Heroes and Gender: Children Reading and Writing

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Educators who are concerned about reading and writing practices within schools, and their constructions and representations of gender, are inevitably confronted with troublesome complexities and contradictions. Responses to these contradictions form a significant part of each of the articles in *English in Australia – Gender* (March, 1994). Hayes, for example, notes the apparent contradictions of critics who call for

> idealised representations of girls which are active, but which contradictorily lack action: independence without violation, cause without effect, courage without danger (Hayes, 1994, p.10).

Contradiction however can be understood not as a failure of critics to `get it right', but as an inevitable consequence of the competing discourses within which we (as educators, as women, as readers and writers) are positioned. Exploring sites of contradiction can be a fruitful way of increasing our understanding of these discourses, in order perhaps to better resist or negotiate our positions within them. Feminist poststructuralist theory offers one useful tool for such an analysis. Equally useful and important is an explicit recognition of the ethical implications of any interaction between people (specifically, between teachers and children, and amongst children) in a classroom situation. `To be positioned, and to take up a position (even if this involves sitting on the fence) is a question of ethics' (Diprose, 1991, p.65). The combination of poststructuralist theory and ethical concern would make less likely the kind of unreflective acceptance of dominant discourse that resulted in the `Bloodbath Efa Bunnies' story (Gilbert, 1993) being written and read as an exciting and amusing adventure.

Here I want to explore some of the contradictions and complexities that girls and boys might find in taking up the position of **hero** in the stories that they read, write, imagine – and live. Specifically, I am interested in exploring how children might be helped to take up the attitude of ten-year-old Mark, of whom Davies says `It is the quality of heroism he likes in any character, with their sex being irrelevant to his positive evaluation of it' (Davies, 1993, p.109). In this discussion I draw

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on research I am currently doing with the narratives of girls and boys aged six to nine years.

What is a hero?

One way of working with questions about reading, writing and gender in classrooms, is to examine cultural understandings about the hero. My Collins dictionary is unequivocally gendered in the four definitions it ' gives of the word 'hero'. Two of these are: 1. *a man distinguished by exceptional courage, nobility, fortitude, etc;* and 4. *the principal male character of a novel, play, etc.* In this dictionary, the word `heroine' is derivative and dependant on the meaning of 'hero': 1. *A woman possessing heroic qualities.* The dictionary of course does no more than ' reflect the culturally different status given to hero and heroine. This difference is not trivial but profoundly linked to the binary organisation which underlies Western culture and thought (Wilshire, 1989). The male/female dualism which places `male' as opposite and superior to `female', makes the (male) hero the norm and the (female) heroine inferior or at best complementary to him.

The concept of what makes a `hero' or `heroine' heroic (and therefore a desirable position for a listener or reader or writer to accept) is a complex one. In *Becoming a Heroine* Rachel Brownstein observes that

> Young women like to read about heroines in fiction so as to rehearse possible lives and to imagine a women's life as important – because they want to be an attractive and powerful and significant someone whose life is worth writing about, whose world revolves around her and makes being the way she is, make sense (Brownstein, 1984, p.xxiv).

But whereas a hero is extraordinary, exempt from the rules of society, a heroine must stick to the social code. `She is governed by constraints as rigid as the ones that make a sonnet' (Brownstein, 1984, p.83). One step towards both revealing and negotiating these differences is taken in critical writing that claims the word `hero' (like `poet' and `actor') for females as well as for males, and discards `heroine' (like `poetess' and `actress') as unnecessary. Adopting this practice allows me to focus more easily on what might be seen as desirable and available behaviour for heroes (female or male), and to see how each is positioned in the storylines of the culture.

One key quality of a hero of either gender is often understood to be *agency*. In a liberal humanist sense, this means that the hero is able to act as an autonomous individual to bring about a desired outcome. Steedman suggests that the women in folk-fairy-tales (in contrast to

women in the classic fairy tales) are heroic, `in that being done to, they *do* back... [they] actively, verbally or physically *make things happen* and draw the plot to its conclusion' (Steedman, 1982, p.143). Adan, working within a psychoanalytic discourse, identifies three versions of the heroic tradition:

> the tradition of hero and victim as played out by different people, with the hero in the active role and the victim in the passive; the tradition of the hero as the rugged individualist who "toughs it out" in adversity; and the tradition of the hero as martyr (Adan, 1991, p.290).

Each of these versions of `hero' is well represented in the storylines of our culture, and in most of them the hero is male. Adan describes Daphne, a silent victim of sexual abuse for more than three years during her middle childhood, as perhaps seeing herself as a (female) victim waiting to be rescued by an heroic `other'. Then she discusses another version of the hero:

> We may overlook our capacity to play the hero in relation to our own vulnerability: that is, we may overlook our capacity to help ourselves (and here I would include a direct appeal to another for help as one way to help ourselves.) (Adan, 1991, p.211).

Many teachers would consider such a capacity — to see oneself as the hero of one's own life, able to take action and worthy of the action taken — as highly desirable for both the girls and the boys in their classes.

Each of these versions of the hero is conceptually related to the idea of agency. But the concept of agency for girls (or women) is necessarily troublesome and contradictory in Western culture; the dualism of Western thought constitutes males, not females, as active agents. To the extent that girls take up their own sense of agency, they are potentially positioning themselves as not-female. How any girl handles this contradiction will depend on all the discursive storylines she has available to her to make sense of her world — both the storylines of her lived experience, and the storylines of the narratives she hears, reads and imagines.

The idea of the hero includes not only agency but also an ethical evaluation of her or his actions. This too is profoundly gendered. Haug argues that `like human beings, morality is bisexual' (Haug, 1984, p.58). That is, she says, human beings are not assigned different moral qualities from birth, on the basis of their sex (that women are caring, for example, or men brave). Rather, the same moral value is given a different *meaning* for each sex, and this meaning is expressed in

different practices. So for example proper behaviour with respect to ability – an important moral value – for males often means verbally asserting competence for themselves. For females, proper behaviour with respect to ability often means not speaking about or publicly claiming that ability for herself. The gendered dualisms of public/private and speaking/silence, aligned to the male/female dualism, often seem to govern the morally appropriate responses that girls and boys understand to be either desirable or available to them.

Boys and male heroes

The idea of masculinity in Western culture is profoundly linked with the overcoming of fear, demonstrated through physical daring (taking risks) and proved by winning. This version of courage is often celebrated in the stories children hear and tell. Boys who want and are able to take up this position of masculine hegemony, gain a lot of bodily experience and practice of overcoming fear (like the boy who tells me about jumping off a ladder into the sea, one step higher each time). These are the boys for whom gender identity seems most closely aligned to the hero position in the

> narrative codes and conventions of the male romance... derived from long-established epic codes of heterosexual male honour and virility being proved and defended through a test of competitive rivalry or combat... Heroes were faced by apparently impossible dilemmas but battled their way through, in the climax of physical combat, to defend their status, honour and masculinity (Jackson, 1990, p.218).

Boys who do not want or are not able to take up this position, nevertheless are able imaginatively to take up many hero positions simply by virtue of being male. These boys might play `Pirates and things... Cowboys. Oh, we just use sticks and things on the frame: Or sometimes we play armies." The different kinds of courage involved in bodily force and skill, and imagined heroism, are both acceptably masculine positionings (though perhaps given different status). The demand for heroism may sometimes be experienced as oppressive (for example, when a boy has nightmares about being unable to save his mother from a monster man); but it insists on the possibility of agency for males in lived experience.

There is a contrast to be made between different kinds of embodiments of `heroic' masculinity: that epitomised in the football hero, where winning against others is the aim; and the embodied masculinity of, for example, the base jumper[1], who pits himself against danger to compete with himself. Both masculinities demand bodily skill

and force of a high order, and physical and mental courage in facing possible injury and pain (or even death). While in popular culture most accolades are reserved for the football hero, the dominant discourse can recognise and reward individual feats of physical and mental courage such as base jumping, and will appropriate them as examples of masculinity achieved. But each activity has different implications for other males (and females) in that base jumping is available, at least in theory, to any person, regardless of competition with others. The emphasis is shifted from an externalised Other to be defeated, to a conscious awareness of one's own fears (both physical and non-physical) that any (and every) person can face. The relationship between bodily practice in overcoming fear (often achieved through sport) and the metaphorical or imaginative experience of overcoming fear (through narrative) – and between different kinds of heroism – involves imagination, metaphor and desire as well as knowledge of oneself as positioned in certain ways and not others within the culture. In each case, however, this maleness is understood as fundamentally not-female:

> The boy/man struggles away from the feminine... in an attempt to become not what they are. The feminine thus becomes the other that one struggles not to be like. It is the negative form against which one defines what it is to have achieved (male) personhood (Davies, 1994, p.10).

Achieving male personhood in opposition to girlness seems to require a more thorough rejection of feminine positioning by boys (in stories as well as in lived experience) than does the reverse for girls. It seems to require a reduction in possible ways of being for boys (even in imagination) at the same time as it promises the rewards of properly achieved maleness (in the lived storylines of the culture).

Girl and male heroes

Stories with male heroes offer a range of masculine positionings to the girls and boys who hear them. Some of these affirm conventional male heroism and female passivity, and some make available a wider than usual understanding of what `proper' male behaviour might be. Stories with male heroes were told with enthusiasm both by some girls and by some boys in my study, in marked contrast to stories with female heroes which boys seldom chose to tell. Some girls seemed to find the position of (male) hero to be very desirable, and available to them through story. As `technologies of the self'[2], the stories seemed to enable these girls imaginatively to construct and take pleasure in heroic selves, and through these selves to explore themes such as love, adventure, courage, power and activity in the world.

These imaginative positionings, for all the pleasure they give, will not of course necessarily change a girl's understanding of herself as female. In the dominant discourse, to be not-male (in lived experience) is to be positioned as unheroic – as subordinate and inferior to the male. So the girl who is positioned with a male hero will experience contradictions between her imagined and her lived positionings, knowing as she does that however desirable she may find male heroes, such positionings are not *really* meant for (available to) her.

de Lauretis (1986) argues that a female reader adopts a double identification – both the `gaze', the active male position, the place of narrative movement; and the `image', the passive female position, the place of narrative closure. Schweickart describes this process as the *immasculation* of women by men:

> As readers and teachers and scholars women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny (Schweickart, 1986, p.41).

The same process seems to take place, she says, for women and girls with all the male-authored texts they read, both the stories that lead girls to identify with a male hero and the stories that lead her to identify with a heroine situated in patriarchal discourse. Davies argues that girls learn both to position themselves as male hero and to see themselves also positioned as other, as outside male reality, and that `learning... to make that opposition unproblematic is the way many girls have coped with their educational experiences' (Davies, 1989, p.29).

These contradictions, embedded in girls' reading and writing practices, might be a source perhaps of frustration, resignation and anger – but they also provide at least the possibility of (re) negotiation of subjectivity. As Walkerdine suggests, the seductive power of fantasy (in fairy tales) can also be a source of hope and enlarged possibility: such stories `act powerfully to engage with important themes about `what might be' (Walkerdine, 1981, p.168).

Girls and female heroes

Stories with strong female heroes also offer a wide range of `hero' positions for children to take up; many teachers have seen them as an important counter to sexist stereotypes in children's stories. Feminists have responded to the dilemmas posed by fairy tales in a number of ways: by writing alternative versions of existing stories(eg Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber);* by returning to older sources and finding the many tales which have been neglected and which do have

strong women heroes (eg the two volumes of *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales);* and by writing new fairy tales with unconventional characters and plots (eg *The Paperbag Princess).* The latter two approaches are intended specifically for children. Davies (1989) studied children's understanding of feminist fairy stories, particularly *The Paperbag Princess,* and found that they produced meanings more consistent with their own understandings of `proper' gendered behaviour, than with the (presumed) feminist message of the authors. That is, feminist versions of fairy tales with sex-role reversals are not enough to undo the male/female dualism or the categories of expected behaviour for girls and boys.

Stories with strong female heroes can sometimes, for some girls, expand (beyond the conventions of the dominant discourse) what is understood to be properly female behaviour. In ways reminiscent of radical feminism, the stories affirm women in ways that many girls clearly value. In these storylines femininity can include power and agency, and the expression of strong emotions such as anger and defiance.

At the same time, this understanding of female agency is still limited and contained by its placement in relation to the male. The male/female dualism is not challenged. In these tales a woman (even if she is a hero) is not so much an agent for herself, subject of her own life, as agent on behalf of, or as part of, or in preparation for, the male:

> Girls can... move mountains (metaphorically speaking!) as long as they do it for others. This means that many acts are possible, but doing anything for one's own benefit is not (Walkerdine, 1984, p.176).

So, for example, strong `femaleness' might be understood to include wisdom and sexuality, but it is their domestic expression that is made attractive. This embeddedness of stories with strong female heroes within the dominant discourse is evidenced by their usually unquestioned assumptions – either about the inevitability of heterosexual marriage at the end of the story, or about its status as a woman's most important achievement.

This understanding of `female' is of course also made available to boys. Through stories with strong female heroes, boys might come to understand `female' as (sometimes) powerful. But it is not surprising that the boys in my study seldom chose to position themselves with even a `heroic' woman in a story. To do so might be to put at risk the `difference' and superiority that results from their positioning as male in the male/female dualism, and to experience their own male status as problematic.

Children are not passive recipients of particular social expectations about gender. They can be seen as actively taking up, negotiating and resisting the various positions that the stories make available. Both stories with female heroes and stories with male heroes offer some girls positions from which they can negotiate the discursive contradictions surrounding desire, agency and femaleness. That is, female heroes in stories are important for girls as they construct their identities (as are male heroes for boys); but so too are male heroes for at least some girls. The part that might possibly be played by female heroes for boys, if they are to be encouraged to construct `selves' that are less hard, competitive and oppositional, is one that is so far unexplored.

Agency and the hero

Feminist poststructuralist writers have a complex understanding of what it means for a female to be positioned as a `hero'. By drawing attention to questions of language, discourse and positioning that construct children's understandings of heroism and gender, they show the *insufficiency* of liberal humanist claims that girls and boys both simply identify with heroes – of either sex.

Feminist poststructuralist theory offers a different understanding of `agency' from the liberal humanist one discussed above. Whereas a liberal humanist sees agency as the product of individual rational choice (and plays down the context of that choice), feminist poststructuralist theory foregrounds the *discursive framework* of the action (especially the action of someone in a marginalised group such as children or women). It seeks `to understand how children are both made subject by/within the social order, and how they are agents/subjects within/against it' (Jones, 1993, p.158). Feminist poststructuralist theory emphasises the extent to which subjects are constituted by (formed by) the discourses within which they live: `In patriarchal societies we cannot escape the implications of femininity. Everything we do signifies compliance or resistance to dominant norms of what it is to be a woman' (Weedon, 1987, p.87). So being able to see oneself as a hero is at least in part an effect of one's positioning in dominant discourse; it is a position made available and desirable to some, and almost impossible for others to achieve.

This poststructuralist emphasis on the constitutive effects of discourse is sometimes problematic for teachers who want to intervene, in the name of equity and social justice, to bring about change. Educators may find themselves constantly needing to achieve a balance, holding contradictory possibilities simultaneously. The concept of the subject as embedded within (constituted by) available discourses, and the concept

of agency as movement within a discursive field, will both be necessary ways of understanding the subjectivity of a particular child or children. Being positioned by others, taking up a position as one's own, resisting, negotiating and complying with such positionings, are continuous, fluid, moment-by-moment and often contradictory processes.

Conclusion

What might this exploration of the idea of the hero suggest for educators who are concerned about gender, and about reading and writing practices in schools? Above all, it reminds us that contradiction is inevitable, and can be seen not as a failure but as an opportunity to examine everyday teaching practice. There are, I think at least three aspects to how this might be done. One strategy is primarily intellectual: teachers and children can have access, for example, to poststructuralist concepts about identity, or the deconstruction of narrative to reveal its function as a technology of the self. But rational, cognitive access to poststructuralist discourse will not be enough to bring about change. It needs to be accompanied by at least two other strategies.

The second strategy is a gradual formulation of an ethical or values system which is explicitly congruent with poststructuralist understandings of the human being.

The third strategy is imaginative reconstruction of narrative - to try to expand what is experienced as desirable and available, by both girls and boys. This `serious play' would involve teachers and children being immersed in multitudes of stories - reading, adapting, choosing and making stories which consciously played with binaries and the deconstruction of the dualisms of the dominant discourse. The primary aim of such `serious play' would be to make desirable the widest possible range of discursive positions for both girls and boys, and in particular to enable girls to position themselves as agentic rather than passive: `increasing the numbers of ways girls can be' (Jones, 1993 p.162). The work done around stories, as well as the stories themselves, would encourage an understanding of the ways that language constructs meaning and identity. At the same time teachers would also recognise that one attraction of stories is their complexity, and be able to say with Bettina Aptheker that `I have been drawn to the poetry and the stories: because they are layered, because more than one truth is represented, because there is ambiguity and paradox' (quoted in Razak, 1993, p.62).

While there can be no formula for successful interventions in work with reading, writing and gender in classrooms, critical imagination suggests a way to integrate intellectual, imaginative and ethical concerns. It takes the inevitability of contradiction as a starting point but

avoids the dualistic trap of `readings of despair' or `readings of disdain' (Hayes, 1994) in the complex understandings of girls' and boys' imagined (and lived) storylines.

Notes

1 Base jumping involves leaping off a high sheer cliff, free falling for as long as possible, and then opening a parachute for a safe landing. Nic Feteris and Glenn Singleman described on an ABC radio programme (5-9-1993) the year-long mental and physical preparation for the ultimate `base jump' which involved over 2000 metres of free fall before parachutes were opened. Feteris said that, at the edge of the 600 metre sheer drop `We had three choices: to turn back and not do it; to do it the wrong way, and die; or to do it the right way.' He described the moment of choice as `defeating the dragons of our fear'.

2 Foucault uses the term `technology of the self' to describe the procedures and social practices `proposed or prescribed for individuals in order to fix, maintain or transform their identity in accordance with a certain number of goals' (Foucault, in Macey, 1993, p.417)

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