READING GENDER RELATIONS AND SEXUALITY: PRETEENS SPEAK OUT

Lyndsay Moffatt & Bonny Norton
University of British Columbia

Recent research has documented the persistence of unequal gender relations and homophobia in young people's lives. Feminist post-structural theories of gender and socio-cultural theories of learning suggest educators need to understand students' constructions of gender relations, masculine/feminine desires, and sexuality if they hope to challenge these behaviors. In this article, we examine a diverse group of 47 preteens' constructions of gender relations, masculine/feminine desires, and sexuality, using a survey, a story from the popular comic *Archie*, and individual interviews. We found that although participants produced feminist and patriarchal constructions of gender relations, they constructed masculine and feminine sexuality as uniformly heterosexual.

Key words: popular culture, feminism, adolescents, discourse analysis

Des recherches récentes indiquent la persistance de relations inégales entre les hommes et les femmes et de l'homophobie chez les jeunes. Des théories d'apprentissage poststructuralistes féministes au sujet du genre ainsi que des théories socioculturelles donnent à penser que les pédagogues ont besoin de comprendre les constructions que se font les élèves des relations entre les sexes, des désirs masculins et féminins et de la sexualité s'ils espèrent remettre en question ces comportements. Dans cet article, les auteures analysent, à l'aide d'un sondage, d'une histoire tirée de la bande dessinée *Archie* et d'entrevues individuelles, un éventail diversifié de 47 constructions que se font des préadolescents des relations entre les sexes, des désirs masculins et féminins et de la sexualité. Elles ont découvert que les participants ont produit des constructions féministes et patriarcales des relations entre les sexes, mais hétérosexuelles de la sexualité masculine et féminine.

Mots clés : culture populaire, féminisme, adolescents, analyse des discours

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Students throughout Australia, North America, and the United Kingdom report that unequal gender relations and homophobic harassment are a part of their daily lives inside and outside school. Research has documented these kinds of relations and abuses from elementary school through post-secondary school (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Murnen & Smolak, 2000; Pellegrini, 2002; Renold, 2002; Timmerman, 2003). Recent scholarship suggests that anti-oppression curricula/pedagogy will not effect any real change in terms of gender equity or the place of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer (GLBQ) people in the world unless educators begin with a clear understanding of young people's ideas about gender relations, masculine/feminine desires, and sexuality (Butler, 1990; Davies, 1993, 2000; Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 2002; Kelly, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Paechter, 2003a, 2003b; Walkerdine, 1987).

This study is part of a larger program of research that seeks to understand current relationships between literacy, identity, and power (Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995; Norton 2001, December/January, 2002, 2003; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004). In this particular study, we examined a group of fifth, sixth, and seventh graders' engagement with the popular comic book series *Archie*. Elsewhere we have attempted to understand why students engage with texts like *Archie* (Norton, 2003); how texts like this might function as a means to promote social interaction between language learners and target language speakers (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004); and how a feminist reading teacher might approach texts like *Archie* comics (Moffatt & Norton, 2005). In this article, we seek to use *Archie* comics as a vehicle to explore preteens' construc-tions of gender relations, masculine/feminine desires, and sexuality. We ask: What can young readers of *Archie* comics tell us about their constructions of gender relations, masculine/feminine desires, and sexuality?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist post-structural theories of gender and socio-cultural theories of learning suggest that current gender relations and attitudes towards homosexuality are by no means natural, inevitable, or static. These perspectives suggest gender relations and homophobia have been

created through a complex confluence of social and historical events. In addition, these theories assert that parents, students, and teachers are, and have been, active in reproducing and maintaining current gender relations and homophobia and that, given the opportunity, they could be instrumental in creating alternative ways of interacting/viewing sexual diversity. From these perspectives, common ideas, ways of talking and thinking, or discourses can both limit and extend social practices/ ways of being and interacting.

Feminist Post-Structural Theories of Gender

Feminist post-structural theories of gender recommend a relational rather than a rational view of gender and gender inequality. Dillabough and Arnot (2001) have suggested that most feminist sociology of education in the 1970s and 1980s was based on investigating gender and education from a rational understanding of how gender is reproduced in society. Although some researchers during this period focused on issues such as students' self esteem, and others looked at extrinsic phenomena such as state structure, researchers generally relied on ideas of a rational society to help explain gender relations, or more specifically, women's oppression.

During the 1970s and 1980s, theorists such as Blenkley, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) and Gilligan (1982) worked to delineate universal ideas about girls'/women's "ways of knowing" and being in the world. Popular gender equity initiatives were predicated on the idea that gendered ways of learning and teaching sprang from female/male biology or from early childhood socialization. Gender intiatives from this period generally advocated that these ways of being/knowing/learning could be utilized in the creation of more "gender fair" schools (Bryson & De Castell, 1997; Davies, 1993; Walkerdine, 1985).

For many feminist educators the kinds of interventions that sprang from such analyses were attempts to provide students with better role models or to re-socialize young people for gender equity. During this period, few researchers focused on the processes by which children or young people are made into gendered subjects or on the reasons why children/adults might collude in their own subjectification as gendered people. Most researchers during this period accepted that being a boy or

a girl was a matter of biology or the result of early socialization (Bryson & De Castell, 1997; Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 2002; Lorber, 1999; Paechter, 2003a, 2003b).

In more recent years, feminist sociologists have begun to use more relational conceptual frameworks to examine the role of gender in society. These frameworks, often named post-structural, do not attempt to map out universal laws concerning women's or men's experiences but instead work to capture how gender is socially constructed and performed as well as how gender inequality is challenged/reproduced /maintained. In contrast to traditional theories of gender, post-structural theorists of gender have asserted that gender is not something that one *has* but is something that one *does* or performs in particular socio-cultural /socio-historical contexts. This approach can be seen in the work of scholars such as Davies (1989, 1993, 2000), Walkerdine (1985, 1987, 1990) and Weedon (1997) among others. From this perspective, discourse or language is seen as highly significant in the reproduction of/resistance to unequal gender relations and social inequality. This approach recommends a more thorough understanding of common discourses of gender and sexuality in local contexts so that educators, students, and parents concerned with gender inequality and homophobia can challenge the reproduction of these ideas.

Socio-Cultural Theories of Learning

Socio-cultural theories of learning highlight the role that local and larger socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts or "communities of practice" play in learning (Wenger, 1998). This perspective suggests that to design effective learning activities and curricula, educators need to have a thorough understanding of students' socio-cultural contexts, their ideas about such contexts, and their ideas about themselves as potential members of particular communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wertsch, 1991). This approach to learning stands in contrast to traditional theories that have tended to focus on ideas such as individual motivation or self-efficacy to explain why some students embrace particular ways of being or particular curricula and why others do not.

Recently Paechter (2003a, 2003b) has begun to describe the process of becoming a gendered person as a process that is not unlike how children and newcomers learn to participate in various literate, numerate, or linguistic communities of practice. Paechter has suggested that children and newcomers learn to participate in communities of practice or discourses of gender through a kind of apprenticeship. Paechter has argued that what people learn about gender and how people perform their genders are both highly dependent on the socio-cultural and historical context in which they live. Similar arguments could be made about how people learn to participate in communities of practice or discourses of sexuality. In some communities of practice young people may learn to accept sexual diversity or to advocate for gay/lesbian /bisexual/queer civil rights. In other communities of practice, they may learn intolerance, homophobia, or how to maintain heterosexual hegemony.

When faced with the persistence of unequal gender relations and homophobia, researchers from both a feminist post-structural perspective of gender and a socio-cultural perspective of learning raise questions about the ideas and discourses of gender and sexuality that are dominant in young people's lives. These perspectives ask how young people are being apprenticed into a world of patriarchal gender relations and heterosexist ideas of sexuality and why some young people might internalize sexism and heterosexism while others might resist such ideas. These theories suggest understanding how young people are talking and thinking about gender relations and sexuality is an important step towards creating effective interventions to challenge dysfunctional gender relations and injustice. In this study, we map out some of the discourses of gender and sexuality that appear to be common in the lives of a diverse group of preteen students.[1] Our intention is to contribute to a deeper understanding of students' thinking about these issues so that educators can create more effective gender equity and anti-homophobia initiatives.

METHODOLOGY

Norton initiated the larger research project, of which this study is a part, by locating a text that appears to have had enduring popularity outside

school, particularly with preteen readers, yet is seldom, if ever, used within official reading curricula. That text was *Archie* comic books. *Archie* comics held particular allure for us as educators and researchers interested in issues of gender equity, language, literacy, and popular culture because they have had a long history of popularity with students, have been championed as a useful tool for reluctant readers and language learners (Krashen, 1993), and yet have been simultaneously criticized for their sexist depiction of gender relations (Glasberg, 1992).

For those unfamiliar with *Archie* comics, the stories in the series focus primarily on the relationships of a group of middle and upper middle-class white teenagers living in the fictitious American community known as Riverdale. A central theme in *Archie* comics is the rivalry between two feminine characters, Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge, for the attentions and affections of the masculine lead character, Archie Andrews. In any given *Archie* magazine, there are up to a dozen stories, the majority of which focus on this rivalry. Betty and Veronica are depicted as thin, leggy, and busty, and are dressed in fashionable cloth-ing. They concern themselves primarily with shopping and gaining Archie's attentions. Archie and his masculine cohorts, in contrast, are not drawn with the same attention to their physical forms or attire. The masculine characters in the comics range from selfish, bad boy Reggie, the million-aire's son, to affable Jughead and dimwitted Moose. Archie himself does not have a strong characterization. However, one of his most defining characteristics appears to be that he is easily distracted by the female form.

The majority of *Archie* readers are preteens aged 10-12, a population whose views on gender relations and sexuality are often under-represented in the literature. Given the ongoing popularity of *Archie* with this age group and the content of the *Archie* stories, this text appeared to be useful for our examination of preteens' ideas about gender and sexuality.

After selecting this text as a research tool, Norton then designed a survey and administered it to a heterogeneous group of 55 grades five, six, and seven students attending a public elementary school in a multi-cultural, middle-class community in Vancouver. Twenty-seven of these students identified themselves as girls and 28 of the students identified

themselves as boys. Twenty-five of these students spoke languages other than English at home such as Bengali, Cantonese, Farsi, Korean, Mandarin, and Swedish. In creating the survey, Norton located a specific *Archie* story entitled *Fairytale Land Revisited* that appeared to provide particularly rich entry points for discussions about gender relations. This story was colour photocopied and included with the survey. Participants were asked to read the comic and then to answer a variety of questions.

Initial questions in the survey focused on the students' consumption of *Archie* comics to gauge the relative popularity of the series and the students' familiarity with the characters. Ensuing questions focused on the specific story included with the survey. These questions were designed in part to help elicit students' constructions of gender relations. Further analysis has revealed that these questions were also useful for eliciting students' ideas about masculine and feminine desires and sexuality. In the next section, we offer a brief summary of the story *Fairytale Land Revisited* that was included in the survey. This outline is meant to give context to the questions the participants were asked and to provide the reader with enough background to understand the participants' answers.

Fairytale Land Revisited

The story included in the survey, *Fairytale Land Revisited*, appeared to be a particularly rich resource for opening up discussions about gender relations and sexuality with preteens. The richness of this story can be seen in the ways that it is both atypical and typical of the series. *Fairytale Land Revisited* can be seen as atypical of the series because it incorporates a fair amount of feminist discourse in its narrative. As suggested by Glasberg (1992), the majority of *Archie* stories do not appear to engage with issues of gender equity in this way.

In the initial frames of *Fairytale Land Revisited*, Betty addresses the reader directly and asserts that some fairytale characters are bad female "role models." She then proceeds to "correct the situation" through her own interventions with various feminine characters. In each exchange, Betty is presented as a modern girl or as a person who has modern solutions to the character's traditional problems. For example, on her walk through "Fairytale Land," Betty meets Little Bo Peep and Miss Muffett.

When the former tells her in tears that she has lost her sheep, Betty retorts "Crying your fool head off isn't going to find them, girl! You need action! Go out and look for those lost sheep!" When Betty meets Miss Muffett cowering in the presence of a spider, she assists her with a handy can of bug spray.

This characterization of Betty as a competent, sensible, modern girl is also apparent in the way she is dressed. Throughout the comic Betty is dressed in pants, sneakers, and a cut-off long-sleeved sweatshirt. In contrast to some of the other characters she meets in the story, Betty's clothes appear modern and modest. In the final vignette of the comic Betty takes on the role of the traditional fairytale character Little Red Riding Hood. Betty is given a red cape and basket and is asked by her mother to take some food to her grandmother. Betty meets a wolf on her way to her grandmother's house and then encounters him again when she enters her grandmother's cottage. In keeping with the traditional story, when Betty arrives at the cottage she finds the wolf has dressed himself in her grandmother's clothes and is tucked into her grand-mother's bed. The wolf then proceeds to try to get Betty into the bed with him.

The climax of *Fairytale Land Revisited* comes when Archie, dressed as a woodsman, hears cries for help coming from Betty's grandmother's cottage. However, when Archie investigates these cries, he finds it is not Betty, but the wolf who is crying out. Betty, having flipped the wolf out of the bed, is proceeding to trounce him. At this point, Archie inquires whether Betty needs any help. Betty tells him clearly that she does not. With her hands planted firmly on her hips she responds, "Certainly not! Does it look like I need it?"

In this way, once again, Betty is depicted as the kind of person who can solve any problem she is presented with. Up to this point, the story can easily be read as a feminist challenge to feminine stereotypes. In this way, *Fairytale Land Revisited* is fairly atypical of the *Archie* series. However, at this moment Veronica, another feminine character, enters the story. Veronica's entrance serves to revert the story into a more patriarchal narrative. Just as Betty refuses Archie's help, Veronica arrives dressed as a sexy version of Little Red Riding Hood. In contrast to Betty, Veronica is wearing a mini dress, knee-high, high-heeled red boots, and

a short red cape. On her arrival, Veronica sings out that she needs Archie's help because "there are a lot of nasty wolves about." A musical note in Veronica's speech bubble implies that Veronica has delivered her entreaty to Archie in a sing-song voice. In other words, the authors have conveyed a sense that Veronica is not really scared, but that she has used her request as a ploy to gain Archie's attentions. At Veronica's entreaty Archie replies, "I'd be glad to help you, Veronica!" Archie and Veronica then turn from Betty and recede into the distance, hand in hand, with hearts and butterflies floating around them. As they do so, Veronica exclaims "Thank you for carrying my basket, you great big handsome woodsman!"

In the final frame of the story, Betty appears to question her earlier assertions about the virtues of looking after oneself. In this frame, Betty addresses the reader directly and says, "Poor Veronica! Gulp! Doesn't she know those fairytale characters are very outdated?" The word "Gulp!" in the middle of Betty's address to the reader can be taken to signify some misgiving on Betty's part. This word is used consistently in the *Archie* series when characters have some discomfort about something they have said or done, or when they anticipate some negative consequences for their actions.

In an attempt to learn something about the participants' understandings of gender relations, Norton designed the survey to include four specific questions to accompany *Fairytale Land Revisited*. First, the participants were asked to write a summary of the story, retelling it as they would to a friend. Next, they were asked to describe the scene in the final frame. Third, the participants were asked how they thought Betty felt in the final frame and what advice they would give her. Finally, in a more general way, the students were also asked why they thought Betty and Veronica liked Archie. After the surveys were collected, 10 girls and 10 boys were then chosen for individual interviews to allow them to expand their written answers. These interviews were then transcribed in preparation for further coding and analysis. At this stage, Moffatt, the first author, became actively involved in the research project.

ANALYSIS

Working back and forth between the participants' surveys, the transcriptions of the interviews, and the comic itself, Moffatt and Norton developed a variety of categories that reflected the preteens' constructions of gender relations, masculine and feminine desires, and sexuality. At each step we sought to be aware of our own assumptions of what we might find and to check and cross check our coding. In our analysis, we found that 8 of the 55 participants did not provide enough data to give us a clear understanding of their constructions of gender relations, mas-culine and feminine desires, or sexuality. Five of these participants did not answer the questions specific to the story and three of them gave us such idiosyncratic responses that we were unable to gain much insight into their thinking. For example, when asked how she thought Betty felt at the end of the comic, one participant suggested that Betty felt "stressed out from helping the fairytale characters with their problems." These kinds of responses were put aside in our attempt to explore the data in detail because they did not give us much insight into the partici-pants' ideas of gender relations, masculine and feminine desires, or sexuality. The codes we developed focused on the remaining 47 par-ticipants. In our final analysis, four codes, which will be discussed in greater detail, proved most salient in our attempts to understand the participants' ideas of gender relations, masculine and feminine desires, and sexuality. These codes were Patriarchal Discourse, Feminist Discourse, Girl Power/Mixed Messages Discourse, Heterosexist Assumptions/GLBQ Possibilities.

Patriarchal Discourse. The code Patriarchal Discourse was used when participants naturalized a power imbalance in gender relations that gave masculine characters/boys/men more prestige than feminine characters /girls/women. Participants expressed this naturalization of unequal power relations in a variety of ways. For example, when asked what advice they would offer Betty, some participants suggested that Betty should "take any help" that Archie offered, or that she should speak "more nicely." The implication behind these statements, like statements in so many girls' and women's magazines, is that girls can and should improve their personalities, or that there are things that they can or should do so that they are more attractive to boys or men. This

construction of gender relations relies on a power imbalance where boys are the coveted prize that girls must strive for. Similarly, when participants indicated that they saw feminine characters as naturally in competition with each other for masculine attention, we coded such constructions as part of patriarchal discourse. In depicting feminine characters as rivals rather than as allies, we saw the participants constructing a patriarchal gender hierarchy in which they placed a high value on feminine char-acters' connections to masculine characters, while they placed a lesser value on feminine characters' connections to other feminine characters.

We also used the code patriarchal discourse when participants naturalized certain attributes of feminine or masculine characters. For example, a few participants spoke of a particular quality being part of a character's nature. Clara, a grade-six student, told us that "being helpful" and "doing nice things" like "baking cookies" was part of Betty's "nature." We coded this kind of comment as part of patriarchal dis-course because over the last thirty years, one of feminism's central con-tributions has been to question the "naturalness" of certain gender traits and to assert that gender and other social identities are socially con-structed.

Feminist Discourse. We used the code Feminist Discourse when participants depicted gender relations along equitable lines or when they asserted that feminine characters/girls/women were, or should be, as valuable as masculine characters/boys/men. For example, Eva, a grade-five student, told us that she thought Betty felt "okay because she didn't care" about Archie and Veronica pairing off at the end of the story. We coded Eva's comments as part of feminist discourse because she ap-peared to imply that a feminine character did not necessarily need a connection to a masculine character. In other words, in contrast with many participants who recommended that Betty should do whatever she could to "win Archie back," Eva's comments suggested that Betty had value regardless of her connection to a masculine character or her lack of such connection. Similarly, Eva advised Betty that she should "tell Veronica those fairytales are very outdated." We also coded this comment as part of feminist discourse because in effect Eva appeared to orient to Veron-ica's "outdated behaviour" as Betty's most significant

problem, *not* to the fact that Betty had supposedly just "lost" Archie to Veronica. In doing so, Eva appeared to reject a worldview that puts women's connection to men above all other concerns and appears to promote a new way of interacting.

Girl Power/Mixed Messages Discourse. Initially, we collated the codes Feminist Discourse and Girl Power Discourse as a single code for participants who appeared to construct gender relations along equitable lines. However, during our analysis, we found it important to delineate between a discourse of Feminism and a discourse of Girl Power. Throughout our analysis, we found that many participants appeared to espouse significantly mediated versions of feminist discourse. For example, Alexis told us that "girls shouldn't be helpless" but that "they shouldn't go beyond that." When we asked for clarification, she told us that girls should not go "too far" in their quest for independence. When asked why it was important not to go too far, Alexis asserted that if a girl were too independent then it would be difficult for her to attract a boyfriend. In reviewing these data we felt Alexis' advice, and that of some of the other participants, was more akin to recent discourses of girl power than to a clear discourse of feminism. In our understanding, current dis-courses of girl power, while holding some features in common with earlier versions of feminism, often assert mixed messages about the importance of heterosexual relationships and gaining boys' attentions while simultaneously touting girl positive slogans. In this way, we devel-oped the code Girl Power/Mixed Messages Discourse. We used this code when participants espoused mediated versions of feminist discourse or when participants asserted both patriarchal and feminist constructions of gender relations at the same time. For example, Moira, a grade-six stu-dent, commented that girls should "just be themselves" and suggested that *Archie* comics are "unrealistic" because they focus "too much on relationships." Yet, Moira also suggested that Betty "should have acted helpless when the wolf attacked so Archie could have saved her instead of Veronica." In this way, Moira appeared to use both feminist and patriarchal constructions of gender relations concurrently no matter how contradictory these discourses might be. The transcript of Moira's inter-view and her survey were coded as examples of Girl Power/Mixed Messages Discourse.

Feminine Desire/Masculine Desire. We used the codes *Feminine Desire/ Masculine Desire* whenever a participant made reference to feminine characters' or masculine characters' desires or to the desires of real girls/ women or real boys/men. For example, in the survey, the participants were asked why they thought Betty and Veronica liked Archie. When the participants indicated an attribute that they thought made Archie attracttive to Betty and Veronica, we coded this attribute as an indication of the participants' construction of feminine desire because both Betty and Veronica were easily recognizable as feminine characters. Similarly, when the participants indicated what they thought women /girls or men/boys did or did not like, these comments were coded as part of the participants' constructions of *feminine desire* or *masculine desire*.

Heterosexist Assumptions and GLBQ Possibilities. The code Heterosexist Assumption was used whenever a participant made reference to either masculine or feminine sexuality and implied that a character would automatically or naturally desire someone of the opposite sex. For example, some participants advised that Betty should "drop Archie" yet also quickly asserted that she should "get another boyfriend." In reading these data, we found it plain that the participants were basing their advice on the assumption that Betty was heterosexual, rather than bisexual or lesbian. In this way, such advice was coded as revealing a heterosexist assumption. We created the related code GLBQ Possibility to address any examples where a participant might question the naturalness of heterosexuality or might suggest that a character could be gay, lesbian, bisexual, questioning, or queer.

FINDINGS

In reviewing the data we learned that more participants consistently used patriarchal discourse than feminist discourse both in the surveys and in the interviews. Twenty-eight per cent of our respondents presented unequivocal patriarchal constructions of gender relations**.** In contrast, 13 per cent of our respondents presented more feminist constructions of gender relations. Yet, perhaps the most significant finding at this phase of our analysis is that the majority of the participants did not adhere to patriarchal discourse *or* feminist discourse in any clear or straight-forward manner. Instead, the majority of them

presented complex and often contradictory constructions of gender relations. Fifty-nine per cent of the participants appeared to use patriarchal and feminist discourses concurrently.

These contradictory and complex constructions of gender relations appeared all the more interesting when we began to look at the participants' constructions of masculine and feminine desires and sexuality. In contrast to their complicated and varied ideas of gender relations, we were forcibly struck by the participants' near consensus concerning mas-culine and feminine desires and their clear consensus regarding sexual-ity. The students presented a very limited range of reasons why a boy/man/masculine character might be attracted to a girl/woman/fem-inine character and a slightly larger range of reasons why a girl/woman/ feminine character might be attracted to a boy/man/masculine character. In addition, although the students made various remarks regarding sex-uality in their surveys and interviews, in every instance, they depicted sexuality as de facto heterosexual.

Patriarchal Constructions of Gender Relations

Thirteen of the 47 participants, 28 per cent of our respondents, presented unequivocal patriarchal constructions of gender relations. Examples of this kind of discourse were particularly clear when, after reading *Fairytale Land Revisited*, we asked the participants what advice they would give Betty. The students advised that Betty should "never talk to a boy like that, especially Archie in front of Veronica or another girl." They suggested that Betty "shouldn't be so extreme" in her attempts to gain equal rights for girls, and that Betty should "not try to change things" as "it's not always good." These words of advice were coded as part of patriarchal discourse because, in effect, they were recommending maintaining the status quo over asserting girls' and women's right to independent lives.

Feminist Constructions of Gender Relations

In contrast to the 13 participants who held unequivocal patriarchal constructions of gender relations, 6 of the 47 participants, 13 per cent of our respondents, presented feminist constructions of gender relations. For example, when we asked the participants how they thought Betty

felt in the final frame of the comic, they spoke of Betty as feeling "fine" or "OK" and even as "proud of herself." They told us that Betty knew how to take care of herself and that she "shouldn't compete with Veronica." In this way, these participants indicated that they had a familiarity with a discourse that did not necessarily put boys and men first and that they did not always see girls as rivals. Such sentiments were expressed by participants like Todd, a grade-six student, who told us that he did not think that Betty was jealous of Veronica and that he thought "girls and boys should have the same kinds of rights." Dean, also a grade-six student, told us that he "didn't like stereotypes for boys or for girls." Yet, in contrast to these clear statements about girls' and women's rights to equality, the majority of the participants who did not use clearly patriarchal constructions of gender relations appeared to be much less comfortable with feminist discourse.

Girl Power/Mixed Constructions of Gender Relations

Twenty-eight of the 47 participants, 59 per cent of our respondents, appeared to be somewhat ambivalent about feminist claims to equality. For example, Mohammad, a grade-six boy, told us that it is "better if things are not sexist," yet he also told us that it is "important" for girls to be "good looking" so that they can attract boys. Similarly, three of the five participants who advised Betty that she should break up with Archie also included the assertion that she should "find another boyfriend." In this way, these participants did not appear to be able to imagine that a young woman could be complete or content without a boyfriend or that she might actually be a lesbian. These participants' comments stood out as perfect examples of contemporary girl power /mixed messages discourse.

    In addition, as we looked more closely at the participants' responses, we found that many of them espoused fairly conservative understandings of gender equity and feminism. For example, Dylan, a grade-seven student, characterized the struggle for women's rights as complete and primarily concerned with opening educational and employment opportunities. In examining Dylan's survey and interview transcript, we noted that at no point did he indicate that gender inequality might persist or refer to other important aspects of women's and

girls' lives. For example, Dylan did not refer to the fact that women are now expected to be employed in the paid labor force and yet are generally employed in marginal, part-time work, have few childcare options, and shoulder more than their equal share of unpaid labor in the home (Hallman, 2000). Similarly, Dylan did not in any way allude to the ongoing presence of violence or sexual violence against women in society. In this way, we felt that Dylan's construction of gender equality was more akin to a conservative version of feminism or a mediated girl power discourse than to a truly feminist discourse.

Preteens' Constructions of Masculine/Feminine Desires

Veiled and direct references to masculine and feminine desires were strewn throughout the data. When examining the respondents' constructions of masculine and feminine desires, we found that, generally speak-ing, boys and masculine characters were depicted as attracted to girls' clothes, physical attributes, and vulnerability while girls and feminine characters were depicted as attracted to boys because they were nice, friendly, helpful, kind, or funny. For example, Suzanne, a grade-six stu-dent, told us Archie likes Veronica "because of what she wears" and "her legs," and Dylan, a grade-seven student, told us that "boys tend to jump for" girls who appear weak. In contrast, Katherine, a grade-five student, told us that Betty and Veronica like Archie "because he is friendly and funny."

    Of the 20 participants who commented on what boys/masculine characters found attractive in girls/feminine characters, 12 made comments about boys liking girls to be "weak," "helpless," "not too proud," or "not too independent." Seven of the participants asserted that boys liked girls who were "pretty" or "beautiful" and only one participant, Jeremy, a grade-six student, told us that "not all boys" think it is import-ant for a girl to be pretty. As Jeremy put it, some boys like "strong girls" and some boys are attracted to girls because they are "nice or sensitive." In contrast, respondents told us that girls liked boys because they were "nice" (7 responses), "funny" (3 responses), "cool" (3 responses), "cute" (3 responses), "helpful" (2 responses), "kind" (2 responses), "popular" (2 responses), "friendly," "well mannered,"

"smart," "sensitive," "clumsy," or because the boy "owns a car" (each 1 response).

Although there appeared to be virtual consensus on the kinds of attributes boys found attractive in girls, and some consensus about what girls found attractive in boys, absent in all participants' talk was any reference to sexual diversity. Although the students made numerous references to romantic relationships, at no point did anyone suggest that a character or person could be gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer/questioning.

"ARCHIE COMICS TELL YOU THAT GIRLS GO OUT WITH BOYS AND BOYS GO OUT WITH GIRLS": PRETEENS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF SEXUALITY

When asked what he felt he learned from *Archie* comics, Dave, a grade-seven student, told us that "*Archie* comics tell you that girls go out with boys and boys go out with girls." This observation rang particularly clear when we examined our participants' constructions of sexuality. References to sexuality could be found throughout the data. Participants frequently made references to "going out," "kissing," "dating," "liking," and "loving." However, although some participants asserted that girls did not need boyfriends, none of the participants appeared to entertain the idea that a feminine or masculine character or a real boy or girl could be gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or questioning. In every instance when a participant made reference to a romantic relationship, she or he implied that a romantic relationship was de facto heterosexual.

In total, 39 of the 47 participants made at least a passing reference to masculine/feminine desires/sexuality and yet notably absent was any reference to sexual diversity. Particularly interesting to note was the significant number of participants who characterized Betty as feeling "jealous" or "sad" at the end of the comic regardless of the fact that her expression did not appear to convey either of these emotions. If anything, her eyes and eyebrows indicated surprise rather than jealousy. Yet 27 of the 42 respondents who answered questions about how they thought Betty felt at the end of the comic characterized her feelings in the final frame as "jealous," "very jealous," "sad," "very sad," "sorry," "lonely," or "mad".

That so many participants appeared to assume that Betty would feel these emotions at the end of the story provides evidence that they constructed Betty as a heterosexual girl who has been jilted by her love interest. It is possible that the participants may have seen Veronica and Archie as equally likely objects of Betty's affections or jealousy. However, this possibility seems remote because none of the remaining 15 participants voiced the possibility that Betty might have sexual desires that veered away from the straight and narrow. These students told us that Betty did not care about Archie and Veronica pairing off or that Betty felt sorry for Veronica, but they did not raise the possibility that Betty might have same sex desires. In addition, the idea that heterosexuality had been naturalized in these participants' minds was also supported by comments like Justine's who told us, "*Obviously* Betty likes Archie" regardless of the fact that there was little, if any, textual evidence of such an attraction in the story.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

These participants' talk suggests preteens are actively engaged in constructing ideas of gender relations, masculine and feminine desires, and sexuality. Our analysis suggests that preteens often hold contradictory ideas of gender relations and that they have a familiarity with both patriarchal and feminist discourses. In addition, these findings suggest educa-tors should not assume that preteens' ideas of gender relations are monolithic or stable. These participants' words provide further evidence for the notion that ideas about gender relations continue to be nego-tiated and re-negotiated long after early childhood (Davies, 1989, 1993; Thorne, 1993).

Second, the results of this study indicate that, although the participants appeared to have somewhat complex ideas of gender rela-tions, they had far more uniform ideas of masculine/feminine desires and sexuality. These findings suggest students could benefit from in-depth discussions about desire and sexuality. That none of the participants voiced the possibility that girls or boys might have homosexual or bisexual feelings may indicate that the mere idea that some people might be gay/lesbian /bisexual/queer is so far outside their everyday dis-course that it is "unthinkable" or that they did not feel

comfortable talk-ing about homosexuality/bisexuality/queerness freely. In either case, these findings point to the need to engage students in anti-homophobia education as the aims of such work is to make GLBQ lives visible and free of shame.

The ongoing presence of unequal gender relations and homophobic harassment in young people's lives today places educators in a position in which they have a responsibility to create spaces for students to engage in debate and discussion about gender relations and sexuality. Although this work remains challenging, these participants' words can help educators and researchers to map out what preteens are thinking about these issues so that we can create more effective gender equity /anti-homophobia initiatives.

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Lyndsay Moffatt is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. She is a former elementary teacher-librarian and secondary English teacher with the Toronto District School Board. Her areas of interest include socio-cultural theories of learning and literacy, discourse analysis, critical literary theories, and the sociology of education.

Bonny Norton is Professor and Distinguished University Scholar in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. She is also Honorary Professor in the School of Education, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, and Visiting Senior Research Fellow at King's College, University of London. Her research addresses critical literacy, identity and language learning, and international development. She can be contacted through www.lerc.educ.ubc.ca/fac/norton/ .