Peyton added that he remembered from his reading of Where the Red Fern Grows that Billy camped in the woods by himself. Peyton, Marshall, and Dylan agreed that they admired Billy's bravery and acknowledged that they were not brave enough to camp in the woods by themselves. Blake said that he would camp alone and would not be convinced otherwise:

Josephine: Would y'all be that brave?

Dylan: No

Blake: Yeah

Josephine: [sarcastically] Yeah, you would go into the woods?

Marshall: You would not!

Peyton: [Laughing in a way to tease Blake]

Blake: I bet you I would.

Dylan: Maybe at the end of the woods

Peyton: I bet you wouldn't go back into the deep woods, like he [Billy] hunts in!

Josephine: [to Peyton] Would you?

Blake: Bet me, bet me!

Dylan tried to find a way that he could be recognized as being brave like Billy when he said that he might camp at the "end of the woods." Marshall attempted to resolve the bravery issue by suggesting later in the discussion that "being a little bit scared of stuff" didn't necessarily make you less of a boy [Transcript 2/7/97]. Dylan and Marshall tried to shape recognizable practices of masculinity to fit their own desires. However, Peyton later disagreed with his brother's comment; he said that being afraid would make you a "weenie" [Transcript 2/7/97]. By making this comment Peyton contradicted his own earlier statement that he would not camp alone. Apparently, it was hard for Peyton to give up the masculine ideal of bravery in the face of Blake's proposed bravery.

In addition to the hegemonic masculine practice of bravery, Blake also recognized the practices of control and power as being characteristic of one's masculinity. Blake reported that Paul, a character in Dune (Herbert, 1965), was obviously male because he had "lots of control...and power" [Transcript 2/7/97]. Blake believed that Paul, a "walking god," could not have been portrayed as a female because he had a powerful voice and was not a wimp [Field notes 2/20/97]. He also had control over people. Blake compared Paul to his father, whom he said had lots of control [Transcript 2/7/97]. The boys agreed that Paul sounded like their fathers. When their fathers spoke (unlike when their mothers spoke), the boys reported they did whatever they had been told to do. Blake also compared Paul to women. He imagined that if Paul had been female, his powers would have been different–Paul would have made people be kind [Field notes 2/20/97]. Clearly, the social institution of family influenced Blake's and the other boys' recognition of masculine practices. Blake knew Paul was male because, like his father, he had control and people listened to

him. In keeping with a dualistic form of thinking about gender, Blake, like Dylan and Marshall, recognized masculine practices as being different from those of feminine practices.

Unlike the other boys, Peyton read a book that challenged this type of dualistic thinking. After reading a couple of chapters of A Stranger in a Strange Land (Heinlein, 1991), Peyton could not tell me how he knew the character Valentine Marshall Smith, a Martian, was male--he just knew it. He reasoned that being a Martian "made him naturally different." He said the author described the Martian as having a "boyish face" that looked like Michelangelo's David (Transcript 2/7/97). But I persisted with more questions:

Josephine: Is he more male or female?

Peyton: Male.

Josephine: What makes him male?

Peyton: He's got a wiener.

Josephine: Does it say that?

[No answer, only giggles from all]

Josephine: What's an action that he does to let you know he is a male?

Peyton:[frustration in voice] He doesn't do anything, he only takes commands from someone else because...

Josephine: So he could be male or female?

Peyton: Yeah!

Josephine: So how do you know?

Peyton: Because the scientist said he was.

Josephine: What actions make him male?

Peyton: But he doesn't have action!!

Blake: Then it wouldn't make any difference if male or female.

Marshall: It wouldn't make it as exciting [if he was a female].

Peyton: [very frustrated] It doesn't have any actions!!

Josephine:[I back off] Ok, Ok, I understand [Transcript 2/7/97].

Although this kind of questioning could have encouraged Peyton to essentialize male and female characteristics, as the other boys had done, he did not do so. He had come across a character that was not easy to recognize as male by physical or emotional characteristics, who represented an ambiguous connection between actions and sex. Peyton had to rely on the narrator of the story to tell him the gender of the Martian. My questions were frustrating to him in that he knew the Martian was a man because the author said so. He guessed the Martian had a penis, but he could not identify any actions that would clearly mark the Martian's gender.

I exercised power over Peyton by repeatedly asking him to tell me how he recognized the character as male. In retrospect, I was asking Peyton to distinguish between sex and gender–a theoretical distinction made by West and Zimmerman (1987)–at a time when he was probably not aware that such a distinction existed. However, as he read further in the book, the gendered identity of the Martian became more visible to him. He learned that the Martian possessed unusual power and was able to make women faint by kissing them [Transcript 2/14/97]–both revered practices within hegemonic Discourses of masculinity.

On one hand, it was easy for the boys to recognize practices of masculinity that were exhibited by the characters in their books. Masculine practices were not feminine practices– boys were braver than girls, and men had more control and power than women. Yet, on the other hand, it was impossible to recognize these practices as exclusively masculine. Were all boys braver? Could female characters be powerful? Were all characters gendered? The boys' responses to my questions about masculine practices portrayed in books reflected the power of hegemonic Discourses of masculinity to influence how boys are supposed to be. Boys and men are supposed to

be brave, powerful, and have control over situations. It was difficult for the young adolescent boys in this study to discount such practices as legitimate masculine practices, especially since they were working very hard at becoming men (Whitson, 1990). The boys tended to support the male stereotypes portrayed in the books they read. While the boys recognized certain practices as masculine, they also wanted to alter them–boys could be a little bit scared and some girls were brave and powerful.

Considering Instabilities and Uncertainties of Gendered Identities

While reflecting on how the critical literacy activities sustained or transformed the boys' awareness of gendered identities and inequities in texts, I thought about the notion of "word with a loophole" (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 232-233). Bakhtin's "word with a loophole" represents the notion that words have no final or ultimate meaning. That is, words have no meaning to which everyone will agree without exception (Clark & Holquist, 1984). The boys' awareness of gendered identities and inequities was like a "word with a loophole" (Bakhtin, 1984, pp., 232-233). At times, the boys questioned the rigidity of the practices of masculinity and talked or wrote about transforming or sustaining them. Other times, they sanctioned these practices as their own.

Critical discourse analysis revealed that the four boys were aware (at least sometimes) of the chameleon-like nature (or loopholes) of the Discourses of gender. As they participated in critical literacy activities, they found examples of how gendered identities were represented in texts, and they began to see loopholes in their taken for granted notion that masculinity was the opposite of femininity. They identified loopholes when they talked about men or boys who were not always brave. These loopholes became especially visible when the so-called masculine practices did not match with their own experiences as boys. When this happened the boys tended to transform the practice to better fit their own experiences.

For example, during the critical literacy activities that focused on bravery and power the

boys attempted to transform the meanings of those practices. As they interacted with each other, they talked about the appropriateness of boys being brave and having power. They drew upon their past experiences as boys who had experienced being afraid. They also drew upon their experiences with texts that portrayed powerful men and boys who were braver than girls. They desired practices of masculinity that would allow them to be a little bit scared, but still be recognized as masculine not feminine. Through this talk, within the homeschool context, three of the boys transformed their understanding of bravery when they admitted they were not as brave as a character in a particular book. The boys produced a new meaning for men being brave as they interacted with their texts and each another. However, even after a discussion in which their talk led me to believe they might transform the meaning of masculine bravery, all four boys returned to describing themselves and each other as brave. The inconsistencies in their personal meanings for the practices of masculinity, such as being brave, exemplify the notion of unfinalized and contextualized meanings, or "word with a loophole".

Parting Thoughts

- ***Aside***. *Written reflections on homeschooling.*

  Blake: "Our research reports that we did asked more of us in homeschool. We did much more research before we actually started writing...we had to be really familiar with the content of the subject."

  Dylan: "I returned [to school] with a better knowledge...of the subjects, smarter".

  Marshall: "I learned about stuff [in homeschool] that I had never heard of, like gender...".

  Peyton: "We have to do whatever the teacher says [in school]. In homeschool we chose what we wanted to study...."

  Dylan: "We didn't have to be so quiet [in homeschool]". (Being able to talk, he wrote, had helped him understand more).

Marshall: "I liked talking about books because you get to know about the other books that your friends and brother were reading, so it is like reading 4 books at a time."

Josephine: The boys' comments validated the homeschool project for me as a mother and a teacher. The boys remembered homeschooling as a meaningful learning experience with their friends and families. However, their comments also made me sad. Sad because the boys lacked enthusiasm for school and thought school did not challenge them. Sad because the homeschooling project is over.

Concerns about the Study

One concern that could be raised about this study is that it is "openly ideological" (Lather, 1986). Lather used the term "openly ideological" to take issue with claims of positivism regarding neutrality and objectivity. She argued that all research has an ideological nature and terms like objectivity and neutrality serve to disguise it. According to her thinking, openly ideological research is no more or less value-laden than positivist research. Rather those who conduct research that challenges the status quo in an attempt to establish a more just social order have broken from positivists' insistence on neutrality and objectivity. Examples of openly ideological research include feminist and critical ethnography (Lather, 1986; Lenzo, 1995). These approaches to research run the risk of being theoretically overdetermined (Lenzo, 1995). In other words, "the researchers' political and theoretical enthusiasms are likely to overshadow the logic of the evidence" (Lenzo, 1995, p. 18). When this happens, research becomes a form of advocacy or advertisement (S. Stahl, personal communication, 4/22/97) instead of research that aims to seek understandings, explain, and generate insights (Anderson, 1989).

To address this concern, I deliberately sought response data (St. Pierre, 1997b). St. Pierre posits that the purpose of response data, data gathered through activities such as peer-debriefing and member checks, is to help researchers keep their ideology from "overshadowing the logic of the

evidence" (Lenzo, 1995, p.18). Gathering response data was my attempt to identify weaknesses in my emerging conceptual analysis that may have been due to my inability to see beyond my own ideology. I gathered response data as I talked to my peer-debriefers–professional colleagues and the four boys, especially my two sons. I also gathered response data from my husband and the other two parents. Their responses, along with the other peer-debriefers, helped to challenge and disrupt my own ideological understandings. For instance, when I told the other three parents about the boys' discomfort in talking about gender, they argued that it was not because the activities were asking the boys to challenge their beliefs about masculinity, as my ideology had led me to believe. It was, instead, because the boys were simply not interested in talking about gender. Their evaluation of the situation caused me to pause and reconsider my stance and interpretations.

Another concern that could be raised relates to the approach I took to analyze my data. CDA is highly inferential. It assumes unequal power relations in the social world and seeks a way to uncover and understand them (Fairclough, 1989, 1995). Fairclough's emphasis on the strength of local, institutional, and societal contexts in shaping unequal power relations has led to accusations that his approach is reductionistic and overly deterministic (Gilbert, 1992), a concern shared with other approaches to critical research (Anderson, 1989; Quantz, 1992). Critics suggest that Fairclough's analysis implies that people are puppets of institutions and Discourses–doing and acting in accordance to the structures of society (Gilbert, 1992). They believe that his analytical framework does not account for the struggles that take place within and between the local, institutional, and societal contexts.

In an attempt to lessen these criticisms, I did two things. First, as I conducted my analysis, I examined the local interactions carefully. I paid attention to who talked, what was said, what was not said, and how it was said. I made inferences about how the boys' tone of voice and body language may have shaped their local interactions. Second, as I wrote my analysis, I adapted CDA's

framework to my data (Fairclough, 1989). Although, Fairclough does not offer specific guidelines for conducting CDA, the three dimensions he outlined–description, interpretation, and explanation–proved essential to my final analysis and lessened the potential for my analysis to be overly deterministic. Although I took these precautionary measures to ensure that my analysis was not overly deterministic, questions can still be raised about my interpretations and explanations. Power relations can be "read into" (Gilbert, 1992, p. 55) all interactions and related to social contexts. I can make no guarantee that there are not other possible interpretations and explanations; in fact, I can most assuredly guarantee that there are.

Insights from the Study

It is increasingly important, as our knowledge of literacy expands, for readers to be aware that the language of texts is not neutral; language inscribes practices of gender in subtle and not so subtle ways. Critical literacy activities have been suggested as a way to explore how texts construct gendered identities and inequities (Davies, 1996; Gilbert, 1997). These activities have also been recommended as a way for boys and young men to work toward destabilizing hegemonic masculine practices (Davies, 1996). However, few studies have been conducted that focus on critical literacy and masculinities. This study provides some insights into how critical literacy activities work to transform or sustain an awareness of gender identities and inequities in texts.

One insight that was particularly interesting to me as a literacy educator was how the success of critical literacy activities depended so much on the local contexts and power relations. Each boy's individual response during a critical literacy activity was unpredictable and inconsistent. Take for example, the impact of the power relations on the boys' talk about bravery. Among friends and within the homeschool contexts, Dylan admitted that he was not always brave, Marshall redefined bravery, Blake said he was brave, and Peyton thought if a boy was scared he was a weenie (even though Peyton had earlier confessed that he was not as brave as the main character in the book they

were discussing). Power relations became visible when Peyton verbally changed his opinion of boys being afraid. Remember, he did not say that boys who were afraid were weenies until his friend Blake would not admit to being scared. Perhaps one way to diffuse some of these local power relations when facilitating critical literacy activities would be to incorporate more written responses. In this way, the boys could privately critique practices of masculinity, until they were ready to critique them out loud with their peers.

A related insight that deserves further attention came from Peyton. He said that talking about the gender of the character was easier than when talking about people he knew. This insight validates the use of books and other texts to focus discussions on gender. Moving gender outside of one's self is a way to talk about hegemonic masculinity without personal confrontation. It could address the dissonance felt when conversations about gender get too personal.

Critical literacy activities tended to transform the boys' awareness of gendered identities and inequities when the masculine practices portrayed in texts did not match their own experiences. This supports Davies (1996) belief that grounding critical literacy activities in boys' own gendered experience is necessary for boys and young men to work toward destabilizing hegemonic masculine practices. She posited that by doing so, boys would develop an awareness of the how their experiences as boys affected their ways of doing gender and how, in turn, their experiences are influenced by the Discourses to which they have access. Conversely, when the practices represented in texts matched the four boys' own practices, these practices tended to be sustained and condoned. This should not be viewed as a reason to disconnect critical literacy discussions from lived experiences, but a reason to continue them. Through such discussions, boys will have opportunities to hear how others experience masculinity and listen to various viewpoints. This might eventually lead to transforming their awareness of gendered identities.

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