

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

**Classical Fairy Tales: Portals To Our Identities**

**by**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an interpretive account describing how young children made sense of themselves and others in and through fairy tales. It is a qualitative study framed by the principles of Gadamerian hermeneutics. I conducted the research project in an early childhood services classroom over a period of eight weeks. My study was grounded in the lived experiences of a group of kindergarten children, aged five to six years old and focused on three young individuals in particular. I was a researcher and a storyteller who gathered the children's tales by observing their play and by having conversations with them. The study explored the difficulties and possibilities offered to the young children, in their attempts to understand identity through fairy tales. The children responded to the tales as feeling, perceiving and thinking individuals who identified with the story characters, interpreted the tales and explored the ideas present in the tales through pretend play. Fairy tales offered a pedagogical dimension in which a liminal space was extant to allow the children to explore the multiple ways of understanding self and other.

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## DEDICATION

To my late maternal grandmother, who told many traditional Indian fairy tales in the comfort of her warm embrace, to my mother, who celebrated the stories during our family gatherings, and to my children, who awakened me into remembering the familiar tales.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **NARRATIVES AND IDENTITY**

Identity is formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture.

(Hill, 1987, p. 44)

#### **The Power of Stories**

“Mama, please don’t die!” my daughter pleaded shortly after returning from school one day. Overcoming my initial surprise, I informed her that that would not occur, as if I had some control over death. There ensued a silence that spelled unhappiness and anxiety. Then she lowered her voice as if to share a deep dark secret and said, “Daddy will marry a witch!” Her entreaty was a signal for me to address her concern. My daughter had perceived a consistent pattern in the fairy tales she had heard and read. She had discovered through these stories a whole web of shifting human relations and their consequences. “Daddy will marry a witch!” is not simply a statement that skitters by into oblivion in a conversation. It is an opening that forces me to respond to a tradition and history we are living out “over and above our wanting and doing” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. xxviii).

Beneath the child’s statement are real issues of identity at play. Children see patterns of human relationships woven into the fabric of the stories told to them and thus

they begin to understand that these stories mirror happenings in the real world even though they may not be true to life in a literal sense. Children do see the possibilities of similar events cited in tales happening to them. They realize that they are young and vulnerable, simultaneously needing protection and freedom to form their identities in order to survive well in their society.

My daughter's plea to me not to die revealed her need to be protected and a genuine fear that she too, like the children in the stories, is vulnerable in the world of grown-ups. Her concern addresses relationships between the old and young which are yet to be negotiated fully. Children learn from the construction of stories about complex human relationships and that life can be complicated and difficult. The young are able to discern in the fairy tales the seamy dark threads of power that lash out on those children who fall out of established social frames, "Little Red Riding Hood" being only one example.

Children are situated in and by the narratives told to them. However, they are by no means passive recipients. Children do respond to narratives by situating themselves in or through the tales by identifying with the story characters, interpreting the tales and exploring the ideas present in the tales through play. Children form connections with the narratives they encounter. They identify with the characters in the stories. They love and admire certain heroes and heroines. They despise others. The emotional connection children develop with certain story characters positions them as active participants in the meaning-making of the narratives.

In acquiring the ability to understand stories, the child is situated as a perceiving, thinking, feeling, acting, speaking subject within a series of narrative fields - as a person in a family saga, as a spectator who tunes in to individual tales and identifies with their characters, and as a performer who repeats cultural myths and sometimes generates new transformations.

(Kinder, 1991, p. 2)

I realized that my daughter had appropriated the identity of a vulnerable child from the fairy tales of “Hansel and Gretel” and “Cinderella.” She was drawn into the stories. There was a certain familiarity in all of this. As a child I too had experienced the call of certain stories. Images of heroines such as Savitri (from the epic tale of “Mahabharata”) and Sita (from the “Ramayana”) were etched on my mind. By embracing these heroines, who were the embodiment of beauty, gentility and obedience, I had to adopt certain contradictions. I co-opted their identities so as to better conduct myself in the social world of my people, the East Indian community in Singapore. Acquiescence to such social identities was approved by the elders and therefore easily appropriated by the young. However, “understanding certainly does not mean merely appropriating customary opinions or acknowledging what tradition has sanctified” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. xxxvii). The docile and passive cultural identities of Savitri, Sita and Sakuntala did not appeal to me later in life. I found myself rejecting these stories and yet retelling them to my own children and students, as these stories carry the hallmarks of four thousand years

of East Indian cultural and social history. They simply cannot be thrown away, for in them lie the gems of human wisdom and tradition.

There are many ways to interpret narratives in our multifaceted world. Most of the above-mentioned narratives are not clear cut in their meanings. The story characters can be situated differently according to the meaning the listeners want to attach to the narratives. For example, the traditional interpretation of the story of “Savitri” centres itself on emphasizing her devotion, obedience and faithfulness to her husband. However the same story can be told with the focus that Savitri is an independent, intelligent and courageous woman who saves her husband from death by outwitting the god of death and justice, Yama. The second interpretation of “Savitri” challenges the dominant discourse of the Hindu culture, which emphasizes the secondary role of women. “Savitri” is a generative Indian tale open to multiple interpretations.

The power of the story is not in the original intention of the author (whatever that may be) but in its ability to be generative and open to new interpretations. Understanding the story of “Savitri” differently has brought the four thousand year-old tradition alive again, but with a new and different significance for today’s audience and storytellers. In retelling the tale of “Savitri” to my children, I have come to appreciate the story deeply (as an adult the story spoke to me differently) and have come to a new understanding about tradition and realized that it is not a cleanly chiseled monolithic rock. There are fissures in it where life becomes porous and livable. Narratives pave the way for such an

understanding to occur as these stories are about the human condition and address the question of what it means to be human - who we are.

The potency of a story is constituted by its sense-making capabilities. I am particularly interested in exploring how young children make sense of themselves (their identities) when they encounter narratives. Children understand the narratives they hear in a variety of ways. I would like to uncover these layers wherein “unspeakable” - hidden, invisible threads of competing notions of our selves - are embedded. As such the research purpose is twofold: to explore the meanings children derive from classical fairy tales and to examine how those meanings influence identity formation. For the purpose of my study, classical narratives, in particular fairy tales, are identified as the primary area of interest, as they are popular with children and are selected by educators to be part of the early childhood school curriculum. Such fairy tales include “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “Snow White” and “Cinderella.”

I have identified young children attending kindergarten for the study as they are leaving the familiar comfort of their families and daycares and formally entering into the sphere of institutionalized education where the identities of self and other are constantly being elaborated and challenged in multiple ways (Grumet, 1988; Davies, 1989, 1993). Moreover, young children have an affinity for fantastical narratives (Paley, 1990; Zipes, 1995). Young children are concerned about understanding self in relation to others. “The question of identity is every child’s most serious preoccupation” (Paley, 1990, p. 31).

Fairy tales allow children to explore the question of identity in an enchanted space where their desires, hopes and fears can be safely expressed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CLASSICAL FAIRY TALES AND IDENTITY

#### Classical Fairy Tales

Narratives are ordinarily defined as stories that are recounted. We tell stories to each other to affirm our experiences, warn others, have pleasure and perhaps to accept our frailties. We pass on our old tales to our children and the tales have a habit of transforming as they are

passed from one tongue to another, kept alive by a sort of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Listeners sometimes resisted changes in a story they knew and loved - and yet, think how changed that story must already have been, from its misty origins to the contemporary rendition. (Yolen, 1981, pp. 21-22)

Fairy tales, amongst other forms of narratives, offer glimpses of ourselves in the process of becoming.

The word 'fairy'...goes back to a Latin feminine word, *fata*, a rare variant of *fatum* (fate) which refers to a goddess of destiny. The fairies resemble goddesses of this kind, for they too know the course of fate. *Fatum*, literally, that which is spoken, the past participle of the verb *fari*, to speak, gives French *fée*, Italian *fata*, Spanish *hada*, all meaning 'fairy', and enclosing connotations of fate; fairies share with Sibyls knowledge of the



future and the past, and in the stories which feature them, both types of figure foretell events to come, and give warnings. (Warner, 1994a, pp. 14-15)

The etymological roots of the word “fairy” indicate that fairy tales are initially works of women who portend the future. The arrival of fairy tales from the lips of women in early days warned young listeners of the dangers and difficulties present in the world and in the same breath gave hope to those who saw possibilities in whatever situations they found themselves.

The word “classical” here does not refer to the time of Greek or Roman antiquity. I define classical fairy tales as significant stories about the human condition and relationships told and retold to children over many generations through various media. The stories existed in the memories of past generations and are extant now in the living generations because of their popular appeal. Fairy tales here are broadly defined to include popular folk tales, fables and myths which are steeped in oral tradition. These types of tales originated from the various oral traditions of China and India where the classification of popular narratives as fairy tales was not clearly defined. “The earliest collections of tales to be enriched with stories similar to our fairy tales were made in the East” (Opie & Opie, 1974, p. 22). The classification of some oral folk tales as fairy tales has been a recent phenomenon in the West. For example, Charles Perrault and Madame de Beaumont, members of the French aristocracy and bourgeoisie, co-opted and popularized some folk tales such as “Cinderella” and “The Three Wishes,” respectively, as *contes de*

*fées* (fairy tales) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Classical fairy narratives are not static stories. These narratives bear traces of the paths they have traveled. People, young and old alike, listen to the tales and breathe life into the stories, thus making them living testimonies of human experiences of days gone by and of days to come.

Classical fairy tales, a particular genre of narrative, are conceived in a web of human relationships. The word “narrative” originates from Latin word *narrare*, which comes from *gnarus*, meaning knowing. In other words, narratives concerned with relations and the resultant knowledge thereof. Fairy tales deal with self and other intimately intertwined in the fabric of life. Out of our lived experiences comes our celebration of life in its various forms through love, success, birth and death, renewal, suppression and the realization that the difficulties of life are shared by all in a web of relationships that makes life bearable and livable.

Fairy tales are historical (Warner, 1994a) and they are brought into the social process through their tellings and retellings. Therefore, fairy tales are involved in cultural politics as they embody the values and interests of a community. The school then becomes a site in which the fairy tales can be told to children. After all, a school is one of the cultural institutions of a community. Fairy tales can be told in a manner where the listeners are allowed the freedom to interact with the stories in such a way that the stories are enriched by the memories and lived experiences of the audience. The stories provide opportunities to the listeners to reflect on the various identities portrayed by the various

characters, and “to enter into a pedagogic encounter with other human beings” (Greene, 1986, p. 479) through an authentic dialogue, respecting whatever questions that arise.

Fairy tales are always in the process of transformation in their tellings and retellings. For example, in France, fairy tales had humble beginnings. They were the tales of the non-literate peasants. The tales gained a foothold in the aristocratic circles when erudite women eloquently used them to question “male rational precepts and patriarchal realms” (Zipes, 1989, p. 4). Thus stories became provocative and subversive and were looked upon with suspicion by King Louis XIV. The fairy tales were later co-opted and transformed by male writers such as Charles Perrault to be more amenable to the general public.

Fairy tales which had been circulating in adult social circles became accessible to children in the early eighteenth century, where they were seen as a useful way to socialize children to the values and norms of the group in power.

However, conventionalization did not necessarily bring about a total watering down and depletion of the unusual ideas and motifs of the literary fairy tale and folk tale. It actually led to a more general acceptance and institutionalization of the literary fairy tale as genre for all ages and classes of readers. Such institutionalization set the framework within which other writers could create, play with those motifs, characters, and...revise them in innovative ways to generate new forms, ideas, and motifs. (Zipes, 1989, p.

Today, fairy tales are part of the early childhood services classrooms. One such tale which has survived the passage of time is *Beauty and the Beast*, composed by Mme. De Villeneuve in 1740.

I am selecting classical fairy tales for my research paper for several reasons. There is a truth to be had in fairy tales. They reflect the traditions of the cultures they come from even though events in fairy tales are fantastical (Warner, 1994a) and subversive (Zipes, 1995). However fairy tales are in danger of losing their history. With corporate involvement, fairy tales are subjected to a bleaching process (Disneyfication) where the histories of the tales are eroded in favour of archetypal figures such as wicked stepmothers, witches and princes/princesses under a curse to heighten the tensions of the tales. For example, the eighteenth-century telling of the French fairy tale “*Beauty and the Beast*” covertly exposed the exploitation of young women in arranged marriages. The story focused on Beauty’s dilemma of being a prisoner of a grotesque beast and how her kindness and love transformed the Beast and broke the spell of an enchantress. However, the twentieth-century Disney version of “*Beauty and the Beast*” was about the Beast. The crux of the Disney animated film was that the Beast had to learn to love someone and have that someone reciprocate his love for the spell of the enchantress to be broken. The Disney version is the Beast’s story. As a result, the historical interpretations of classical fairy tales are shadowed and, with them, the culture that cradles the narratives. Warner (1994a) argues that

the historical interpretation of fairy tale holds out more hope to the listener or the reader than the psychoanalytic or mystical approaches, because it reveals how human behaviour is embedded in material circumstance, in the laws of dowry, land tenure, feudal obedience, domestic hierarchies and marital dispositions, and that when these pass and change, behaviour may change with them... ( pp. xviii - xix)

Fairy tales are a reflection of tradition, history and culture. They do not remain static but change with the circumstances of the society in which they have planted their roots.

Fairy tales are like travellers' tales - traces of their earlier wanderings are felt in places far from Europe. For example, the story of "Cinderella" seems to have travelled from China to Europe. Tales similar to "Cinderella" are found in other cultures too. The Chinese version of "Cinderella" is Yeh-Shen, recorded around AD 850-60 (Warner, 1994a). The first European version appeared in Italy in 1634 (Opie & Opie, 1974). Other traditional tales have their traces of history derived from ancient Greece and India. The richness of traditional fairy tales in terms of their cultural history and their perennial attraction to both young and old cannot be discounted. Like the characters in the fairy tales, the narratives themselves have undergone metamorphoses that have enabled them to survive right up to this day.

Fairy tales are open to multiple interpretations. They come alive through the storytellers who are custodians. Storytellers nurture these stories, not so much for themselves, but for the joy of understanding the richness of life through interpretation.

Thus when I am immersed in understanding the phenomenon of narrative and identity with regards to children, I am evoking history, tradition and a whole web of relationships. It is not about me, the children or the narratives. It encompasses all of us: self and other. We are not just alone in the world and have to work from scratch to understand our experiences in life. Fairy tales provide multiple frameworks for understanding our variegated experiences.

They are, in Isak Dinesen's marvelous expression, "a serious statement of our existence." The tales and stories handed down to us from the cultures that preceded us were the most serious, succinct expressions of the accumulated wisdom of those cultures. They were created in a symbolic, metaphoric story language and then honed by centuries of tongue-polishing.... (Yolen, 1981, p. 18)

Fairy tales easily avail themselves to tongue-polishing. They continue to transform and metamorphosize. The process of tongue-polishing will never cease. The storyteller tells his/her story and leaves it in the hands of the listener. They are, like the wind, scattering seeds in the fertile minds of their listeners. The earthly cycle continues.

Classical fairy tales are part of our tradition, not so much that we would want to slip back into the nostalgic past, but more so to remind us that because of them we are open to other possibilities of better conducting ourselves in the future. Tradition is not a static body of knowledge from the past but a living pool of collective knowledge that facilitates meaning-making, and has the ability to transform and be transformed by others.

Thus, certain fairy tales in tradition are appropriated to support one's location in a community. For example, Robert Bly (1996) described the deterioration of the western paternal society into that of the sibling society by drawing upon fairy tales such as "Jack and the Beanstalk" to argue his case that we have regressed socially by abandoning responsibility and leaving children, like Jack, unprotected.

A detailed work of fairy tales (Warner, 1994a) exposes a wealth of tradition and the human dilemma which is hidden therein, coming to life with the breath of the storyteller and planting roots and living in the minds of the audience because fairy tales capture the richness of the tapestry of life. Through the fantastical repertoire of dreadful dragons, enchanted castles, fairies, heroic deeds, evil beings, princes and princesses, fairy tales allude to the complexities of human relationships. On the surface, fairy tales may seem to be innocuous. It is in the uncovering of a fairy tale that one finds unspeakable truths about human relationships (Warner, 1994a; Zipes, 1995). The careful unravelling of the threads in the fairy stories reveal human dramas moved by incidences of injustice, powerlessness, resistance, celebration of human life and survival against all odds. For example, in the fairy tales of the "The Twelve Brothers" and "Cinderella," the main story characters were the silent daughters. Silence was considered a virtue when exercised by the female members of society in maintaining the family equilibrium in early nineteenth century Germany (Warner, 1994a). Women who broke silence were the other: the witches and the stepmothers. However, silence, though unheard, was conspicuous and therefore visible. The plight of the exploited textile workers in the Huguenot community of Hesse

loomed potently through the image of the bleeding hands of the long-suffering silent princess of “The Twelve Brothers” (Warner, 1994a).

Due to their rich tradition, a mere categorization of fairy tales as being sexist and patriarchal (Davis, 1989; Bailey, 1993; Lieberman, 1972; Zipes, 1995, 1997) removes the complexities layered into the stories. It is like going to a museum to gaze at the haunting displays of historical artefacts. What comes forward in such a gaze is a hollowed out artefact divorced of its social and material conditions. Only a distorted and gutted understanding of the artefact becomes possible. Fairy tales are different; they are rooted in the living world yet, they live in our imagination, fueled by our creative desire to have a world where things impossible become possible.

Embedded in fairy tales are issues of life, identity, happiness and fulfillment. In fairy tales, the act of living is closely tied to finding our selves in relation to others. The characters come of age when they are able to discover meanings in their lives and can fulfill their tasks well. These are often accomplished with the benevolent assistance of fairy godmothers and animals. The characters in the fairy tales are faced with almost insurmountable problems and yet survive the ordeals. Some tales have happy endings while others do not. All tales mirror our journeys in a living world beset with difficulties, tensions, and the pain and pleasure of understanding self and other.



### Identity: Recovering Desire and Pleasure

A world of familiarity can occasionally be frightening and risky. An incident drawn from my childhood shall illustrate how classical fairy tales can position one against one's desire and disrupt one's understanding of self. My sense of who I was and where I stood relative to the others in the grade six classroom was poignantly conveyed to me when my classmates selected me to assume the role of the witch in "Sleeping Beauty." Their contention was based not on my acting ability but my physical attributes, namely being dark and having long black hair. I fitted the role of the character in the narrative. All of the other girls in the class were Chinese and had black hair. Any one of them could have just as easily been the witch. However, I was the only Indian girl in a classroom of Chinese. I had no desire to be the witch. I wanted to be one of the fairy godmothers. This incident located me in a particular web of relations with my classmates. Like the witch, I was located in the borderlands. The story of "Sleeping Beauty" awakened me to the reality as to who gets to play the privileged roles and who gets to be the underdogs in the narratives of our lives. Lessons learnt from narratives about self and other can be powerful.

Our sense of who we are is constantly at play when we encounter others in narratives. My encounter with my classmates through the tale of "Sleeping Beauty" provided a sense of who we were in relation to one another. Out of our relations, I came to understand how I was situated on the margins in the classroom at that point in time. However my grandmother situated me differently in her world of East Indian fairy tales. I was likened to the East Indian princesses such as Sita, Damayanti and Sakuntala. The

plays I engaged in with my sisters called upon these princesses. I realized that our identities cannot be located within a given social frame as we are constantly shifting our positions vis-à-vis others. Our sense of who we are is always relational.

Identity is about relations. “Relations of Kind. Full of the kinships that bind our lives to each other and to the life of the Earth” (Jardine, 1994, p. 111). To relate requires a person to make connections with the other. The kinships we make depend on the situation in which we find ourselves. The word “situation” stems from the Latin word *situs*, which can mean the position of a person in relation to another person or persons. The definition of identity is now extended to refer to the different subject positions an individual can take up in life. Our identities are not locatable in a single subject position but by the multiple subject positions which are often contradictory and unpredictable. As a result, we interpret our selves and others differently. I will adopt the term identity to mean the different positions one occupies in the course of living one’s life and the attendant relationships that come with occupying such multiple locations in the living world. For example, in my own life, I have been named mother, daughter, wife, sister, alien resident and minority woman, according to the kind of relations I establish with family members and the public. Each of these positions places me in different relationships. As a mother, daughter, wife and sister, I enjoy close familial ties and am located in a “we” group. As an alien resident and minority woman, I am located as the other, part of the “they” group.

The notion of identity, based on “we” meaning self and “they” meaning the other, is built on the concept of similarity. The word “identity” has its roots in Latin, *identitas*,

meaning sameness. The word is used to describe a person sharing identical traits with the rest of the group. Reproducing resemblances is vital to identity. Difference is looked upon with suspicion and seen as dangerous. A person who is different is marked as the other. My classmates resembled each other in that they were all members of the Chinese community. They all possessed fair complexions. They shared a common language. I was positioned as the dark other in our play, the outsider. I was rendered powerless by their decision to cast me as the witch. I had a different perception of my self. I felt as though I belonged with my classmates, having been born and raised in Singapore. I saw them as people who were part of our multicultural nation. Yet my experiences with my classmates made me understand that although I could exercise my agency and autonomy in understanding my self and the other, I did not have a complete say in defining my identity. Others had a say in determining where I should be situated in the community. Thus the tension of who we are and how we define others is played out in real life in classrooms and other places. As a consequence, there is separation and pain. I was separated from my friends and suffered in silence, having been named the dark other. The difficulties surrounding the notion of identity can be better understood when identity is realized as “a story which can never fully be told” (Davies, 1993, p. 22) as we are constantly in the process of becoming (Gadamer, 1960/1989).

Understanding self and other is a fecundating process which has to do with coming to understand deeply that the notion of identity is rooted in the act of living. Our lived experiences enrich our understanding of self and other. Pleasure and pain come from

knowing and understanding our selves. Therefore I am turning to the tale of “Cupid and Psyche” to draw out the emotional aspect of identity. The tale is one of how Psyche, through her difficult experiences of life, came to understand her self in relation to others. I would like to recover the complexities embedded in the tale where fear, pain, love, pleasure, jealousy, greed and a host of other human emotions and desires serve as openings to understand our selves. Like Psyche, we are not spared from the pain or pleasure of uncovering a glimpse of identity.

According to the tale of “Cupid and Psyche,” Aphrodite, jealous of Psyche’s beauty, sent her comely son, Cupid, to kill her. But Cupid fell in love with Psyche and protected her from his mother. He married Psyche but he did not reveal his true identity. However, Psyche’s sisters were jealous of her good fortune, and decided to encourage Psyche to find out what kind of a monster she had married. Psyche, unable to contain her curiosity, discovered the identity of Cupid. Thereafter, Psyche underwent many tribulations to get her husband back. Psyche embarked on a journey that led her to understand life in all its complexity. Cupid relented and was reconciled with Psyche. The reunion resulted in the birth of their child, Pleasure. The tale of “Cupid and Psyche” resembles many animal-groom stories. “Beauty and the Beast” is such a story. What is relevant here is that the tale of “Cupid and Psyche” is more than a love story. The story is about identity steeped in the living world, full of human emotions surrounding our desires to be extraordinary people possessing much-desired attributes such as beauty and bravery.

Fairy tales remind us that our identities are revealed through a careful unlayering of our rich lived experiences.

### Fairy Tales and Identity

The need to understand and name ourselves is part of the human condition. Thus we create stories for ourselves to answer that call within us. We pass on our understanding of the world through narratives, among them fairy tales, which carry our hopes, fears, tradition and fractured understandings of ourselves to our progeny.

Fairy tales do not carry definitive ideas of who we are. Instead, they carry the invisible threads of our struggles to understand what is to become of us. We are constantly trying to define ourselves and each time we do, we realize too soon that such a definition does not describe all there is to know as we are always in the process of knowing and becoming.

Identity is the main thread that holds narrative together. Fairy tales and identity exist in a symbiotic relationship. Fairy tales open up different dimensions of identity, namely the mystical, cosmological and sociological (Campbell, 1988). All of the dimensions are interrelated and mutually supportive.

The mystical dimension helps us realize the wonder of the universe. Fairy tales invite us to understand ourselves in relation to the mystical world, the universe at-large and the local community. As such fairy tales are instructive. They provide spaces wherein we can explore our selves. Fairy tales are children's myths (Campbell, 1988). For example,

the tales of “Ravana,” “Draupadi” and “Shakuntala” from the “Mahabharata” connect the East Indian children of the Hindu community to the mystical world. They address children by evoking the wonder of the world we are living in. As such, the fairy tales stir the children’s imaginations.

In addition, for many readers of that time, to read or listen to a fairy tale provided a means to distance themselves psychologically from their present situations and to be transported to a magical realm. To read a fairy tale was to follow the narrative path to happiness. (Zipes, 1997, p. 4)

The cosmological dimension presents an image of the universe based on knowledge that corresponds with scientific explanations on how things work. This dimension thereby facilitates and increases our fascination and wonder about the universe and the place of humans within it. For example, the Chinese fairy tale of the “Cowherd and the Spinning Maid” provides an explanation of the existence of the Milky Way.

The sociological dimension provides justification for certain social structures and our relationship to them. For example, the

literary fairy tales of Giovan Francesco Straparola, Giambattista Basile, Mme. D’Aulnoy, Charles Perrault, Mlle. L’Héritier, Mlle. de la Force, and others were complex symbolic social acts intended to reflect upon mores, norms, and habits organized for the purpose of reinforcing a hierarchically arranged civilizing process in a particular society. (Zipes, 1997, p. 3)

However, the sociological dimension varies from culture to culture and within each culture evolves and changes over time. Therefore, some of the social practices which the fairy tales promote may be outmoded and outdated. For example, in the Chinese Cinderella fairy tale, the practice of footbinding was considered important to mark the social standing of Chinese women. Women born to genteel families bound their feet to appear beautiful. However, such a social practice has long been abandoned and is now viewed as an abhorrent system designed to maintain women's subservience.

Fairy tales provide the liminal space where multiple interpretations of "how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances" (Campbell, 1988, p. 39) are extended to the audience. In "Hansel and Gretel," the children, though in dire circumstances, managed to outwit the witch and secure their lives. They were not helpless children. Even children abandoned by their trusted relatives can do well in fairy tales. They provide the nourishing hope that a life is possible under any circumstances.

I would like to recover the pedagogical dimension of fairy tales in this study. Such an undertaking involves returning the act of storytelling to its original difficulty, where storytelling was connected to the material bodily world of harvesting, hunting, feasting, celebrating births, mourning deaths and other such events. The community was entertained and pleasure was derived from an understanding that the tale connected them to outstanding personalities and events with whom/which the community would want to identify. The tales told and retold were the tales experienced by the members of the group.

Storytelling was a communal event, yet each member in part made his/her connection to a larger story. The tales told were part and parcel of the community.

Through our journeys and adventures, like characters in the tales, we come to learn more about ourselves. That is the appeal of narratives; they speak and relate to our experiences of life and are open to interpretation both at a personal and communal level. One of the places where fairy tales become part and parcel of a community is in a classroom of young children.



### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **CLASSICAL FAIRY TALES AND SCHOOL**

Narratives, which include fairy tales, in the pedagogical arena are often used as vehicles to fulfill curriculum objectives, be they social, economic or political. Narratives abound in the early childhood services classroom, yet the issue of identity is either downplayed or treated instrumentally. This state of affairs is due, in my view, to the dominance of the empirical-analytic and critical paradigms in educational thought.

##### **The Empirical-Analytic Paradigm**

The empirical-analytic paradigm fine tuned by Tyler (1949) is one of the dominant frameworks of curriculum construction in schools. It is a highly organized and technical approach to curriculum planning. The educational experience of learners is structured and compartmentalized according to the Tylerian categories: purposes, selection, organization and evaluation of learning experiences. The learning experiences are geared to certain predetermined ends. Narratives in the empirical-analytic paradigm become instruments to achieve predetermined educational goals. Stories are never ends in themselves but always the means to the ends in question.

The contrasting works of Bruno Bettelheim (1975) and Kieran Egan (1986) are difficult to contain strictly within the framework of the empirical-analytic paradigm, even though both experts share certain values inherent in the empirical-analytic paradigm.

However, I would like to position both Bettelheim and Egan under the umbrella of the empirical-analytic paradigm, primarily because both promote the instrumental use of narrative.

Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* has influenced how fairy tales are included in the early childhood curriculum. Fairy tales are narrowly defined in the Freudian-inspired psychoanalytic theory as having therapeutic value for young children, who have to contend with conflicting tensions of the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious mind. Children are constituted as possible subjects for intervention and regulation. For example, Bettelheim (1975) "as an educator and therapist of severely disturbed children" (p. 4) uses fairy tales to ameliorate the tensions that a child experiences in his/her life. The intervention and regulation are done in the interest of bettering the lives of the vulnerable young.

According to Bruno Bettelheim, the story of "Little Red Cap" better known as "Little Red Riding Hood," is about oedipal conflicts. Little Red Cap is caught in a conflict between the pleasure principle (id) and reality principle (the ego). Little Red Cap represents the "pubertal child" (Bettelheim, 1975, p. 170) who tries to understand the world by using his/her sensory capabilities: hearing, seeing, touching and tasting. The pubertal child finds the female figures (represented by Little Red Riding Hood's mother and grandmother) non-threatening. The male figure is of great importance. The "wolf" in "Little Red Cap" symbolizes the malevolent male who seduces and destroys. The hunter

symbolizes the paternal figure who protects and exercises benevolent power. It is in the story of "Little Red Cap" that a pubertal child

is trying to understand the contradictory nature of the male by experiencing all aspects of his personality: the selfish, asocial, violent, potentially destructive tendencies of the id (the wolf); the unselfish, social, thoughtful, and protective propensities of the ego (the hunter). (Bettelheim, 1975, p. 172)

Bettelheim interprets the story as portraying the ambivalence experienced by Little Red Cap when confronted with the sexual overtures of the wolf (the seducer). The sexual character of the fairy tale appeals to the unconscious mind of the pubertal child. The pubertal child is caught up in oedipal conflicts involving the father. "With the reactivation in puberty of early oedipal longings, the girl's wish for her father...and her desire to be seduced by him, also become reactivated. Then the girl feels she deserves to be punished terribly...(Bettelheim, 1975, p. 175). The fairy tale allows the pubertal child to deal with the ambivalences and achieve a higher plane of maturity.

Bettelheim claims that young children's behaviour is largely instinctual and that they lack the capability to engage in abstract thinking. Children learn about selves and others through a linear process, starting "from most irrational beginnings. Only in adulthood can an intelligent understanding of the meaning of one's existence in this world be gained from one's experiences in it" (Bettelheim, 1975, p. 3). A child at the early stage of personality development uses binary opposites to make meaning and is not capable of

dealing with ambiguity. Children are drawn to the binary opposites because “polarization dominates the child’s mind...” (p. 9).

Though Bettelheim recognizes the historicity of the fairy tales and that “fairy tales have meanings on many levels...” (Bettelheim, 1975, p. 169), he prioritizes his psychoanalytic rendering of the fairy tales above other meanings. Eventually fairy tales are only viewed in terms of inner struggles of the human mind. These inner struggles are seen as universal.

Fairy tales are of therapeutic use to young children who have to struggle with oral fixations and oedipal conflicts (Bettelheim, 1975). Bettelheim’s interest in the various meanings children make when they encounter narratives is basically diagnostic. Fairy tales are used to smooth over conflicts between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Children are seen as patients who are in need of prescription (in this case a healthy dose of fairy tales) to develop into well adjusted beings. “But like all good fairy tales, these stories also indicate the right remedies to undo the damage, and the prescription is in line with the best psychological insights of today” (Bettelheim, 1975, pp. 70-71).

Bettelheim (1975) argues that in order to understand our selves, we have to know the inner workings of our minds. The capacity to understand the self is dependent on a linear maturational process where we make step by step progress from lower to higher levels of understanding of the world. The search for identity is associated with the developmental processes. Bettelheim agrees with the genetic epistemology of Piaget, that a “child’s thinking remains animistic until the age of puberty” (1975, p. 46). Until then the

child is said to experience the world subjectively. However, such a viewpoint is challenged today (Matthew, 1994, 1995) for being limited and reflective of a particular disciplinary knowledge, namely, cognitive psychology and its attendant discursive practices.

Matthew (1995) argues that children are capable of engaging in abstract philosophical issues. The cognitive epistemology propounded by Piaget and used by Bettelheim to support his case (1975) throws a very narrow shaft of light on how children understand the world around them. According to Bettelheim, a child's understanding of the world is dependent on where that child is in his/her developmental stage. The role of an educator is to provide fairy tales to enable a child to realize the meaning of his/her life at that stage. In other words, fairy tales are used to address the various mental conflicts children experience in their need to understand the world. Larger issues pertaining to understanding one's identity in relation to a wider community are therefore ignored.

There is a serious need to reconceptualize the early childhood curriculum (Kessler & Swadener, 1992) to include alternative ways of understanding the relationship between self and story. Alternative conceptions would allow a broader, richer understanding of the self as well as respect the lived experiences of the children in the here and now of our classrooms. There is a need to understand how children make meanings of fairy tales in classrooms away from the clinical gaze of psychoanalysis.

Kieran Egan's dissatisfaction with the empirical-analytic paradigm is largely centred on its neglect of children's imaginative and creative mental capacities. Kieran Egan (1986) argues that the school curriculum suffers from a lack of imagination by

enforcing learning activities based largely on concrete experiences (from the known to the unknown). He asserts that children are capable of abstract thinking and have creative imaginations. He supports his arguments by illustrating how children are able to comprehend complex abstract ideas through the stories they encounter in their lives. Egan is interested in the structure of narratives and not so much in how narratives have something to illuminate about the self and one's life experiences.

Egan proposes the story form model to select, organize and build the content of lessons. The story structure has universal features such as binary opposites and story rhythm. The story form model encompasses an expectation of conflicts in the beginning, the tension of binary opposites in the middle and the resolution of conflicts in the end of the story. Egan has concentrated on coming up with a story form model to tackle the issue of how to teach children a pre-determined body of knowledge effectively.

## The Story Form Model

### 1. Identifying importance:

What is most important about this topic?

Why should it matter to children?

What is affectively engaging about it?

### 2. Finding binary opposites:

What powerful binary opposites best catch the importance of the topic?

### 3. Organizing content into story form:

3.1 What content most dramatically embodies the binary opposites, in order to provide access to the topic?

3.2 What content best articulates the topic into a developing story form?

### 4. Conclusion:

What is the best way of resolving the dramatic conflict inherent in the binary opposites?

What degree of mediation of those opposites is it appropriate to seek?

### 5. Evaluation:

How can one know whether the topic has been understood, its importance grasped, and the content learned?

Figure 1. Source: Egan, Kieran (1986). *Teaching as story telling: An alternative approach to teaching and curriculum in the elementary school*. Ontario: The Althouse Press. p. 41.

In his discussion of the story form model, Egan cites examples of binary opposites such as fear/hope, kindness/cruelty and good/bad evident in the fairy tale of “Cinderella.” Egan calls these binary opposites “structural devices” whose purpose is to “serve as criteria for selection and organization of the content of the story and they serve as the main structuring lines along which the story moves forward” (Egan, 1986, pp. 26-27).

Egan selected the story of “Cinderella” to illustrate how the binary opposites good/bad are used to select and organize content and support the development of the story line. First, a conflict between the good/bad is identified. Incidents and characters are selected to propel the story. In this case, the stepmother is selected to be the embodiment of evil, and incidents of cruelty against Cinderella are organized to deliver said message. Cinderella becomes the embodiment of the good, demonstrated by her kindness and good nature. The binary opposite of good/bad is in constant tension throughout the story. The story model achieves an optimum conclusion when the conflict set up in the beginning is resolved or mediated in favour of the good. For example, Cinderella’s stepmother and stepsiblings realized their errant behaviour and are forgiven by Cinderella. They, together with Cinderella, lived happily ever after.

The story form model replicates the empirical-analytic paradigm. The living history of narratives is ignored. The participation of the children in meaning-making and the situatedness of the children have implications for how stories are interpreted by them and how they take up such knowledge to understand self and others. In Egan’s model, the



participation of children in meaning-making is neglected. Narratives are reduced to method.

The first problem is that narratives are manipulated to fit the story form model. The story form model recommended by Egan does not take into account other forms of stories which do not share the same structure. The traditional story plot consisting of a beginning, a middle and an ending is not a viable yardstick for many stories from other cultural backgrounds. It privileges the one story plot over others. Sutton-Smith (1995) states that the traditional story plot with a beginning, middle and end is problematic as it

is derived from myth-of-the-hero narrative found in the folk cultures of urban civilizations, but not all other folk cultures. These stages in the development of the narrative are not necessarily universal in human development. Many cultures tell tales which do not have resolution. They may attempt resolutions that are failures, or talk of nullifications of threats but without real resolution. (p. 74)

In privileging one type of narrative discourse over any other, Egan has excluded other forms of story in the dialogue. There is no opening for an authentic dialogue. He serves the very paradigm he criticizes for not paying attention to the emotions (affective) and creative imagination of children in education. His alternative model perpetuates the underlying interest of the empirical-analytic paradigm where ends supersede means and “children are perceived of as objects to be controlled, predicted and manipulated” (Jardine

& Clandinin, 1987, p. 476). The model ignores the lived experiences of children and their agencies.

**The Critical Paradigm** - “Beware of the Big Bad Storyteller!” - (Zipes, 1995, p. xi)

Critical theorists observe that the traditional classical narratives are part of the dominant discourse that needs to be made problematic. The knowledge contained in the fairy tales is not neutral. Fairy tales celebrate the values and interests of the patriarchal elite. Through the sites of pleasure and entertainment (culture industry), the elite maintain their power. The culture industry is motivated by the desire to reap profits and power to influence consumers’ behaviour. With the appropriation of popular children’s narratives by Disney, children are exposed to the dominant values such as female passivity/male dominance through the discourse of pleasure and innocence (Giroux, 1995, 1996; Zipes, 1997). As a result, popular fairy tales such as “Beauty and the Beast,” “Snow White” and “Cinderella” are commodified.

Zipes (1995) states that there are two dangers facing children in schools. One has to do with the instrumentalization of the school curricula which stifles the imagination of children, and the other danger is the commercialization of storytelling, where children are made into avid consumers. To counter these dangers, Zipes recommends that storytelling be used as a means to respond to the community needs and increase the social awareness of children. Storytelling then becomes “a process of empowerment” (Zipes, 1995, p. 4).

Classical fairy tales, according to critical theorists, should be used to bring about a heightened sense of social awareness.

It is important, I believe, for the children to hear or read a classical tale that they are “supposed” to know, according to society’s standard-bearers, even though I personally may find the tale sexist, racist, or abusive to children in some way. In order for children to be able to innovate and use the characters, motifs, and narrative strategies of the tales, they must gain a sense of what a classical model is and be able to distinguish the differences between genres. (Zipes, 1995, p. 17)

By having knowledge of the classical fairy tales, children can then be guided to address the problems of sexism and racism, among others, to bring about social justice.

The storyteller plays the role of the rabble rouser - the instigator. To illustrate his point, Zipes draws our attention to the tale of “Little Red Riding Hood.” He related Perrault’s version of the tale where Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother met their violent deaths. In addition to Perrault’s version, Zipes provided different but liberating versions of “Little Red Riding Hood,” that challenged the sexist and patriarchal elements present in the fairy tale, to the children in the classrooms. The counter-versions of the “Little Red Riding Hood” tale are to provoke children into questioning the oppressive patriarchal elements and abuses inherent in the classical version. Though Zipes is interested in the meanings children make of the stories told to them, his primary purpose in

storytelling in the classrooms is to create a young student population sensitive to communal needs and social injustice.

Critical theorists are interested in achieving social justice and through praxis, that is reflective action, they hope to awaken the consciousness of the oppressed to take an active role in their lives and to remove the inequalities present in society. Freire (1970), like Gadamer, articulates that knowledge is not neutral. He advocates dialogue, reflection and communication among educators and students to make them aware of their oppressive conditions and to enable them to take action. Critical theorists

recognize that unforced subjectivity or nondistorted communication can only take place in an uncontentious sphere of transcendental truth.

Subjectivities are produced in public and private arenas that are riven with material inequalities and social injustices and that reflect race, class, and gender privileges. Subjectivities constituted by dominant discursive formations invite speakers or agents to misrecognize or mistake themselves as the authors of their own identity, occluding the material relations of capitalist production. (Sleeter and McLaren, 1995, p. 19)

People in the market economy are misled into believing that they possess the freedom to constitute their own identities, in both the public and private spheres of their lives. The oppressive capitalist forces, hidden within the various human interactions in the market economy, need to be exposed in order for people to understand how their subjectivities are influenced by the prevailing capitalist discourses. Therefore, the issue of identity is of

importance to critical theorists. However, like the feminists, they explore the issue from the viewpoint of their political philosophy; the intent is to liberate learners from oppressive elements inherent in their society.

An active dialogical relationship between educators and students is encouraged and invited by the critical theorists (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). However, dialogue in the critical sense becomes a conversation with a hidden agenda. For the critical theorists, the dialogue is driven by a particular agenda from the outset, to enlighten the oppressed. Thus an open and sincere dialogue is difficult, given the kind of agenda at play. The lived experiences of learners are recognized but only insofar as they can be manipulated by critical theorists. Learners' roles are reduced to that of sharing their experiences for discussion purposes so that their suppression and the oppressive conditions become exhibits to justify political action. "I speak to you to inform you of your victimization and oppression rather than with you in order that together we create a world which does justice to both of us" (Smith, 1994, p. 117). Under these circumstances, fairy tales become instruments for the critical theorists to expose oppressive elements in society. The messy contradictions and ambiguities encompassing our lives are politicized as if by adopting political actions our problems will go away. This is not the real world. We have to make a case here to return the world to its original difficulty, where we refuse attempts to smooth complexities and resolve contradictions.

Other scholars concerned with political action are feminists. However, they differ from the critical theorists in that their political agenda is focused on gender issues.

Feminist scholars (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Grumet, 1988; Ellsworth, 1989; Noddings, 1992) have exposed the empirical-analytic paradigm as serving the interests of the dominant group at the expense of marginalized groups, namely women and minorities. Their response to the empirical-analytic paradigm is to raise the consciousness of educators and learners alike to the hidden social, historical, political and economic biases in curriculum against women. Feminist educators are now calling for a reconceptualization of the curriculum in schools (Kessler & Swadener, 1992). They have discussed the issue of identity extensively (Kauffman, 1993; Stone, 1994).

Many feminists have exposed the oppressive modernist and patriarchal elements in narratives (Bailey, 1993; Davies, 1989, 1993; Gilligan, 1979). Marcia K. Lieberman (1972) criticizes patriarchal elements in many popular fairy tales for relegating the powerless and passive roles to females. She questions the agenda of such famous stories as: "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White." She argues that positive female models are lacking in these stories. The heroines in these stories take on the roles of passive females. Cinderella is an example of a long-suffering heroine. Many of these heroines are incapable of resolving their problems by themselves. They require courageous men to rescue them. In conclusion, Lieberman (1972) wants us to:

consider the possibility that the classical attributes of 'femininity' found in these stories are in fact imprinted in children and reinforced by the stories themselves. Analyses of the influence of the most popular children's

literature may give us insight into some of the origins of psycho-identity.

(p. 200)

Underlying the discussion on how narratives should be constructed is the question of identity. Feminists' criticisms of narratives for children (Lieberman, 1972; Bailey, 1993; Davies, 1989, 1993) are centred on how these narratives abet the construction of gendered identities which are detrimental to children.

Female children are said to be influenced by the passive female characters of the narratives while male children see female roles reduced to secondary props in the stories. The feminists' response to such stories is to counter them with stories that liberate the female characters from their traditional passive roles. Dialogues in classrooms among feminist educators and children become slanted if they are too narrowly focused on a selective group of children, namely girls, and require other models of proactive female characters and themes to give a balanced view.

What lies in the shadow of such dialogues are the traditions of classical stories. The traditions of classical stories are not centred around patriarchal discourses alone. In the liminal spaces of the fairy tales, there are subversive elements which question the protocol of the dominant group in society. Though the feminists have examined the issue of identity extensively, the focus is rather limited to women's issues. The complexities surrounding the question of identity need to be acknowledged. Identity as a topic must include all of us.

Warner (1994a), in her in-depth study of fairy tales, warns that we must not delude ourselves into thinking that these stories are the approved stamps of a patriarchal society. Rather these stories are testimonies of the complex workings of human relationships and as such have much to offer us in terms of enriching our understanding of our selves and others. Fairy tales caution us to be mindful of the danger of closing our doors to possibilities. We should not be too hasty like the Beast in “Beauty and the Beast” to turn out the old hag.

### The Hermeneutic Attitude

Narrative and its role in understanding self and other is not acknowledged as a pivotal area for curriculum consideration. Fairy tales are used instrumentally in the empirical-analytic and critical paradigms. The educational experiences of children through fairy tales are centred on overcoming psychological problems (Bettelheim, 1975) and mastering certain content (Egan, 1986). For the critical theorists, fairy tales are used for the instrumental purpose of achieving social justice.

I advocate the adoption of a hermeneutic attitude towards fairy tales and identity. The hermeneutic attitude requires adults (teacher and researcher) to realize that any encounter with children in the classroom is a pedagogic moment rich with the possibility of new interpretations of self and other. As a hermeneut, I want to understand how fairy tales invite children to live in a space in-between where they can begin to explore issues of identity.



The hermeneutic attitude attempts to return the telling of tales to its original character. The first storytellers (Campbell, 1988) were attuned to the rhythm of community activities. Telling stories was a communal event. The storyteller was only part of the storytelling process. Telling stories involved participation by the listeners also.

The relations between the storyteller and community was a pedagogic one as multiple interpretations of the story told were acknowledged. When a tale unfolded from the lips of the storyteller, it became part and whole simultaneously. The tale became “part” as an individual member of the community enriched the tale with his/her interpretation. The tale became “whole” as the community could jointly partake in the emotions of the story characters on stage. There was a shared experience of the story. The pleasure associated with the common experience of connecting to a larger than life event held the community together.

Hermeneutics refuses to objectify our lived experiences into a simple case. A hermeneutic attitude requires one to understand life in all its complex forms. Hermeneutics provides a liminal space where vast possibilities in understanding the meanings of our lived experiences are acknowledged. The kind of pedagogical approach I am calling for is a return to the practice of storytelling where fairy tales are told to warn young children and adults alike about the difficulties of life and the complexities present in our relationships with one another. As such, fairy tales are told and not taught. A space is provided for children to explore fairy tales through play. Children are permitted to add their own

meanings to the fairy tales they encounter to understand themselves and others. When children interpret fairy tales, they come to understand themselves differently.

A case has to be made for a different notion of fairy tales and identity to represent the many and varied situations and relations that exist in classrooms. Here we bring our stories, including “unspeakable” stories, out into the open. In the open space provided by dialogue we come to understand who we are as we continue to move on in the drama of life; each speaking moment brings us to remembrance and forgetting. Like travellers’ tales, one’s identity bear traces of the places travelled, resisting appropriation to a single site it has travelled to and yet finding itself foreign to the place of origin because of its travelled past (Trinh, 1994). Like travelled tales, identity resists being the same and in the retelling of our narratives we call upon others who have contributed richly to our understandings. As we come to understand who we are through the many narratives that are present in our lives, we also understand that there are myriads of things we do not understand about ourselves.

In view of the dynamic and transformational character of our identity, I would argue for a curriculum in which children are given opportunities to make sense of the narratives they hear in a classroom without being led by various experts. A hermeneutic attitude calling for generous attention to lived experiences and interpretation is advocated. A narrative gives a child many possibilities of what the world can hold for him or her. It opens a path upon which a child can more easily embark, the destination and outcome of which are yet to be decided.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **GATHERING LIVING TALES**

...every research method is embedded in commitments to particular versions of the world (an ontology) and ways of knowing that world (an epistemology) implicitly held by the researcher. (Usher, Ian & Johnston, 1997, p.176)

#### The Problem of Method

This interpretive study is framed by the principles of hermeneutics, especially Gadamerian hermeneutics, which serve as a window to explore the meanings children derive from classical fairy tales and to examine how those meanings influence identity formation. Gadamerian hermeneutics is not a method. Basically it explicates a way of being in the midst of and making sense of lived experience. Understanding and interpreting self and the world we live in through tradition, history, culture and language are the crux of hermeneutics.

Interpretive work is connected to the living world and as such, the complexity and ambiguity surrounding our lived experiences are acknowledged as relevant to understanding of self and other. This is radically different from the type of research advocated in the empirical-analytic paradigm, where the clear univocal tradition of

Descartes (Jardine, 1990) and modern technological thinking are privileged over other ways of approaching the world.

In the empirical-analytic paradigm, the research act requires the isolation of the object of study from the rest of the world, disconnected from the living world and meaning-making in order to be validated. “We must suspend any spontaneous familiarity or sense of kinship that it evokes in us. We must also put out of play any interconnections we see or suspect between this instance and any other meanings or tales or stories or narratives” (Jardine, 1992, p. 52). These severances enable the empirical inquiry to be univocal. This univocity is resisted by Gadamer (1960/1989) in favour of plurivocity. Interpretive research wants to look at how an event occurs in relation to others, evoking multiple possibilities and resisting the isolation of a case.

The empirical-analytic approach has nothing new to reveal in terms of deepening understanding or viewing things differently, as it has already framed the parameters of how a study should be conducted. It has become exclusive. Our knowledge of the world and thereby our selves is garnered with specific methodologies and practices of various disciplinary knowledges. Each disciplinary knowledge attempts to occupy the authoritative position in providing the Truth and to degrade and/or eliminate contending practices. For example, the psychological approach is quite dominant in educational thought and practice. The developmental stages espoused by the psychological experts such as Piaget greatly influenced educational thought on early childhood curriculum. Hermeneutics looks at lived experience and attempts to interpret the world in history, tradition and culture.

There is no single set of privileged knowledge. Hermeneutics does not bring about a closure to events. It is open to interpretation and starts in “the middle of stories” (Smith, 1994, p. 126). As a result, research becomes an on-going process dedicated to the task of bringing greater understanding to the living world. Therefore, a research story can be told and retold over and over again to create different meanings which contribute to increased human understanding. Each telling of a story is a special case as it may offer something different to deepen our understanding.

The researcher is constituted differently in the various methodologies. In the empirical-analytic paradigm, the research methodology is structured on the principles of neutrality, objectivity, repeatability, validity and universality. The researcher is strictly a non-partisan observer to ensure objectivity. The validity of the research is dependent on how well the study has been hermetically sealed from contamination. Both the researcher and the researched are denied their sense-making capabilities based on what they already know from their lived experiences.

Authors are an ‘absent presence’ in the scientific literature; both corporate and individual research is de-authored by the same textual device of indirect prose. The resulting accounts follow and privilege a technical trajectory in which selves as authors, authorisers and authorities are absented. In this way, science maintains its own fiction as a practice without practitioners, an agentless and therefore universally valid enterprise. (Usher, Ian & Johnston, 1997, p. 219)

Adherence to prescribed scripts of research is crucial to the empirical-analytic approach to justify its authoritative claims to truth. The subjects of the research are reduced to objects. The researcher's voice is passive as well as hidden behind the text of scientific discourse. As a result, "our lives, the lives of our children, the life of the Earth, become well-lit, enlightened, presentable, clear, univocal, like thin veneer whose surface is unambiguous, shiny/reflective, clean, without depth - bodiless, sexless, ghostly, empty..." (Jardine, 1990, p. 215).

Unlike the empirical-analytic approach, hermeneutics requires the researcher (meaning seeker) to be present holistically in the community to explore the research inquiry in a grounded way - in touch with the moist warm Earth which supports the material bodily world, where relations with one another are founded in blood ties, and in renewal and decay as the circle of life continues in the throes of birth and death. As a meaning seeker, I had an obligation to fulfill in the community which granted me the privilege of being in the midst of their young children in kindergarten. By being part of the community, there was no separation of responsibilities between myself and the children. Both sides were mutually involved in interpreting and making sense of our experiences.

Gadamer (1960/1989) argues that we are both historical and cultural beings. We perceive our world according to our lived experiences. We thus acquire different ways of looking at matters. Our leanings towards certain matters are a question of prejudice. Prejudice can be good or bad. In the empirical-analytic paradigm, knowledge based on objectivism and scientism is privileged truth. However, such a perspective is a form of

bias. Truths obtained in such a framework are conceived in time, history and tradition. I acknowledge that I am a prejudiced being and that is not necessarily bad. Prejudice “certainly does not mean a false judgment, but part of the idea is that it can have either a positive or a negative value,” and what we should guard against “is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 270). I brought my conceptions of life into play in my interaction with the children. I was not a neutral observer, as I was caught up by the events occurring in the classroom.

One of the key elements of hermeneutics is its recognition that the act of interpretation is an on-going process. I understood that I played the role of an interpreter and recognized that the children whose actions I was interpreting were themselves interpreters. Children, in my study, were seen as interpreters of the fairy tales they had heard and sense-makers of the different identities rooted in the narratives. The children had their own stories to tell. Their stories made a difference, because when the children re-told the fairy tales they heard, they transformed the tales by layering the narratives with their interpretations.

“The fecundity of the individual case” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 38; Jardine, 1992) requires us to interpret the situation in the light of its particularity, which can deepen our understanding. The task of interpretive work here is to address each case in its state of being and in its relations to others (part to whole and vice versa). I observed three children (Albert, Katrina and Samuel) in particular and other children in the classroom as a whole as they interacted with one another in pretend play at the various play centres. I found the

notion of the “individual case” to be useful as it allowed me to view my study of children differently. Rather than having a generic explanation as to how children come to see themselves and others through stories (treating them as objects), hermeneutics required me to be in the midst of the children. It was not just the children who came to an understanding about the topic. I too was transformed by each encounter.

Hermeneutics resists making a human event into an isolated case that can be dissected, scrutinized microscopically and labelled by the researcher. In a world dominated by modernism and mass reproduction of human images and materials, one can be deluded into thinking that it is possible to invent a generic identity that speaks for all of us. For example, the corporate world promotes the image of an avid consumer of goods. Tremendous effort is concentrated on making us similar consumers to generate high demand for mass produced goods and services. To be the same then means to erase the difference. However, the children in the study refused to be labelled and categorized according to generic images. Their lived experiences enriched the pedagogical understanding of self and other.

Hermeneutics calls upon us to pay attention to the familial and ordinary things in life in a deeper way in order to draw meanings that are sedimented beneath the surface. I offer my research as one such telling in the hope that it may deepen our understanding of narratives and identity formation.



### Being in the Midst of Children

I conducted the research project over a period of eight weeks in an early childhood services classroom in an elementary school in an urban centre in Alberta, Canada. The school served a small and well-established community. There were only two early childhood services classes in the school, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. I researched the young children in the morning class only; the class was comprised of twenty-seven children (eighteen girls and nine boys). The children came from diverse multicultural backgrounds. The parents took an active interest in their children's education by volunteering their services in the classroom. They participated in the various activities organized by the teacher, such as building a castle. I encountered several volunteer parents at all times during the course of my project in the classroom. They assisted the teacher in carrying out various class activities, such as reading to a child.

The teacher was a creative and nurturing individual. He allowed children to move freely between various centres. He encouraged children to sing while he strummed the guitar. He posted a picture of his family in the classroom. He ended the school days with a song which the children sang with enthusiasm.

I was primarily interested in collaborating with children who were in the five to six year-old age range. Children of this age group are strongly influenced by both parents and teachers. At home and in school, children encounter a variety of ideas about the world and themselves which they have to negotiate to understand their place within a wider social

network. They are in the borderlands, a space in-between, which allow the children to explore, question, risk or affirm their identities.

The children's participation in the study involved: listening and participating as an audience to the dramatic telling of the selected classical fairy tales, participating in the dramatic play centre through the manipulation of puppets already used for the storytelling; and finally, being observed by and having conversations with me, the researcher.

Fairy tales provide another space in-between where children are invited at their own risk to navigate an adult world festering with dangers, tribulations and ambiguities, to face the possibility of metamorphosis and claim the promise of a better understanding of life and themselves. Popular classical fairy tales were selected because of their familiarity to children. Moreover, I was interested in how these stories were appropriated by the children to allow them to dwell in the space in-between. The classical fairy tales selected for the study were: *The Blind Men and the Elephant* (Quigley, 1959), "Rapunzel" (Grimm & Grimm, 1987), "Hansel and Gretel" (Opie & Opie, 1974), *Savitri* (Shepard, 1992), "Rumpelstiltskin" (Opie & Opie, 1974), "Little Red Riding Hood" (Opie & Opie, 1974), "Beauty and the Beast" (Opie & Opie, 1974), and *Yeh-Shen - A Cinderella story from China* (Louie, 1982). The various authors have done extensive research and presented the classical fairy tales as closely as possible to the original versions. Over the years, many versions of said stories have appeared. By knowing the original versions, one could perhaps understand the transformations these stories have undergone. The process of storytelling is ongoing. The stories people relate to each other are not final, for these

stories have a perennial quality of being able to assume new interpretations each time that they are told and retold, lived and relived.

The stories were selected because they contained a wide range of characters with whom the children could identify. Fairy tales from other cultures such as “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” “Savitri” and “Yeh-Shen” were selected because they provided accounts of life experiences to which the children could relate. These stories spoke of various human identities: the powerful, the weak, the ordinary, the marginalized and the wealthy, amongst others.

I used puppets of various types - mouth puppets, foam puppets, miniature puppets, rod puppets and shadow puppets - to engage the children in fairy tales. Puppets are art forms that appeal to young children; they open the doors of creative imagination and invite children to come and be with them in the world of narratives where experiences of all sorts await them. The children were willing to suspend their disbelief during storytelling and accord the puppets life-like qualities during the play.

The charm and the power of puppets is their existence in a liminal realm between reality and illusion. Puppets are always in flux, moving back and forth....It is only through the attempt at creating an illusion that the audience can see a lifeless object as a character endowed with vitality....

(Kominz & Levenson, 1990, p. 17)

In the process of storytelling, I was transformed into the storyteller, the performer, the prince, the princess, the witch, the father, the mother, the child and the big bad wolf,

amongst many other characters. I was positioned behind the stage curtains, living under the shadows of the animated puppets and lending my voice to them. My voice became the many “voices” of the puppets who engaged the children in the tales.

I was shadowed when the puppets were “telling” stories. The children, who were transported to the magical world of fairy tales, forgot my presence as another grown-up who had come to observe and have conversations with them. Instead, they saw me as a fellow traveller in their adventures in the realm of fairy tales. Such was the power of the language of the puppet (Kominz & Levenson, 1990) at that moment of storytelling. It is a common lived experience of many puppeteers to find themselves receding into the background at that point in time when the audience shifts its attention to the puppets and the story that is being played, and “one does not notice” (Meschke & Sörenson, 1992, p. 119) the puppeteers. The puppets entertained the children and “served us as a place to hide, a shield to guard our masked emotions” (Latshaw, 1990, p. 9) and a haven for our vulnerable selves. While engaging in puppetry, I was placed in a role to serve the children. As such, my interest lay in establishing a relationship with the audience through the medium of puppets and this required imagination and dialogue. “The experience of a living puppet requires the combined imaginations and energies of these two communities,” (Bradley, 1990, p. 112) namely, the researcher and the children in this study.

The puppets became the basis for intimacy for all participants because they were non-threatening. In short order, in the children’s eyes, I was transformed from Leela the researcher to Lola the “puppet lady.” It was with the arrival of my pretend name that I

was allotted a role in the children's play. I was to become their audience as they had been my audience when I "played" with the puppets. As their audience, I realized that puppet play offered me a non-intrusive way to participate with the children in interpreting the stories told to them in the classroom.

I set up a wooden puppet stage for the children in the dramatic play centre. The purpose of having such a centre was to provide the children with opportunities to play with the puppets under a free choice environment when they were not engaged in conversation with me, the researcher. They had the freedom to act out or play the parts of the narrative that intrigued them. Children use their sensory capabilities to explore the world. The puppets became a visual and tactile medium through which the children could explore their emotional needs in a safe manner. They used their hands to feel the puppets. They had to know the puppets before giving them their voices. Touching the puppets was pleasurable to children. They easily engaged in puppet play without prompting. "Puppet play (i.e. playing with puppets) is the simplest form of puppetry which, like dramatic play, occurs spontaneously and without adult intervention" (Hunt & Renfro, 1982, p. 19). The children were free to play with the puppets in any manner they chose. At times, I observed Samuel playing alone with a puppet and at other times he was playing in a group. The children improvised the scripts of their spontaneous plays.

While carrying out my research, I realized that I was entering a condition of game play. According to Gadamer (1960/1989), one enters a game by leaving the cares of the familiar and ordinary world and entering into a new situation bounded by its own

particular set of rules. I realized that as a participant observer (player), I must abide by the rules that govern the play of children and that I did not govern how the game was to be played collectively. As players, the children and I responded and reacted to what was being played and were transported by the game (story) itself. We were all drawn in. There were some things considered deliberate about play: one had to be in it and it conducted the player. The game play situation existed through my storytelling and the children's play.

We recognized that the game carried us and that as players, we were not mere cogs in the wheel of play. We became the creators of the game. We exercised our agencies. The game came to life through us when it was played. What was significant was that the game had a claim on the players. There was constant to-and-fro movement amongst the players and spectators. This kept the play buoyant. Here follows a multi-layered excerpt of the children's script on "Rumpelstiltskin." They were fascinated by the episode where the queen had to provide the true name of Rumpelstiltskin. It was a veritable moment of tension in the tale. Would the queen be able to name Rumpelstiltskin?

Samuel : "You have three days. You have three days to...."

Emile: "You have to figure out whose his name is."

Sally : "I don't know."

Samuel : "You figure out my name. Figure out my name."

Emile: "Now he comes back. He comes back."

Samuel : "Have you figured out my name yet?"

Sally: "Casper?"

Samuel : “No.”

Sally: “Ralph?”

Samuel: “No.”

Sally: “Brick?” (Children - laughing)

Samuel : “No. Okay. This is three guess. I am going home. Bye, bye.”

Emile: “Then he goes home.”

Sally: “Go to the forest and figure out his name.”

Emile: “Okay.”

Samuel: “Have you figured my name?”

Sally: “Rumpelstiltskin.”

Samuel: “Have you figured my name out?”

Sally: “Uhhmm...John?”

Samuel: “No.”

Sally: “Sidney?”

Samuel : “No.”

Sally: “Oh, then it has to be Rumpelstiltskin.”

Samuel :” Hee...ahhh! Give me your child! Heee...ahhh.... I’ve got your child!”

Sally: “Noo...ooo...it isn’t fair. How about...how about she didn’t ...Oh...Chinese stick!”

Samuel: “I have got your child!”

Sally: “Shhh!”

Teacher: “Three of the girls have to go to the library. Can I get Sally, Rose and Emile.”

The adults in the classroom receded to the background while the children were fully engrossed in their play. Their play was interrupted when the teacher requested that some of the players go to the library.

### Gathering Children's Lived Experiences

My study focused on the lived experiences of the children collectively (whole) and of three young individuals (Albert, Katrina and Samuel) who deepened my understanding and provided insights into the research inquiry. The three children were selected on the basis of their keen interest in the narratives, extensive participation in the dramatic play centre and willingness to engage in conversation with me. However, this did not mean that the other children in the classroom were excluded from the study. I observed them at play and listened to their conversations.

I spent two mornings per week in the classroom, from 10.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. This arrangement was agreed upon by the teacher and myself so that the teacher could spend the first half of the morning doing "academic" work such as reading and writing with the children. He allocated the second part of the morning to activities in the play centres.

On the first day of each week, I held a fifteen minute storytelling session with puppets, after which the children were free to participate in the various play centres. I remained in class for the next forty-five minutes to observe and interact with the children upon invitation. I audio-taped and video-recorded the children's play to augment my field



notes. My observations provided the necessary information from which I drew certain questions to pose to the children the following day.

On the second morning of each week, I had conversations with Albert, Katrina and Samuel at a corner of the classroom where there existed a minimal amount of distractions. The conversations were guided by questions about the fairy tales. Some of the questions I asked were as follows: How did you feel about the story? Did you like the story? Why? Why not? What was your favourite part of the story? Why? Who did you like/dislike in the story? And why? Whom do you want to be like? And why? Our conversations usually lasted about five to ten minutes for each child, depending on the child's willingness to participate. I spent the last fifteen minutes of the morning observing the children's play.

Conversation is a necessary way of establishing direct contact with the children. Gadamerian hermeneutics recognizes that language is an integral part of the being and thereby essential to understanding self and others. It emphasizes dialogue to bring to bear all of the various views and experiences which enable understanding. As such, one interpretation of experience does not take precedence over others as various interpretations may present the issues differently, depending on time and place.

My conversation with the children involved the active process of listening, observing and interacting with them about the fairy tales told to them. The willingness and the sensitivity to hearing what others had to say about the subject matter was important to me because "the hermeneutical experience also has its own rigor: that of uninterrupted

listening” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 465). I used an audio-visual recorder and a tape-recorder to tape the dialogues with the children.

The three children (Albert, Katrina and Samuel) were reluctant to engage in conversation. They would rather play! It was very difficult to have an I-Thou relationship in a conversation where the children were reluctant to talk. They were more interested in playing out the stories. They saw their friends playing at the different centres. It was difficult for them to sustain their interest in conversation. For example, Albert and I were having a conversation on the fairy tale of “Savitri.” Albert kept straining his neck to his left to see what was happening at the dramatic centre. He could barely wait to return to his play. “Can I go back to the centre?” he asked. I had to let him go. Albert showed some resistance to having conversations about the fairy tales. It was largely because he preferred to play with his classmates in the dramatic centre. Having conversations with me meant that he had to forego his much desired play. As such, conversation with Albert was difficult. His usual responses to my queries were rather laconic. Generally, children are seldom enthusiastic about participating in a conversation and much knowledge about children is thus obtained by observing the children at play (Manen, 1990; Paley, 1997). They were reluctant to talk about the images they held close to their hearts. Paley (1988) argues that one has to be attentive to children’s activities and conversations during play to uncover the unspoken lines. I learnt to rely on my observations of children at play and on the audio- and video-recordings. This did not discount the fact that there was still a lot to be discovered from conversation. For example, I was rewarded by the children when they

were ready to talk. Samuel was reluctant to talk at first. However, after several conversations, he invited me into his make-believe world where I gained insights into the kind of individual he was aspiring to be.

The children's play was an important part of my work. Initially, I wrote furiously in an attempt to capture the actions before me. I realized very quickly that when I chose to write about the children's activities as they were happening, I was in danger of losing the spirit of play. I abandoned my pen and notebook for I realized that

Close observation involves an attitude of assuming a relation that is as close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations....The method of close observation requires that one be a participant and an observer at the same time, that one maintain a certain orientation of reflectivity.... (Manen, 1990, p. 69)

It was difficult to be reflective in my observations when I was writing fieldnotes in class. As well, I deemed the act of writing fieldnotes, when joyful play was taking place amongst children, to be inharmonious with the spirit of children's play. As a result, I wrote about my observations after the children's play had ended. In addition to fieldnotes, I wrote notes in a journal, in the quiet recess of my home, to include the activities of the children and my reflections of my journey in this study. Journal writing served to clarify my understanding and allowed me to better engage in exploring the research topic.

Understanding required interpretation of the data collected. It was a contemplative

process. The audio- and video-recordings became valuable reminders of what had transpired in the classroom. I listened to the audio-tapes and watched the video-tapes to assist me in understanding the dynamics of the classroom. By reading my notes and transcripts of my conversations with the children and watching the video-tapes of the children's play several times, I was able to highlight issues that concerned the children most, namely, issues of identity related to desire, power, position and gender. Upon reflection on the issues that surfaced during the children's play, I realized that I had to use Bakhtin's works on carnival to understand how children interpreted the fairy tale of "Rapunzel" and how pleasure played an important part in understanding identity. "All interpretation is highlighting" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 400). By highlighting certain issues that came forward in the conversations and activities observed in class, I was actively participating in data reduction.

Throughout data analysis, I tried to honour the meanings made by the children by attending carefully to their words and actions.

### Standing Tall: Sustaining An Interpretive Work

Any interpretation of truth could not stand by itself as it has to relate to others and requires a form of rigor that allows it to be sustainable and generative in a community. A set of criteria drawn largely from Gadamer's works (coherence, comprehensiveness, penetration, thoroughness, appropriateness, contextuality, agreement, suggestiveness and

potential) provides hermeneutics with the “methodological rigor” (Madison, 1988) to support the project under study.

Good interpretive research must show consistency and coherence in its interpretation. The details in the interpretation must complement each other harmoniously. If there are contradictions, then the researcher’s obligation is to “attempt to make coherent sense of these contradictions” (Madison, 1988, p. 29). My study is held together consistently by grounding my research on fairy tales and identity.

Madison states that the principle of comprehensiveness is concerned with “the relation of the interpretation to the work itself which is interpreted” (Madison, 1988, p. 29). In other words, my interpretation of the relationship between fairy tales and identity in young children must be well rooted in the various works of fairy tales and identity, which together provide the foreground in which the study can be carried out to its completion. My study has established a strong relationship between fairy tales and identity in young children. Understanding and interpretation is rooted in establishing a meaningful and reciprocal dialogue between the interpreter and the interpreted.

Another guiding principle is penetration, where the researcher is able to bring forth intelligibly the crux of the project under study by highlighting the research inquiry and undertaking the study by exploring the various academic literature on the topic and conducting research in the classroom. I have highlighted the research inquiry and grounded my study on the various academic literature and on children’s play and conversation.

The study must be conducted with thoroughness where the researcher is required to be fastidious in his/her attempts to address significant issues that arise in the work itself. To the best of my knowledge, I have been thorough in investigating the topic by reading extensively, collecting data in a classroom by observing children, writing notes, reflecting on the topic at hand, engaging children in conversations and analyzing the data reflectively. I had to read my notes several times, listen to the audio-tapes numerous times and watch the video-tapes of the children's pretend plays many times. All of these actions enabled me to note significant issues which arose from such a research work. Throughout all of these actions, there were constant to and fro movements between my observations, the literature and the voices of the children.

An interpretation may be considered valid for its appropriateness. The questions an interpreter poses for a study must bear some relation to the existing literature on the topic. The questions surrounding fairy tales and identity have been posed in various forms before and have been the source of various interpretations (Bettelheim, 1975; Egan, 1986; Paley, 1990). I have already shown the various interpretations of the uses of fairy tales and their attendant impact on identity. The inquiry I have undertaken stands on the shoulders of other academics who delved deeply into the connection between fairy tales and identity. As such, it is important to study the issue in its proper context.

Contextuality involves the act of including historical and cultural elements which shed light on the various interpretations. Interpretation is situated in the clasp of history and culture; we (the interpreter and interpreted) are all immersed in it. I have provided

various contexts for the topic under discussion. I have provided detailed historical and cultural accounts of fairy tales and identity and described the context in which the study was undertaken, amongst other things.

The principle of agreement deals with adhering to an interpretation that holds in good stead the forces of tradition. Gadamer (1960/1989) has at great length argued for tradition. However, prudence must be exercised here as one would not want to blindly adhere to all that traditional interpretations have to offer. In fact, Madison argues that one should not be hesitant to break from traditional readings and offer new perspectives to the old question, where “the past resounds in a new voice” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 284). I advocate that fairy tales, as purveyors of tradition, have much to offer in terms of providing new and different insights into our identity. The children in this study were able to provide us a refreshing way of understanding self and other generously. For example, the children interpreted the fairy tale of “Rapunzel” by evoking the spirit of carnival (Bakhtin, 1965/1968).

The principle of suggestiveness comes into play where good interpretation is seen to bear fruitful imagination and generates veritable questions that spur further investigation. It should be cautioned that such endeavours do not signify that we have come to a better understanding. “Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better...It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, pp. 296-297). A good interpretation, to be valid, must show potential for

further research. A good interpretation has a future to reckon with, where due to the nature of interpretation, it opens productive spaces for questions to arise.

Madison argues that interpretive research is a serious and responsible inquiry of human actions. To engage in interpretive research is to be involved in a rigorous process “of practical reasoning and of persuasive argumentation” (Madison, 1988, p. 35) that shadows weaker interpretations and highlights good interpretations.

The principles stated above have scaffolded and maintained the integrity of the research work, honoured the contributions of the children and protected them from being reduced to mere specimens of a study. It is in the generous spirit of hermeneutics that I proceed to tell the tales of identity which the children created while playing in the liminal spaces provided by the fairy tales.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **MONSTROUS BEASTS AND WITCHES: TALES OF THE OTHER**

But however much a religious or profane play represents a world wholly closed within itself, it is as if open toward the spectator, in whom it achieves its whole significance. The players play their roles as in any game, and thus the play is represented, but the play itself is the whole, comprising players and spectators. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 109)

The children situated themselves in the stories via play to explore and comprehend their identities. Play with fairy tales created a liminal zone, a space-in-between, characterized by a refusal to bring closure to the topics at hand. The children used play to (re)tell the fairy tales and to explore whether the possibilities granted to story characters were open to them. The process of interpretation or (re)telling involved participating as spectators/actors during storytelling and as actors/spectators in play.

#### **The Stage**

The classroom (stage) was dominated by a huge wooden castle complete with a dungeon and drawbridge. The castle was built with community effort involving parents, children and teacher. We could see the castle from all corners of the classroom as it was

situated in the middle of the room. Surrounding the castle were a variety of play centres: computer centre, reading/library centre, “take it apart” workshop centre, a dramatic play centre, sand centre, science centre, printing centre, block centre and listening centre.

I observed that the centre of activities for the children was the castle. All activities took place around it. Near the entrance of the castle was a treasure box which contained various medieval paraphernalia associated with the theme of “Castles and Dragons”: plastic swords, plastic armour plates, plastic shields, a purple cloak and various costumes resembling the attire of medieval princesses and knights. The costumes and attendant accoutrements of play were signifiers of the identities the children assumed when they were engaged in pretend play. These trappings were symbolic representations.

Other centres were of considerable interest to the children as well. The “take it apart” workshop centre was especially popular with the boys, who dismantled appliances and then attempted to reconstruct them. There was plenty of hammering, banging, pulling and fixing in this centre. Usually a maximum of eight children were allowed in each centre. Otherwise, the children were able to move freely from one centre to another. I observed that the children were able to go to the centres of choice with minimal friction. They tended to weave in and out of various centres at their own will. When the play began, the stage became busy and the stories unfolded.

### The Scripts

At the time that I was carrying out my research, the children's learning activities were centred on the theme of "Castles and Dragons." The teacher had been telling the children fairy tales such as "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "The Three Little Bears." As such, my research project complemented the activities of the children. There was "narrative continuity" (Paley, 1997) in the curriculum programme as the selected fairy tales suited the topic at hand in the classroom and the children were able to continue with their play. In this instance "*play* is narrative continuity" as the children were "marching to that same rhythm" (Paley, 1997, p. 75) already present in the classroom before my arrival. My stories and puppets only served to enhance the curriculum.

The fairy tales entitled "The Blind Men and the Elephant," "Rapunzel" and "Hansel and Gretel" allowed the children to live in the spaces in-between. They interpreted the tales and positioned themselves in the stories by adopting the various identities of the story characters. Each of the children interpreted each story differently. Each interpretation of each fairy tale was rooted in a certain tradition already present in our society. Albert invoked the tradition of superheroes and monsters prevalent in many ancient tales of Greece, India and China. Darlene, with her enthusiasm for laughter, brought the carnival spirit of medieval times to the children. Katrina, Emile, Sally, Samuel and Albert laid bare some of the tensions surrounding identity and power.

### The Open Side

A portable wooden stage was used for the storytelling. The children were active participants in the storytelling. I encouraged the children to participate in the storytelling by providing sound effects for the puppet play. Our plays were often interrupted. Therefore, it was not unusual for the children to intervene during the storytelling with their ideas. When such interruptions occurred, the puppets “talked” to the children as if the conversations were part of the story. As such, the children in the classroom were not weighed down by the protocol required of audiences in public theatres. They were collaborators in the storytelling process where the meaning of the tale was jointly created and negotiated by the storyteller and the children.

The children were not hearing the fairy tales I had selected for the first time. The fairy tales were familiar to them and therefore aided their participation in the telling of each tale. Not all children agreed with the version of the tale told to them. Darlene approached me after the telling of “Beauty and the Beast.”

Darlene: “You had the ending wrong.”

Leela: “Why?”

Darlene: “The real ‘Beauty and the Beast’ does not have two sisters.”

Leela: “Really?”

Darlene: “It’s okay. Now you know the real ‘Beauty and the Beast’.”

“The real ‘Beauty and the Beast’ does not have two sisters,” echoed in my mind. What is the “real” “Beauty and the Beast”? Obviously, the story of “Beauty and the Beast”

narrated to the children was a “wrong” version for Darlene. The children were not keen to accept the version told to them. It was important to Darlene that I knew the “real” “Beauty and the Beast.” The children knew these stories from other sources.

The children’s participation from the open side of the stage required their involvement as an investor, which

means that the audience members have some stake in the performance itself. The viewers are implicated and engaged both in the success of the performance itself, as an artistic event, and in the successful conclusion or progression of the enacted events, within the performance frame.

(Proschan, 1987, p. 41)

The children had been solicited earlier on to participate in certain parts of the story when the appropriate cues were given. Not all of their participation in the fairy tales were choreographed by me. There were moments in the storytelling when a child would intervene and add to the story. For example, one child could not contain himself and interjected excitedly, “I know what they will do next. Get married. I know the story!” I was called to address the child in this instance. In such a situation, I used puppets to acknowledge the child and then continued with the story. “Yes, Kevin. Now I must ask Beauty to marry me,” the Beast replied. The play continued.

The play at hand became whole as the children and I (as players and spectators and vice versa) experienced the play with the open side of the stage extending toward us, drawing us into the stories. When I was the storyteller (player), the children were invited

in as active spectators. When the children became storytellers (players), I was invited in as a spectator. The children became players and spectators themselves as they played. We moved in and out of the play because the open side of the stage, the liminal space, was extended to us all.

Thus it is not really the absence of a fourth wall that turns the play into a show. Rather openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play. The audience only completes what the play as such is. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 109)

It was possible then for the children to situate themselves in the stories because the openness of the play allowed our shared understanding of fairy tales to emerge.

### Spotlighting

An explication of the three selected fairy tales below will highlight the relationship between identity and narrative and how the children co-opted the stories to make sense of the world and themselves.

#### The stinking beast.

“The Blind Men and the Elephant” is an old tale from India. One day, six blind men came across a huge thing. They did not know what it was. They touched different parts of the thing and came up with different answers. All of the answers were right in part. The six blind men interpreted the elephant according to their various sensory experiences. As a

result, six varied interpretations of what an elephant looked like were offered. The various interpretations held a certain particular truth but they could not be sustained as a whole by themselves. It was only in relation to all other interpretations that the whole identity of the elephant was made apparent to them. I dramatized the story for the children through the use of puppets. After the story telling, the teacher gave the children freedom of choice to select their play centres.

The castle centre became alive. The drawbridge came down. The children were then permitted to enter the fantastical world of fairy tales. The treasure box was ajar and its contents were now accessible. The children rummaged through the treasure box. The children gathered their favourite costumes and various paraphernalia of play that transformed them into story characters: kings, princesses, princes and knights, to name a few. There was a lot of enthusiasm at the castle centre as the children dressed themselves for the parts they wanted to play. The girls dressed themselves in soft flowing fabrics and the boys gathered their hard plastic swords, stiff plastic breast plates and shields. Albert searched through the treasure box and picked up a purple cloak lined with fake white fur and threw it round his shoulders. He was pretending to be a king. Samuel wore plastic armour and carried a shield and sword in his hands. He wanted to be a brave knight, a guard. Katrina and Amy were dressed in soft pastel garments as medieval maidens and princesses.

Albert, Samuel and Katrina took an active interest in reenacting the story of "The Blind Men and the Elephant." Later when the story began to transform, more children

joined in the play. Albert wanted to be the leader of a group of seven children (Samuel, Kevin, Mike, Katrina, Emile and Amy). Under the direction of Albert, the children began attacking the elephant puppet with great violence. They transformed themselves into a loud mob intent on destroying the evil elephant puppet.

The classroom teacher became quite concerned with the children's rowdiness and asked them to treat the elephant puppet with a gentle touch and play with soft voices. The children agreed and played quietly for a short while, but as they became once more involved in the play, they returned to their ferocious attacks on the elephant puppet.

In the beginning, I was quite anxious. I did not want the foam puppets to be destroyed as a good deal of time and effort went into their creation. So I reminded them to be gentle. The children responded by being quiet again. However, they returned to playing aggressively with the elephant. I experienced a conflict of interest. I wanted the children to play with the puppets so I could see their stories unfolding. At the same time, I wanted the puppets to remain in relatively good condition. I had to make the difficult decision of letting go of my investment in the puppets. I subsequently decided to be less concerned with the puppets and more resolved to witness what was happening in the children's play. I also realized that our (the teacher's and my) reminders to treat the elephant puppet gently interrupted and interfered with the children's play and their impromptu script. What was worse was that our reminders exerted a form of control over the children's play. The children's story was at risk when their play was interrupted. Thus, I decided to allow the children to do as they pleased with the puppets. The play must go on.



The children attacked the elephant puppet making nonsensical sounds, “Yep, yep, yep, yep...” as they did so. Albert attacked the foam elephant puppet with great force and declared that “The elephant is dead.” Other children joined in and whooped with joy. Katrina, who tightly held the puppet, became so upset with the aggression levelled at the elephant puppet that she emphatically asked the children to stop. She briefly had their cooperation but later, they resumed their attack the elephant puppet.

In the children’s play, the elephant was transformed into an evil monster that had to be vanquished. The elephant was not given an evil persona in the story told to the children, but in the children’s play, it became a foul smelling creature and a target for violent attacks. Some of the children held their noses with their fingers and went “pooh, pooh” to the elephant. The elephant had become an outcast (the other). The fact that the elephant smelled foul evoked much laughter from the children. The children’s humour was centred on the body odour of the elephant. Gross (1987) refers such acts to “the incongruity of imagery, when images which generally occur in separate realms are welded into a single image. This usually involves the degradation of that which is lofty and abstract into that which pertains to the body and material living” (p. 106). The children’s attacks could only be possible when the elephant was made the enemy. The other was different from the children. The other stunk. The other was a monster.

At the end of the half hour of puppet play, the elephant’s ear was torn. The six blind men had various tears to their faces. The teacher was apologetic about the condition of the foam puppets. I brought home the torn, embattled puppets, bearing the scars of a

furious confrontation, to be repaired for the next day's play. I was, however, surprised by the violent treatment of the elephant, as nowhere in the story that I related to them did there appear an element of violence. I also had come to the realization that I must make sufficiently sturdy puppets that could withstand such rough play.

The play acting in the dramatic play centre had several undercurrents. Albert wanted to vanquish the monstrous stinking elephant. Samuel was all too willing to be the knight to destroy such a big beast, that was his sought-after quest. Katrina and Amy were appalled and they protested the violence; they wanted the elephant to be treated with kindness. The girls were not prepared to relinquish the initial representation of the benign elephant. The boys transformed the elephant into a monster to demonstrate their power and assert their leadership.

Albert positioned himself as the leader in the children's script. The other boys, Samuel, Kevin and Mike, were willing to take Albert's lead. The boys drew their characters from the earlier myths of monsters. The classroom teacher had already been dealing with the themes of fairy tales with specific reference to dragons. One example was "Saint George and the Dragon." Beasts, huge and vile, were categorized as monsters and were used in many tales to evoke fear and action. The word

'monster' is derived, in the opinion of one Latin grammarian, from *monestrum*, via *moneo*, and encloses the notions of advising, of reminding, above all of warning. But *moneo*, in the word *monstrum* has come under the influence of Latin *monstrare*, to show.... (Warner, 1994b, p. 19)

The monster in the children's play made visible the children's notions of self and other. The innocuous elephant became a monster (other) that had to be vanquished. The act of vanquishing the elephant became a riotous revelry for the participant boys and girls. The monster made the boys' notions of themselves visible. "We're living in a new age of faith of sorts, of myth-making, of monsters, of chimaeras. And these chimaeras define human identity - especially the role of men" (Warner, 1994b, p. 20). The boys responded feverishly to their call to arms with the monstrous elephant. They were loud. "Wham! Bang! Ya!" they uttered as they landed blows on the elephant. Katrina, who was holding the elephant puppet, retreated as the boys pressed forward and onward. Amy tried to support Katrina.

The story of "The Blind Men and the Elephant" did not contain the binary opposites of good/evil. The children introduced the element of good/evil into the story spontaneously. The children identified themselves with the forces of good. They were brave warriors fighting the evil, foul smelling and monstrous elephant. The children's tales define enemies and aliens and in conjuring them up they say who we are and what we want, they tell stories to impose structure and order. Like fiction, they can tell the truth even while they're making it all up. (Warner, 1994b, p. 19)

The children did not identify with the six blind men. Instead, the puppets were used as tools to attack the elephant. It was no longer a scene where the six blind men touched the elephant carefully to discover its identity. In order to define themselves, the children

wanted a larger theme where they could evoke images of heroes and heroines in the stories they had heard. They saw themselves in relation to the other. The monstrous elephant was the other.

The identity of the elephant was a mystery in the story told to the children. The children exercised their agencies by transforming the elephant into an embodiment of evil to enable them to situate themselves into the story. The elephant became the despised other who deserved the unwarranted violence. The other, in the material bodily world, was monstrous and foul smelling. There was the degradation of the elephant's body and with it, the justifiable abuse. "That children find pleasure in these mock battles does not mean that they enjoy violence in real life. As with the grotesque body, they find power, pleasure, and opportunities for resistance in portraying these strong, bold, courageous characters" (Grace & Tobin, 1997, p. 174). The children saw themselves as heroes/heroines with the chivalric purpose of destroying the foul smelling monster. The identity of the group was recognizable as one related to an established cultural template belonging to the good and the brave. The attacks on the elephant's body ceased when Albert triumphantly declared, "The elephant is dead!"

Only the death of the monstrous elephant brought peace and celebration. There was rejoicing. The children left the scene and went to the castle. Sakura, who had watched the battle from the sidelines, picked up the dead elephant and ventured towards the castle but was stopped by Samuel. The elephant was not allowed in the castle. A play sword fight ensued between Sakura and Samuel. Sakura was determined to have her way. The

elephant was also used as a shield. She was able to take the elephant in when Samuel capitulated. It was a dead elephant that was finally allowed into the castle.

One thing seemed obvious in the dramatic play; the children did express pleasure in playing with the puppets, interpreting the story and transforming the narrative. In their narrative, the wisdom of knowing the relationship between part and whole was subverted by the ideals of bravery, leadership, power, good/evil and pleasure. All of these ideals are closely related to how we see ourselves. However, the identities the children took up in the tale of “The Blind Men and the Elephant” did not remain intact. Albert adopted the identity of a witch. Samuel had a short stint as the prince in “Rapunzel.” The girls became strong princesses. The children, as story players, also initiated changes in the parts they wanted to play in “Rapunzel.”

#### Rapunzel! Rapunzel! Let your hair down!

The Brothers Grimm’s tale of “Rapunzel” has its origin in Charlotte-Rose de la Force’s fairy tale of 1697. The version I told to the children was from *The Complete Fairy Tales of Brothers Grimm* (Grimm & Grimm, 1987). I selected “Rapunzel” because of its familiarity to the children and its exploration of the question of identity and human relations. Rapunzel’s father was terrified when the witch discovered that he had stolen her herb, rampion. He promised his unborn child to the witch who spared his life. The witch raised beautiful Rapunzel in an inaccessible tower in a forest. The witch climbed on Rapunzel’s hair to gain access to the tower. This was discreetly observed by a handsome

prince, who was enchanted by Rapunzel's singing. When the witch was away, he gained access to Rapunzel by her hair. They fell in love. The witch soon discovered their relationship and Rapunzel was banished to the desert. The prince, who was blinded, roamed aimlessly about till one day he wandered to the desert where Rapunzel and the two children lived. They were reunited.

Rapunzel matured as she came to experience love, unhappiness and joy. Her hair was symbolic of her connection to both the witch and the prince, who were able to establish relations with Rapunzel by climbing up her hair, the bridge to each friendship. Moreover, Rapunzel's hair attested to certain qualities associated with inner and outer female beauty. It embodied beauty, innocence and sexuality.

The identity of the witch became visible as her relationship with Rapunzel grew. Her punitive actions against Rapunzel's parents, the prince and Rapunzel eventually cast her in a villainous role. She wanted to own Rapunzel completely, but that total ownership was challenged by a handsome young prince and Rapunzel. After all, Rapunzel preferred the prince's companionship to that of "old Mother Gothel" (Grimm & Grimm, 1987, p. 48).

There were several underlying motifs in the fairy tale: absent parents, dominant female character, a passive and long-suffering female character and a kind and handsome prince. 'Rapunzel' was a story of love and relationships. The enchantress needed Rapunzel for companionship. "Rapunzel" filled that void for the enchantress. Warner (1994a) argues

that Rapunzel's imprisonment reflected a time where a young bride found herself at the mercy of the mother-in-law who viewed the daughter-in-law as a threat in her household.

The children were responsive to "Rapunzel." Albert, Darlene, Emile, Katrina, Rose, Samuel and Tara were totally engrossed in the dramatic play centre. The children used the mouth puppets to enact their play. The puppets were made of foam and reinforced with fabric to withstand rough play.

Albert played the role of the handsome prince. He was attired in a purple cloak. Initially Katrina played the role of the princess, but later Darlene assumed that role. When Samuel wanted to be the prince, Albert took the role of the witch. He was fascinated by the witch puppet.

The children were not very interested in re-enacting the story as it was told to them. They interpreted the story differently. In their hands, the tale became a parody. The girls exaggerated Rapunzel's singing. They spoke in high, shrill voices and showed absolute disrespect to the witch. The witch was played by Albert, who tried to instill fear in the girls. What seemed to trivialize the witch's attempt to obtain power was the exaggerated singing of Rapunzel, who was no longer portrayed as a hapless damsel, but someone who could drown the witch's hissings with her trilling, "Tra, la, la, la." The witch appeared comical as she desperately tried to intimidate Rapunzel, whose loud singing drained her power. Likewise, the prince competed for attention in the children's reinterpretation of Rapunzel. He was relegated to the background, cast in the shadow of Rapunzel. The prince was no longer the hero who would rescue Rapunzel from the power

of the witch. The children were fascinated by Rapunzel's lengthy hair, as here lay the avenue by which both the witch and the prince had access to her.

Darlene: "Tra la la la...tra la la la...tra la la la."

Rose: "Go over there and say, 'Rapunzel! Rapunzel!' Let's go over there."

Emile: "Rapunzel."

Darlene: "Tra la la la...tra la la la"

Rose: "Hey, sis! Stop that tra la la la."

Darlene: "Why? Tra la la la...tra la la la...tra la la la."

Tara: "If you wanna to get up, take my hair (holding the puppet, Savitri)."

Darlene: "No! Yours isn't long enough, Tara."

Rose: "You take her hair."

Emile: "No."

Rose: "Rapunzel! Rapunzel! Let your hair down! Rapunzel! Let your hair down!

Rapunzel! Let your hair down!"

Tara: "I will get your hair down."

Rose: "Let your hair down. No. Rapunzel!"

Darlene had much pleasure playing the role of Rapunzel. She threw Rapunzel's hair about flippantly. Other children responded to these actions by having their puppets do silly actions. Satyavan (the Indian prince of "Savitri") was seen throwing kisses to Rapunzel, who responded in kind. The witch (played by Albert) was reduced to a less threatening figure. To get Rapunzel's attention, she was nibbling Rapunzel's hair.



Rapunzel ignored her and took the centre stage with her preoccupation - trilling her “Tra la la la la.” The other children gathered around her to encourage her to “Let down her hair!”

Beneath the story of “Rapunzel,” the children weaved a subplot wherein Rapunzel interrupted the discourse of passive princesses. The children’s Rapunzel celebrated the rupture by happily singing and letting her hair down for others who wanted to have a share of the fun. Rapunzel was no longer a docile damsel imprisoned in a tower. She was free. In the classroom, she was loud, happy, outspoken and flirtatious. Rapunzel refused to be the other. She provided a different embodiment of the female figure, one that challenged the power that sought to provide her with a subaltern identity. Other story characters from different fairy tales were co-opted to support Rapunzel. The girls in the classroom positioned themselves in the play as heroines. They used laughter to situate themselves as active protagonists who refused to be passive princesses.

The children in the class responded to Rapunzel in an oppositional way. The children were reluctant to accept Rapunzel as a passive heroine. Their play with the puppets transgressed the social mores present in the original story by laughing at the various puppet characters and at themselves. To understand laughter as an opening designed to throw into question the established order of matters in our lives, I referred to the Bakhtinian concept of “carnival.” Carnival is characterized by laughter, gaiety and hyperbolization of the material bodily world. The concept encompasses the parodic play with the official and authoritative discourse in our society. The old witch in “Rapunzel”

was powerful and feared by those who encountered her. The children dealt the old enchantress a blow by laughing at her and confronting their own fear.

Terror is conquered by laughter (Bakhtin, 1965/1968, p. 336). Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 23)

To the children, the fairy tale of “Rapunzel” was about desire and pleasure of the material bodily world. Pleasure and desire denied to characters in “Rapunzel” were restored in the children’s play. For example, Rapunzel’s desire to marry the prince and have pleasure in the companionship of the prince was thwarted by the enchantress. Rapunzel, a passive prisoner, could not save herself or her prince from the evil machinations of the witch. However, in the children’s play, Rapunzel’s identity was positive. She was not the prisoner of the enchantress. She was confident and fulfilled her desire for pleasure by singing to her heart’s content, flirting with princes by throwing kisses at them, and undermining the enchantress by ignoring and laughing at the threats levelled at her.

By exposing the undercurrents running through the tale of “Rapunzel” via laughter, the children had inadvertently exposed the kinds of identities sanctioned in the fairy tale. The hidden identities emerged and were nullified by the children. The children had demonstrated through their play that they could exercise their agencies to reject sanctioned identities. Through their creative play and infectious laughter, the girls questioned the passive role of Rapunzel and the hidden patriarchal discourse. They refused to be framed as the other. Darlene’s interpretation of “Rapunzel” provided the girls with an avenue to resist the subtle message concerning the degrading aspects of female power exemplified by the witch. The girls’ interpretation of “Rapunzel” provided a positive spin to feminine power and identity. A passive young woman was transformed through play into an active female with the understanding that “the pleasure of drama is...the joy of knowledge” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 112). The girls, through their play, highlighted what was covert in the story and allowed them to see themselves as active heroines in their scripts.

The children opened up new possibilities for the characters in the fairy tale of “Rapunzel.” The carnival spirit of the children provided the fairy tale with a refreshing interpretation that celebrated the opening of the world to other ways of interpreting our lived experiences. It was about renewal. The carnival was oriented to the future. It offered us the opportunity to release ourselves from the grips of the established order of things and to see our identities in a constant process of becoming when we interact with one another. The carnival liberates the players in a game play situation. “The boundaries

between the play and life are intentionally erased. Life itself is on stage” (Bakhtin, 1965/1968, p. 258).

### Which witch is wicked?

The fairy tale of “Hansel and Gretel” centres on the abandonment of a young lad and his sister in a dark forest by their parents. Hansel and Gretel wandered in the forest when by chance they found a house made of bread, cakes and sugar. They hungrily devoured parts of the house. The witch discovered them and invited the children into her house with kindly offerings of food and shelter. The children succumbed to such generosity. The following morning the witch caged Hansel and enslaved Gretel to do the housework. Her intention was to fatten Hansel so that she could partake of a sumptuous meal. Hansel tricked the witch with a thin bone whenever she came to the cage to size him up with her bleary vision. Weeks went by and the witch became quite impatient and at last decided to feast on the children anyway. Gretel shoved the witch into the oven when that opportunity presented itself. The witch met a fiery death. Both were freed from the witch, gathered her riches and headed home. They met their father who was overjoyed to see them again. He was living alone as his wife had died. Thus the story ended with the removal of both women.

In the warm, cosy atmosphere of the witch’s kitchen, hidden in a dark forest, the children (Albert, Emile, Katrina, Rose and Sally) brewed their tales of the wicked witch who wanted to consume young children. The tales they spun showed that the children

were ambivalent about the witch. Some desired to be the witch only in so far as to explore her power. However, they were not interested in acquiring her evil attributes. Some of the girls, like Emile, resolved the problem of the wicked witch by domesticating her. For example, in their play, Katrina wanted Emile to be a mean witch but Emile was somewhat reluctant.

Katrina: "Pretend the witch is so mean."

Emile: "I don't know."

Katrina: "She (the witch) is doing all the work."

Emile: "Yes, I was."

Emile was not prepared to be an evil witch. She was a witch who cleaned the kitchen and enjoyed reading books. In the children's play, there was a constant tension between resistance to and compliance with the witch's authority. They were captivated by the power of the witch and at the same time were horrified by her cannibalistic tendencies. Albert was fascinated by the power of the witch and was reluctant to condemn her. The girls too were interested in the witch and desired her power. On the other hand, Katrina, Samuel and Sakura were unhappy with the witch for "she wants to eat them (Hansel and Gretel)."

The witch's kitchen was the domestic scene where the children gathered to play out their fears. One of those fears was centered on the witch's evil craving for young children. In the witch's kitchen, they were baking and cleaning. Once in a while, the witch was thrown in the oven. They wanted to destroy the witch by the very same way the witch

wanted to prepare the children for her meal. Consumption is one of the prevailing themes in the story of “Hansel and Gretel” which caught the children’s attention. The story begins with the question which the father posed to his wife, “What will become of us? How can we feed our children when we have no more than we can eat ourselves?” (Opie & Opie, 1974, p. 312). As a result, the brutal decision to abandon the children in the forest was made. Hunger drove the children to nibble on the witch’s house, which was specifically built with materials that tempted the children. It was the witch’s bait to lure unsuspecting children so that she could have her meal. The witch hungered for children.

The eating habits of the witch placed her in the margins. The witch’s cannibalistic tendencies brought about an aversion to her which evoked no sympathy from the children as she was pushed into the oven to face a horrific death. In fact, “she is consigned to the flames of her oven to a loud sigh of relief, or even a hurrah” (Warner, 1994a p. 202). Positioning people according to what they consume is not new to our world. In ancient India, people were positioned by the food they ate. The intellectuals and the priests ate sweet food. Warriors ate spicy and fiery food. The untouchables ate sour and tasteless food. The witch became an untouchable as a result of her cannibalistic penchant for children. Cannibalism has been used in classical and in present time to define self and other as outsiders and to justify acts of aggression towards the other.

The self needs the other to establish a sense of integral identity. If my enemies are like me, how can I go on feeling enmity towards them?...

Cannibalism is used to define the alien but actually mirrors the speaker.

(Warner, 1994b, p. 74)

Cannibalism is used to identify the other as the outsider, whose ways of living are different from ours. In the children's play, the witch was seen as the fearful other because of her appetite for children.

Subjugation of the other in "Hansel and Gretel" involved positioning women in unflattering roles: the mother who abandoned her children and the witch who desired the children as culinary delicacies. The father, though complicit in the act of abandoning the children, was given a less villainous role. His role in abandoning the children was forgiven in the end. The story of "Hansel and Gretel" deals with the identities of four groups of people: the wicked mother, the weak father, precocious children and the abhorrent wicked witch. The story sanctioned the identities of the father and children and vilified the roles of certain females. However, the identity of the witch was central in the children's rendering of "Hansel and Gretel."

The children's play revolved around understanding the meaning of the other. The witch - a cannibal - was the despised other. They disliked her because she ate children. In the children's play, the witch was thrown in the oven several times.

Emile: "What are you doing in my kitchen?"

Albert: "Because I am an evil witch."

Katrina: "She is in the oven. Can I leave it in the oven?"

Albert: "Ow! Get me out of here! Hansel and Gretel! Gretel!"

Through their play, the children encountered the elements of fear (represented by the witch), power (represented by the witch who could influence the actions of the children) and desire (represented by the children's desire to acquire power to influence the actions of their fellow playmates). The children's play reflected the mixed emotions of the children toward the witch. On the one hand, the children desired the witch's power. To acquire the witch's power, there had to be a transformation. The witch then became a beautiful queen. She was invited to visit the children. On the other hand, the witch was someone they feared. The children's attitude towards the witch was ambivalent. Their perceptions of the wicked witch vacillated throughout their exploration of the fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel."

The power of the witch resided in her ability to instill fear. Albert understood that power and threatened the girls with wrath. Fear generates conformity. In identity formation, fear keeps people in their place in society. That is why Bakhtin sees laughter as a liberating force that enables people to see what lies hidden from them in the liminal space opened up by laughter. Fear creates tension. It requires frequent reminders and threats. Albert understood the power was related with certain actions, mainly issuing threats and giving orders. The fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel" allowed him to live in the liminal space, like the witch, to explore the opportunity to experience power.

Albert and the girls competed with one other for the role of the witch. The witch in "Hansel and Gretel" was an unpopular figure and abhorrent to the children. Yet in their play, they desired to be the witch. They were inexorably drawn to the power the witch



wielded. The scene of the play was in the arena of domesticity. The witch held a central role in their play in the domestic arena. The children played with miniature puppets and artefacts that were elements of the storytelling. Albert assumed the risk of being the witch. He ordered the girls around to clean the house, fetch water and stop reading. His role as a witch was contested by Emile. She too wanted to be the witch. However, Albert adamantly held onto this role. As a result, Emile called Albert a “girlie.” The word “girlie” was an angry word addressed to Albert to serve as a warning that he had crossed the boundaries of gendered identities. Albert did not behave in a masculine manner in his insistence on playing the witch, a feminine role. Emile perceived that the role of the witch was appropriate to the girls rather than the boys.

Albert’s role as a witch was challenged by the girls. Can a witch be played by a boy? How could Albert enjoy playing the witch? The players were transported by the play which eventually evoked the utterance of “girlie.” Emile attempted to elicit a history of gendered relations to disqualify Albert from becoming the witch. Albert’s failure to assume a male role was basically viewed as improper. As a result, Albert was named a “girlie,” thus attributing to him girl-like qualities.

Emile: “Albert, do you wanna be.”

Albert: “I am being the witch.”

Katrina: “What do I have to clean now, witch?”

Albert: “You help her clean right now before I get angry.” (In a gruff voice).

Emile: “Why do we have to clean when you make a mess? We didn’t make this mess.”

Albert: "Yeah."

Katrina: "No. How about you be a nasty mop? You weren't a witch but a mop.

If you are not going to that nice, I'm going to be the spy in there."

Albert: "Ee...ah. Help! Katrina, Help! I am down the drain."

Katrina: "I am going to put all these stuff down the clip."

Albert: "Now!" (Growls).

Emile: "Here you go. Witch! Girlie!"

Katrina: "Why is she doing this? Hey! Hey! Get me out of here!"

Albert: "No. No...oo, it's mine. It's my turn. Give me that broom. Give me that."

Katrina: "No, this is the one. I'm...I'm not that."

Albert: "Can I have the broom now?"

Emile: "Just keep cleaning."

Albert: "Now can I have the broom?"

Katrina: "You can have the mop."

Emile: "So many times you have taken the broom."

Katrina: "Uh...huh!"

Emile: "How about making a small witch? Can you stop...finishing with the book."

Albert: (In a very gruff and authoritative voice.) "Put the book down!"

The word "girlie" did not perturb Albert, who still had his royal cape. Being king was his primary identity during play. The role of the witch allowed him to do what a king would do. Give orders! Something he did with ease. Albert's authority had been

challenged by both Emile and Katrina. They were not prepared to take orders from the witch (Albert) all the time. When Albert pressed forward with his authoritative commands, he was told by Katrina to be nice. The girls also suggested other roles for Albert such as a “mop.”

His decision to play the witch was a risky choice. Albert spoke in a high-pitched voice and growled to make himself known to the girls. Albert wanted the girls to stop reading and do the housework. The children were also trying to control who should have the broom. The broom was synonymous with the witch’s image. Whoever gets the broom, gets to play witch and thereby exercise power. The power of the witch fascinated the children. They contested with one another to explore the dynamics of power which positioned them in their play.

For the girls, power issues were centred on who did the chores, who read books and who played the witch. In the intimacy of the kitchen, the girls simmered tales of their own around cleaning up. They were vigorous in doing their chores. Much of their play was set in the house of the evil witch. The witch was the central character in their play. The children spiced up the story of “Hansel and Gretel” with their own meanings by re-creating the story. The kitchen nourished their tales.

There was resistance to the witch’s power as the girls busied themselves with house cleaning. The “witch” was in some ways ignored. Thus, the witch’s commands were superfluous. In fact, one of the girls mentioned that, “I don’t need no witch.” The girls were resisting the witch by engaging in sweeping, mopping and cleaning the house. They

were doing the chores on their own initiative. The manifestation of identity can be seen in the rituals of cleaning the kitchen and preparing food. Rituals in the kitchen are associated with women's work and they reflect a certain discourse which maintains control over the construction of a female identity. These rituals mirror the realities of many women's lives, wherein the principal activity consists of maintaining the hearth and home. Perhaps the girls were engaged in mimicking their mothers and other prominent female adults in their everyday life and in voicing their concerns that centred around the ethic of care. Moreover, the kitchen was a place where women traditionally held power. They controlled who ate and who worked. For example, in "Hansel and Gretel," the stepmother decided that the children no longer could partake in their meagre meals and the decision to abandon the children was made. The kitchen was a place where women challenged each other for control over material things.

In their desire to explore the identity of the witch, the girls engaged the witch in domestic work. In such a task, the witch was non-threatening as she was doing woman's work. The girls were able to play with the witch when she was engaged in household chores. The girls went further to transform the witch into a beautiful queen. The children erased the boundaries between various fairy tales by introducing characters from one fairy tale to another. In their domestic play, the cannibalistic old witch was transformed into a domesticated beautiful queen who happened to be a witch. In anticipation of her arrival, the girls frantically cleaned the house. There was a constant tension surrounding the character of the witch. There were times during the play that the children complied with

the orders of the witch and at other times they resisted. For example, the girls were cleaning house in anticipation of the queen's arrival, when one of them uttered, "Who cares about the queen, she's an evil witch." It was obvious that in their script, the witch was an fearful figure.

In the children's play, there existed a lot of ambivalence towards the character of the witch. The children, like Hansel and Gretel, recognized that the witch could be a feared and powerful figure, someone who threatened the lives of young children. At the same time, they recognized that the witch's power could be reduced if they chose to ignore her as in their pretend plays of "Rapunzel" and "Hansel and Gretel" or they could transform her into a domesticated woman.

The children desired the commanding power of the witch but not the evil quality associated with it, such as consuming young children. Though in the original story, the witch was cast in the margins because of her evil actions, in the children's script the witch became a central character. This shift in relationship was significant because the children recognized the double-edged sword of power and they were not quite sure about how they were going to deal with it.

There was a strong desire to identify with power and at the same time a resistance to identify oneself with the darker side of power. The children were caught in the liminal space where they realized power relates to their identities in a significant way. They

desired power. The ambivalence towards the power of a strong female character mirrored the tensions extant in our society.

### Epilogue

The children reacted differently to the three fairy tales. In the case of “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” the children demonstrated that they liked to see a story in a moral context of binary opposites: good/evil. The boys used their play as a liminal zone to explore the identities of superheroes and situate themselves in the retelling of the tale of “The Blind Men and the Elephant” as outstanding personalities. The discourse of superheroes requires the boys to act violently to the monstrous other to prove their qualifications to the hall of fame occupied by the legendary male heroes. The girls followed suit, but they were reluctant to demonstrate their prowess through violence. They would rather be compassionate to the other. They demonstrated their strength by showing compassion.

In the girls’ play, “Rapunzel” opened a liminal world where they explored the possibilities of retelling the tale using laughter to defy the construction of a passive princess as their heroine. Faced with the prospect of becoming the other through the weak characterization of Rapunzel and choosing between an insipid Rapunzel and an old, evil enchantress, the girls creatively inserted into the fairy tale a rebellious Rapunzel. The children saw the problem existing in the fairy tale as a moral dilemma between good and evil. The girls wanted to identify themselves with Rapunzel but not with a weak Rapunzel.

They did not want to identify with the old Mother Gothel either. So they introduced an emboldened Rapunzel who understood that power can be asserted through the material bodily function of laughter. The children used play to uncover other possibilities to create a heroine with whom they could identify.

In “Hansel and Gretel,” the children focused their attention on the persona of the witch. Other characters in the story receded into the background. Again, the children had to wrestle with a moral dilemma. They wanted the power of the witch, but not the darker elements associated with it. Their entire play was concentrated on coming to grips with the identity of the witch which embodied certain prejudices about feminine power and how that power can be regenerative. In the space in-between provided by play, the children explored other possibilities for the identity of the witch in the fairy tale of “Hansel and Gretel.” The witch was the powerful female. The girls liked the idea of a powerful female but not an evil one. Thus the children’s play involved uncovering and overcoming their fear of the witch and providing possibilities for a positive transformation of the powerful, horrid, ugly witch into a beautiful queen witch. However, the fear that a beautiful queen witch could be dangerous was not missed by the girls. One of the girls uttered that she did not care for the beautiful witch because she was wicked. The tale of “Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs” has one such beautiful queen witch. On the other hand, Albert embraced the character of the witch, not so much in that she was evil, but in his belief that he could mollify her character. He was able to see power beyond gender differences. He co-opted the witch into his repertoire of strong characters.

In the liminal world of their fairy tale play, the children demonstrated an awareness of the relationship between identity and power. The witch was an embodiment of power and evil. The children identified with power and they wanted it. They rejected evil. Even though the story of “Hansel and Gretel” offered children choices to identify themselves with Hansel and Gretel, they gravitated towards the witch. They situated themselves in the scripts in those roles that explored power and that allowed them to identify with people of importance. They like being princes or princesses, heroes and heroines. Thus in their play, minor characters are often ignored.

Through play, the children interpreted the fairy tales and made decisions as to whether they wanted to identify with the story characters. They demonstrated that where there was a paucity of desirable story characters, they re-created them. The fairy tales were renewed with fresh blood. The children invited in from the open side of the stage willingly participated in making sense of fairy tales. We recognize ourselves in the fairy tales and give them new blood by layering them with our meanings. The narratives continue their journey in a spiralling movement; there is no ending.



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **A POWERFUL KING, A BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS AND A BRAVE GUARD:**

#### **TALES OF SELVES**

Within the dream of innocence lies the imaginary state of wildness: the natural realm where animals live, which savages were also thought to inhabit. Like the child, this place can hold up the image of paradise lost, or of an unruly and dangerous territory which must be ordered, tamed, even consumed. And at the hidden heart of the parcel, in the middle, beneath all the enfolded layers, there's the secret treasure: the story of identity and belonging, the myth of home, which places everyone in relation to mothers, to fathers, to offspring, to here and to elsewhere, to time past and time present - and in so doing lays the path of the future, where we may or may not be saved. (Warner, 1994b, p. xv)

The “unruly and dangerous territory” is the liminal space located in fairy tales where children are invited to explore “the story of identity and belonging.” The liminal space is the heart of our stories and others. Therein lies our desire to know who we are in relation to others and what will become of us. It was in this liminal space that the three children (Albert, Katrina and Samuel) found pleasure and pain in trying to fulfill their desires to be extraordinary people and to be positioned as powerful, beautiful and brave

persons. The desire to be larger than life characters was reflected in their play and sustained by their need to be accepted by their peers. Acceptance in the community of their peers granted them access to play and friendships which were viable sources of pleasure. The three children in my study interpreted the classical fairy tales variously to understand themselves. The three cases are presented to illustrate “the fecundity of an individual case” (Jardine, 1992) where each child is a case in point.

### The Boy Who Would Be King

Albert came from a family whose members were involved in fine arts. His mother was a composer, a singer and a music teacher. His father was interested in drama. The family members participated in swimming, camping and hiking as leisure activities. Albert had been in a nursery school for two years. He especially enjoyed reading, computer activities, board games, puzzles and collecting toy cars and trucks. He enjoyed school as well as the company of his classmates.

My understanding of Albert’s interpretations of the fairy tales is derived from my observations of his play and conversations with him. I selected Albert for the project as he showed sustained interest in storytelling, playing with puppets and engaging in fantasy play with other children in the dramatic play centre. From the onset, Albert was very interested in the fairy tales and was particularly attentive during storytelling.

Albert desired to be king, for such a story character allowed him to explore power. The role of king was associated with power, authority, privilege and high esteem for

Albert. A king is an authoritative figure who influences the actions of his people. Albert saw a pattern of human relationships woven around such an identity. He believed that a king could issue orders to which his people had to adhere.

Leela: "I noticed that you like to wear this cloak. Is it a prince's outfit?"

Albert: "No. It is a king's outfit."

Leela: "It is a king's outfit. So do you like playing king?"

Albert: "Ahmm."

Leela: "Why?"

Albert: "Because ahmm...so I can...ahmm...do it. Do it...do it...do it what I can do."

Leela: "Ahmm..."

Albert: "And ask people what...ask people that do orders from you. Stuff like that."

In choosing to be king, Albert constituted his identity according to the ideals of power and action. Albert established connections with the story characters who possessed the power to influence the behaviour of others. For example, he liked the king in "Rumpelstiltskin" - "I like him as a king." The king ordered the miller to bring his daughter to the court when he boasted that his daughter could spin straw into gold. Upon her arrival, the king ordered the miller's daughter to spin straw into gold for three days. After that, he decided to marry her and enjoy the wealth she created for him. Albert did not speak of the miller's daughter in our conversation, as he was interested in the power of the king and his fine clothing. "Rumpelstiltskin" is a fairy tale that demonstrated to Albert that a king was above the rest of his people. The position and the identity of the

king was not seriously challenged. The fact that the king remained undisturbed throughout the tale did not go unnoticed by Albert, who desired to be king. He observed that kings “can do what they want” from the fairy tale of “Rumpelstiltskin.”

The identity of a king was connected to the superhero action play in which Albert was involved with the other boys. He demonstrated the power of leadership when he led the mock violent attacks on the elephant puppet. He related to the boys through a physical display of his swordmanship and led them to battle evil forces. The boys rallied behind Albert when he created a monstrous elephant that had to be destroyed. Albert responded to the story by situating himself as a hero, an extraordinary person, whose primary motive was to vanquish evil.

Power is represented in material things. The desire to be king was manifested by Albert’s selection of the purple cape as part of the necessary accoutrement of a king. The cape signified royal power. Clothing can “act as powerful signifiers of masculine and feminine ways of being. They appear to have a symbolic weight of perhaps equal if not greater significance for the children than the symbolic forms encoded in language” (Davies, 1989, p.16). Throughout my sojourn with the children in the classroom, I noticed that Albert wore his royal purple cape constantly.

Leela: “Let’s see if you have a chance, who would you want to be like in the story?”

Albert: “The king.”

Leela: “Why do you want to be the king?”

Albert: “Because hmmm...he has sort of this thing on him.”

Leela: "Pardon."

Albert: "Because he has sort of this thing on him."

Leela: "The crown?"

Albert: "No. His clothes."

The king's apparel held a lot of significance for Albert. By wearing the royal purple cape, he visibly announced to his friends that he wanted to be a leader. He positioned himself as someone in authority. He stated that he liked the king for his stately attire and the influence which the office of the king held.

By being "king," Albert constituted various kinds of relationships with his classmates. The pleasure of understanding the story came from identifying with the king. The identity of the king came to life when others were willing to grant him the space to be king and acknowledge his role. The pleasure of being king came from his peers' acceptance of his role. For example, in one of their plays, the castle was burning. Albert was the king whom the children turned to for help. He called for emergency services, such as an ambulance, and attended to the injured and distressed princesses while his guards fought the fiery dragon. This was a self that Albert was exploring and desiring to be.

Albert deduced that a king was a privileged male who asserted authority by issuing orders and that these orders were subsequently carried out by others. For example, he led the children in their attacks on the elephant. He gave them orders to attack the elephant. The orders were carried out. The attacks ceased when he declared the elephant dead. Moreover, Albert saw himself as a protector of princesses. Though he liked strong

princesses like Savitri who protected the world, he preferred princesses who would allow him to be the protector: “Hmmm...because...hmmm...hmmm...a prince can...hmmm...look after the princess or the queen.” The desire to protect princesses is steeped in the chivalric tradition of princes, kings and knights of medieval times and is alive today in the minds of many young children like Albert. Whenever Albert assumed the role of a protector, he was drawing on the tradition of action heroes.

Through a host of story characters (the monster slayer in “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” the king in “Rumpelstiltskin,” the prince in “Beauty and the Beast” and the witch in “Rapunzel” and “Hansel and Gretel”), Albert was allowed to occupy the space in-between to explore the complexities of human relationships. Albert was cognizant of himself as a king/prince who enjoyed many material and social benefits. By relating to the identity of a king, Albert ensured that he would enjoy certain pleasures not obtainable by those who had to obey orders. For Albert, “you don’t have to say please...” if you were a king. Albert appropriated certain classical fairy tales to legitimize his position as a figure of authority in his community. By giving his interpretation of the classical fairy tales, Albert was able to weave himself into the scripts of the children’s play. He found power was variously interpreted in the different identities he had adopted. As a monster slayer and a king, he encountered minimal resistance to his authority. The boys and girls were willing to accept Albert’s leadership in their play. He led them into sword fights with imaginary evil characters. However, as a witch, he encountered resistance and ridicule from his classmates, especially the girls. They refused to acknowledge his role as a powerful

person. There were several reasons for this rebuttal. They refused to be framed as the weak other in the play. They challenged Albert's position as the powerful one. Albert was aware that even though he may be a powerful person, his orders were not binding on his classmates. The children refused his orders on several occasions. As Albert assumed the identities of different story characters in the children's plays, he was placed in different relationships by his fellow playmates.

Albert's desire to be a strong and authoritative person could be seen in his lukewarm response to the princely story character, Satyavan. Albert mentioned in our conversation that he barely liked the East Indian fairy tale of "Savitri," one of the many minor stories contained in the epic poem of "Mahabharata" which was written around 400 B.C. to 400 A.D. The story of "Savitri" provides a positive female model of a brave and intelligent princess who outwitted Yama, the god of death and justice, to save her husband. Princess Savitri played an active role in choosing her bridegroom, Satyavan, and later rescuing him from death. Throughout the story, Satyavan, a prince, remained a passive figure. Albert could not identify himself with the passive East Indian prince. Satyavan was a catatonic male figure.

Albert experienced various tensions in his desire to explore power. He faced several dilemmas as he took up powerful roles. In his play, with the exception of "The Blind Men and the Elephant," Albert had a different disposition towards morally objectionable characters. Albert explored various characters who exerted power - the good, the bad and the ugly, to name a few. He explored the positions of the various

fantastical characters and their attendant relationships with others in society. He explored the different aspects of power embodied by different story characters and how power positioned people in society. As a consequence, he was willing to venture out into the liminal space to explore story characters who lived in “an unruly and dangerous territory” where he could not just be a wolf but “a very bad wolf.” In the tale of the “Little Red Cap,” Albert was more attracted to the power exhibited by the big bad wolf. The fairy tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” clarified my understanding of Albert’s attraction to fairy tale characters who were in positions of power. In our conversation, Albert showed me that he was aware of the moral issues at play in the story. He did not condone the actions of the wolf. His favourite part of the tale was when rocks were placed in the belly of the wolf. Bad actions, such as eating grandmother, were punishable offences.

Leela: “What was your favourite part of the story?”

Albert: “My favourite part was when they put rocks in the big bad wolf.”

Leela: “Why do you like that part?”

Albert: “Hmmm...because he dies.”

The death of the wolf was an important part in the tale as the threat of a grave danger to lives was removed. The idea was succinctly forwarded by Albert.

Leela: “What was it?”

Albert: “Hmmm...when they killed the big bad wolf because there is no more bad parts when they killed him.”



In the superhero play, Albert saw punishment as an appropriate action to be taken against evil characters. Punishment by death ensured the violent and physical removal of an evil threat. Fairy tales are replete with such outcomes for evil story characters.

Fairy tales provided Albert a liminal space where he could establish kinships with his fellow playmates. There was interconnectedness in the children's play. Fairy tales offered a space in-between for Albert to explore his desire to know about himself in relation to others. Understanding the different relations he made through fairy tales provided Albert a rich, diverse knowledge of himself and others. In all of the relations Albert encountered in playing out the fairy tales, he engaged in a series of actions. He negotiated his entry into dramatic situations with the girls. Power was not the only theme he explored. He was receptive to other social interactions, for example, the act of marriage. In fairy tales, marriage is often mentioned as a desirable social practice. Marriage is often seen as a reward at the end of the fairy tales. The girls approached him to marry them in their plays. It was one of the ways in which he situated himself as the comely prince whom the princesses wanted to marry. He was agreeable. Once I observed him dressing his "bride-to-be," Sally. He was willing to go on his knees to serve tea to his princess. He played the role of a hero with the girls. He was to them a prince they could marry. He had many invitations from the girls to marry them. He was often invited to play king, husband or bridegroom. He made choices as to whether he wanted to comply, resist, ignore or transform what came to meet him. For example, Albert was quite confident of himself in that he refused to give up the role of the witch in "Hansel and Gretel" to the

girls even though he was under pressure from them to do so. He was able to negotiate for himself a more powerful role in the girls' play than the other boys could.

Albert was fully aware that in an enchanted liminal world of fairy tales, he could take risks to explore various identities safely. Though he located himself as a king, he was aware there were other possibilities of identifying oneself. The identity of a king offered him a safe frame from which he could make incursions into the territories of the other. He always played with his royal purple cape on his shoulders, even though he was temporarily assuming the identities of a witch or a "very bad wolf."

Albert was also aware that he had the creative ability to change stories and the roles of different characters. He used the fairy tales to explore evil characters. He was willing to take the identity of a witch, a very bad wolf or a wicked king, for he believed that he could transform them into better personages - "Because you can make them." He realized that in the world of fairy tales, identities need not be etched permanently.

Through the lived experiences of Albert, I came to understand how children relate to one another in the liminal space provided by the fairy tales in order to make sense of self and other. Albert, through his interpretation of various fairy tales in play, demonstrated that there were no boundaries for identities. Each character in the fairy tale was capable of metamorphosis and transformation in the hands of the interpreter. Albert's refusal to accept that the fairy tale has the final word on the various identities showed that he interpreted fairy tales according to the connections they made with him. Albert, through

his exploration of power, showed through his play that the various positionings served to highlight that we are always in the process of becoming and therefore his statement, “because you can make them” opens up new possibilities. Creating new roles means vast opportunities.

### Katrina, The Beautiful Princess

Katrina enjoyed music and ballet dancing. She liked to dress up for school. She would appear in various outfits, such as western dress. She enjoyed donning the different princess clothes from the treasure box. At home, Katrina was exposed to storytelling and puppetry. Katrina constructed some of her own puppets. Both of her parents were professionals. Katrina had an older brother and sister. They enjoyed sports and computer. Katrina’s mother liked to sew. She shared Katrina’s enthusiasm for stories. She took Katrina to children’s theatres.

Katrina’s primary desire was to establish friendships. As a consequence, she became willing to play supportive roles in her play with other children. Katrina derived great pleasure in re-telling fairy tales by adopting the identity of a beautiful princess and dressing herself in that guise. She selected princess puppets to play with the other children to build friendships in the classroom. On one occasion, for example, Katrina used the Rapunzel puppet in her play with Albert and Samuel. She was retold the tale of Rapunzel as told in class. Darlene then came to the centre and took the Rapunzel puppet from Katrina and interpreted the story differently. Katrina, meanwhile, took the princess Savitri

puppet. She contributed to the play by supporting Darlene's play of a flirtatious Rapunzel. Katrina was not interested in asserting her desires strongly and often agreed with other children in order to maintain peace in the group. In the retelling of "Rapunzel," Katrina supported an active Rapunzel who refused to be framed as a docile and passive princess. Katrina demonstrated in her play that princesses could engage in activities that question the story lines in any of the fairy tales. Darlene viewed Rapunzel as a strong young woman who challenged the authority of the witch. Katrina followed suit and participated in the joyful re-interpretation of Rapunzel. She did so to please her playmates.

By playing supporting roles, Katrina was able to make connections with other children. It was her way of ensuring that she was included in their play. I observed that Katrina played very well with Albert, largely because she was willing to support his role as king. Katrina did not question the role of Albert as leader. Often, she opted to take the role of a princess. Albert and Samuel allowed Katrina to be a princess during their play time in the dramatic play centre. However, Katrina did not project herself as an assertive princess. She was a princess who Albert could count on while acting out his princely role and thus complemented his play. For example, Katrina was holding the elephant puppet while Albert, Samuel and the others pounded the puppet. It was only when the beatings became intolerable that Katrina finally protested.

Katrina had difficulty maintaining her part in a group play. She was often ousted from the dramatic play by stronger girls, namely Sally, Rose and Emile. For instance,

Katrina had gained access to the princess puppets before the other girls could. They became upset with her. Katrina tried to play with them but she was unsuccessful.

Rose: "We know that Katrina got those girls."

Emile: "Well, Katrina didn't know this."

Sally: "You can be more Hansel."

Rose: "She is all girls."

Katrina: "We are not Gretel."

Rose: "I will not move it (stage)."

Katrina: "I will take care of it."

Emile: "No, I am not playing with you, Katrina."

Rose: "Told you."

Sally: "Okay. Let's get mean to Katrina."

Emile: "Yeah."

Katrina: "No!"

Katrina left the dramatic centre. Her fate was shared by two other girls, namely, Sita and Sakura. She found refuge in the castle where she found other friendships.

Katrina spent most of her time in the castle centre when she was not in the dramatic centre. She could still play princess in the castle centre. Here she found friends who were willing to have her as their princess. These girls called themselves "bunnies." They were Katrina's attendants. The play with the "bunnies" opened up a space for Katrina to be a princess. Katrina identified herself with the princesses in "Rapunzel,"

“Savitri,” and “Rumpelstiltskin.” As a princess who possessed beauty, Katrina gained access to friendships and influence with her “bunnies.” The fairy tales provided Katrina opportunities to be in a liminal space where she could express her desire to be an extraordinary person of beauty and wealth.

Despite her acceptance by some children, Katrina still desired to be accepted by the more dominant girls (Darlene, Emile, Rose and Sally) in the class. She left the castle centre to go and play at the dramatic play area and tried to befriend the girls by assuming supportive roles in their scripts. As a result, she was not always excluded from playing with the girls. Once in a while, she was allowed to stay and play. For example, the girls were engaged in retelling “Beauty and the Beast” when Katrina decided to join them.

Katrina: “I need him (the Beast), Darlene.”

Darlene: “I know that.”

Katrina: “I can’t use him.”

Darlene: “I will take Hansel.”

Katrina: “You turn into somebody.”

Darlene: “You can’t turn into him (Hansel).”

Katrina: “Okay then.”

Sally: “How about you send us to our bedroom, okay?”

Katrina: “Go to your bedroom!”

Darlene: “No.”

Katrina: “Go to your bedroom!”

Darlene: "No! We are in the castle right now."

Katrina: "Go to your bedroom."

Darlene: "I will in my time."

Katrina: "Go to your bedroom."

Sally: "Mom wants to sleep in the bedroom."

Katrina: "Go to your bedroom."

Darlene: "I am in my bedroom."

Katrina: "Now he turn into...."

Sally: "Darlene, how about she run away?"

Darlene: "What are you doing Mario face, huh?"

Katrina: "I want to go back with your mom's sister."

Darlene: "Really?"

Sally: "Let's move to the castle."

Katrina: "Shall I go?"

Sally: "Yes. If you don't, I will hit you."

Katrina: "No!"

Sally: "You stay here for rest of your life."

Katrina: "No."

Sally: "You can go. This beast died, okay?"

Darlene: "Okay."

Katrina was given the role of the Beast and Darlene played Beauty. Sally instructed Katrina to give orders to Beauty. However, the orders were resisted by Darlene. The scripts were created spontaneously as Darlene and Sally played and Katrina followed the scripts on their terms. She had to be content with simply being allowed to play with them. She was not allowed the role of a princess. She was situated on the margin as the Beast. Nevertheless, Katrina was obliging and took her cues from the others. Even though Katrina aspired to be a princess, she was not successful in playing that role as often as she wished as she had to compete with the other girls for the princess puppets. However, when she was left alone, Katrina was able to enjoy her role as the Beast. Katrina saw the Beast as a creature not to be feared, but as a comical character. Katrina reduced the Beast into a love-sick creature. She took great pleasure in manipulating the Beast to utter a loud soulful roar. "For the children, these moments of curricular slippage and excess provided the opportunity to produce their own pleasures, on their own terms...." (Grace & Tobin, 1997, p. 160).

Katrina desired to be a princess because she wanted beauty and wealth which she could use to gain access to friendships and approval from peers. Beautiful maidens were often extolled in the fairy tales. "Beautiful girls are never ignored..." (Lieberman, 1972, p. 187). To be beautiful, a young woman must possess inner and outer beauty. Kindness, humility, good temper and caring are attributes of inner beauty. A pretty face with long flowing hair and shapely body are seen as outer beauty (Warner, 1994a). Katrina desired both forms of beauty. She also desired wealth. The pleasure of owning material things like



jewelry, fine clothes and places of abode is part of our ritual to mark and locate our positions in spaces that would speak of our identities. To be a princess means one gets to own material possessions.

Leela: "Okay. Now earlier on in the in...when we were having a conversation, you said you would like to be a princess. Is it true?"

Katrina: "Yeah."

Leela: "Tell me why you would like to be a princess?"

Katrina: "Coz why it's good."

Leela: "What is so good about being a princess?"

Katrina: "You get to hmmm...walk around."

Leela: "Just walk around."

Katrina: "Yeah."

Leela: "Let's see, if I were to give you a chance to be a princess...let's imagine that you are going to be a princess. What kind of a princess do you want to be?"

Katrina: "Jasmine."

Leela: "Princess Jasmine. Why do you like Princess Jasmine?"

Katrina: "Coz why she gets to climb magic carpet."

Leela: "Is that why? What else?"

Katrina: "Hmmm...she has a monkey."

Leela: "She has a monkey. What else?"

Katrina: "She has a lion."

The position of princess provide access to wealth, influence, attention, desires and relationships. The children realized that the adults in their lives were engaged in an elaborate ritual of identity by possessing material goods such as a house, car and works of art.

Still, in a world in which people regularly move in and out of apartments, christening each new space with the rituals of identity that involve cleaning, redecorating, displaying one's things - in a world in which we construct our identity with the clothes we wear and the space in which we dwell...

(Morgan, 1996, pp. 43-44)

Though Katrina liked beautiful princesses and their costumes, she preferred princesses who were brave and beautiful at the same time. She liked Princess Savitri "coz why she is not afraid to go out in the woods." Moreover, Princess Savitri saved her husband.

Katrina was aware of the difficult moral issues at hand in the fairy tale of "Rumpelstiltskin." To her it was not a simple problem of keeping a promise or not keeping a promise. She was concerned about the well being of the baby. She was looking at a larger issue. She supported the queen's actions to keep the baby. She liked the queen "coz why, she doesn't give up her baby." She identified with the beautiful queen. That particular action was important to her as she felt disappointed that the parents had lied in "Hansel and Gretel" by abandoning the children in the woods. It was not too important for Katrina that the queen did not keep her promise to Rumpelstiltskin. In our conversation,

she acknowledged that the act of not keeping a promise was not an appropriate thing to do, but that was compensated by the queen doing good things.

Leela: "Hmmm...what about the queen? What do you think of the queen?"

Katrina: "Good."

Leela: "Did she keep her promise?"

Katrina: "No. No."

Leela: "Do you think that's good?"

Katrina: "No."

Leela: "You don't think that is good. But you still like the queen."

Katrina: "Yeah."

Leela: "Why?"

Katrina: "Coz why, she doesn't give up her baby.... She puts...does good things."

Leela: "Like what?"

Katrina: "Letting people not take her stuff."

Katrina felt that beauty and wealth were important ingredients for establishing relationships. She engaged in the ritual of dressing up and derived great pleasure in trying to appear beautiful. Katrina competed with other girls to gain access to the princess puppets because these puppets were dressed in extraordinarily fine garments. Katrina valued beauty as a significant aspect of her identity because she could possess the power to have followers who would fulfill her wishes. At the castle centre, another group of girls known as "bunnies" accepted her as their princess. Her "bunnies" followed her around and

supported her in her role as a princess. Katrina led them to the dramatic play centre but was told by Sally to “get out!” The “bunnies” were upset that their princess was treated with such disrespect. “How could you say that to bunnies and a princess?” one of the bunnies said.

The fairy tales allowed Katrina to be in the enchanted space in-between where she discovered that her desire to be a princess in the company of many girls with similar desires was a difficult one. The liminal space was an “unruly and dangerous territory,” as she discovered that some of her classmates relegated her to the margins as they too wanted to be beautiful and wealthy princesses. Katrina’s desire to be a princess was thwarted in the dramatic play centre. The liminal space provided by the fairy tales did not shield Katrina from learning the unsettling lesson that identity is under constant negotiation.

### Samuel, A Brave Guard

Samuel had been to nursery school prior to attending kindergarten. He had a two-year old sister. Both his parents were in the work force. Samuel liked to play in the “take it apart” centre most. He hammered and banged objects with tools. He made loud noises to accompany his actions. He enjoyed playing with toys such as trucks and farm equipment. Samuel enjoyed outdoor activities and he liked a big space around which to move and roam.

Samuel explored his identity by associating with those story characters who displayed great physical prowess. Samuel's desire to be an outstanding guard was expressed by his actions. Samuel was usually seen with a hard hat or the plastic armour of a medieval knight. He liked to play the role of a guard, which allowed him to be physically active. He was often seen running around the castle, engaged in mock sword fights with other boys and taking objects apart in the workshop centre. Samuel identified himself with action heroes who protected people from the forces of evil. As an action hero, Samuel gravitated to those fairy tale characters which allowed him to participate in the destruction of evil. He was one of the boys who furiously engaged the monstrous elephant in a battle. In the mock battle, Samuel happily delivered many blows to the elephant. He made loud noises. The battle was fought in an exaggerated fashion, as in the spirit of carnival. He shared a spirit of camaraderie with the other boys whenever they re-enacted the many superhero adventures through the fairy tales. The chivalric adventures of Samuel in the classroom were fuelled by his desire to be a larger than life character. Samuel reenacted the superhero play by showing to the others that he could engage in sword fights with skilful dexterity. In the classroom, Samuel was engaged in more mock battles than any other boys. It was his ritual activity. He fought with imaginary dragons when the castle was on fire. He protected his castle and the princesses who had scattered about the classroom.

In Samuel's play, the witch was transformed into an aerial acrobat. "She" hardly engaged in any conversation with other children. The only thing that fascinated him about

the witch was that he could fly her about in the classroom on a mop. This allowed him to do what he liked best, which was to move about freely in a big area. In his play, the witch was no longer evil. She was a witch who liked flying about the classroom. Samuel saw action and power in a moral space. Action figures were important to him. However, the action figures had to occupy a moral space. He was not attracted to the witch even though she was a person of major influence in the story of "Hansel and Gretel." She was an evil witch with whom he could not identify even though she was powerful.

Leela: "Is there anybody in the story who you don't like?"

Samuel: "The witch I don't like."

Leela: "Is there any reason why you don't like the witch?"

Samuel: "Because she is mean."

Leela: "Why do you think that she is mean?"

Samuel: "She is mean. Because she does bad stuff."

Samuel was concerned about issues of good and evil. He related to action figure characters in the fairy tales who were good. For example, in "Hansel and Gretel," he held the young children in high regard because "the witch got thrown into the fire." In our conversation, Samuel mentioned that he liked both Hansel and Gretel.

Leela: "Who would you like to be in 'Hansel and Gretel?'"

Samuel: "The kids."

Leela: "Would you like to be Hansel or would you like to be Gretel?"

Samuel: "Both."

Leela: "Why do you like to be both children?"

Samuel: "Just like them both. I like."

He related to the various children's actions where they defended themselves well against the evil machinations of the witch. He liked Gretel because "she pushed the witch into the fire." The same could be said of his interest in the hobgoblin, Rumpelstiltskin. He positioned Rumpelstiltskin on a wooden spoon and flew him about at different places in the classroom. Often he made sounds like "whoosh ... whoosh" as he weaved the little puppet on the spoon about the classroom. Much of his interest was in Rumpelstiltskin's aerodynamic performances on a wooden spoon. Samuel, who needed a lot of space in which to move and perform big movements, was drawn to Rumpelstiltskin's ability to fly. The fairy tale of "Rumpelstiltskin" gave Samuel the space for his body to manoeuvre. His large movements made sense to the other children as they saw him "whooshing" by with Rumpelstiltskin on the spoon. When Samuel wove in and out of the children's play, they did not protest.

In his play, Samuel was positioned differently by the girls and boys. He was very fascinated by the prince puppets. He would touch them and move them about to see what the puppets were capable of doing before engaging them in play. One day, Samuel took the prince puppet in the tale of "Savitri" and tried to negotiate his entry into the girls' play.

Samuel: "I used to be a prince."

Darlene: "You don't look like a real prince. Ha! Ha! Ha! That's so funny."

Samuel: "Guess I am not your friend."

Darlene: "Yes, you're! I'm only kidding. You look like a Jack be different."

Sally: "You look like a...."

Darlene: "You look like a chef."

Katrina: "Hey. Hi! Brother. What do you do?"

Samuel: "Ah...this my girlfriend."

Darlene: "He's mine."

Katrina: "She is terribly involved."

Darlene: "Look at him! He is like a bore, eh?"

The girls teased Samuel. He was unable to cope so he left the dramatic centre for the "take-it-apart" centre. His display of physical dexterity in sword fights was not something he could use in playing with the girls. Often he found himself lost for words and teased by the girls. He therefore entered the girls' play by flying the witch or Rumpelstiltskin about. In the girls' play, he was positioned differently and had to gain their attention by flying the puppets about. The witch in "Hansel and Gretel" and the hobgoblin in "Rumpelstiltskin" offered Samuel a space where he could relate to the girls. He showed off his physical dexterity by engaging in spectacular aerial displays of the witch flying on her mop and Rumpelstiltskin on his wooden spoon. The girls accepted Samuel into their plays as long as he flew about with the puppets. Here Samuel gained friendships and acceptance. Instead of sword fighting, Samuel was involved in a different kind of action, flying, which the girls found acceptable to their scripts.



Samuel assumed the role of an action superhero with the boys. The boys' play allowed him to do what he enjoyed most. Samuel, in all of his play, was mainly interested in assuming the role of a brave guard, an action superhero. The plastic armour and sword were important props for his role. "I always play with a sword." Quite often, Samuel engaged Kevin and Albert in sword fights. Playing the role of a guard or knight was pleasurable for Samuel. He revelled in mock sword fights because he "always win...but the other person goofs." He regarded himself as a skilful swordsman. Samuel's furious mock sword fights made sense in a larger context. His story of the castle burning was part of the larger script played by the children. Once during my observations, I noticed that the children were agitated. The castle was burning. The dragon attacked the castle. The princesses were upset as they tried to salvage whatever they could from the castle. Sakura pretended to be hurt. She could not move. The ambulance had to be called. Albert, the king, was on the telephone trying to get more help. Albert tried administering first aid to Sakura. While all this was going on, Samuel was defending the castle by battling with the dragon. He was a superhero who would slay the dragon dead. He buried the dragon. He returned the dragon to the living earth. The dragon, no longer a threat, became something nourishing for the earth.

Samuel identified himself with those story characters who engaged in action. His favourite identity was that of a guard who protected the castle from fiery dragons. The boys participated with him in the superhero play. Here he was one of the boys. The

retelling of the tale of “The Blind Men and the Elephant” by the children enabled Samuel to be in the “unruly” territory where acts of violence were condoned in the name of destroying the evil other. However, not all fairy tales fostered the birth of such a retelling. In the “unruly and dangerous territory,” there were other story characters who were also action figures of a different stroke. They were not superheroes. Where a fairy tale had a lacklustre action hero/heroine, Samuel turned to the other action figures, namely the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” and the hobgoblin in “Rumpelstiltskin.”

The meanings Albert, Katrina and Samuel made of the fairy tales were generative. Each of these children demonstrated a particular case of how he/she made connections to the fairy tales to understand self/other in a liminal space. Their stories can be related to a larger social context. The children made personal investments in the stories they scripted and poured so much of themselves into the retelling of the tales. Their understandings of the tales offered glimpses of the children’s perceptions of themselves and others. The children demonstrated that they were active meaning makers and astute observers and, as such, they interpreted the narratives differently as each story meant different things to each child. Albert related to the fairy tales which helped him understand power and authority through the various story characters. Katrina related to the stories by sieving out the meanings connected to beautiful and rich princesses, whereas Samuel identified himself with action figures. They were not blank slates as they interpreted the stories by re-telling them through their play. In the re-tellings the children inscribed their personal signatures

on the tales, giving them new life. Through their desire to know self and other, the children invariably agitated the order in the classroom by becoming creative revelers. Actions connected with the living world were exaggerated. There was excessive laughter, violence, bodily movements, quibbles and play.

The children's play highlighted their desires to be extraordinary people and thus they had to do extraordinary things. They therefore exaggerated their actions by laughing loudly, speaking in loud shrill voices and moving wildly about the classroom. They were noisy. Silence, a sign of an ordered class, was disrupted. They also created monsters in their classroom and heaped upon the monster and dragon deadly blows. Their exaggerated behaviour was carnivalesque. "In portraying such awesome, fear-inspiring creatures and characters, the students experienced power, agency, and control" (Grace & Tobin, 1997, p. 171).

The children's exploration of identity was possible in the liminal spaces provided by fairy tales, where stories of identity which lay hidden were uncovered through play. Albert explored the identities connected with power: king, prince and witch. Katrina was interested in the identity of a princess and learned that her desire was thwarted by a group of strong girls. Samuel identified with action figures who made big movements in a wide space. As such he was interested in playing the roles of a guard, a witch and a hobgoblin. Albert, Katrina and Samuel gained various insights that gave them pleasure and pain. The fairy tales allowed each child to explore his/her desires, fears and his/her understanding of self and others through pretend play.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **IN SEARCH OF OUR SELVES: A SPIRAL JOURNEY**

The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably....They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. (Roy, 1997, p. 218)

#### A Spiral Journey

The desire to understand self and others is a “spiral journey” (Biallas, 1986, p. 7). On this journey, just as we begin to understand our selves, we realize that there is more to understand. The journey in search of ourselves is never completed; there is a continuous back and forth movement between past, present and future. Between the continuous spiralling movements of the journey, there are spaces - pauses where we can contemplate and explore ourselves in relation to others. Pauses are liminal zones where we can realize the “fluid multiplicity of possibilities” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 268) of self and other. In this study, play with fairy tales provided opportunities for such pause.

Fairy tales raise important questions about what it means to be human. Fairy tales do not attempt to provide a single answer; instead they offer glimpses of ourselves in multiple situations. Thus they are portals to our identities. Fairy tales warn us to refrain from tending to parochialism. They agitate the tranquillity of our society by unravelling the

various human experiences and by resisting the impulse to define who we are once and for all. In the liminal spaces created by fairy tales, the journey to understand self and other is etched in perpetuity.

The happy endings of fairy tales are only the beginning of the larger story, and any study which attempts to encompass it wholly must stumble and fall before any kind of ending can be made: the story of storytelling is a tale that will never be done. (Warner, 1994a, p. xxi )

We should be reluctant to discount fairy tales as old wives' tales and that they have nothing new to reveal about us. The knowledge existing in fairy tales is rich and fertile with human experiences. There exists a place for everyone in the many fairy tales.

Like dwelling spaces, fairy tales housed artefacts of identity and were sacred places where the children engaged in the rituals of uncovering and discovering themselves and others. Fairy tales, subtly threaded with various notions of identity as depicted by the many story characters, invited the children to re-tell stories steeped in their desire to be extraordinary people. The children retold stories through pretend play. They appropriated certain identities to make sense of their lived experiences and to explore their desires. In the process, the children were situated and also situated themselves as spectators and actors in the retelling of the fairy tales through play.

### The Ritual of Pretend Play

Pretend play was an important ritual for the children in this study. It occurred in the classroom with the understanding that the world of pretend play was filled with vast possibilities. The children liked to use the word “pretend” to announce the commencement of their play. The word “pretend” was an important opening for the children. The word “pretend” comes from Latin *praetendere* meaning to stretch forth, put forward, allege or claim. To pretend requires one to put forward a claim for consideration. Pretend also means portend, to giving warning (The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1993).

Pretend opens up a new space for possibilities. The Latin word *prae-* refers to in front. Tend refers to the action of attending or listening to something. Listen. Hear. An action essential in a conversation. Tend is rooted in Latin *tendere* meaning stretch, the action of moving towards something. When the children said “pretend” during their play, they were announcing the onset of the re-creation of a narrative. They moved, stretched and portended. It was an incantation. The stage was up. The play began. The stage had three walls and an open side facing the spectators who were invited in. “ ‘Pretend’ disarms and enchants; it suggest heroic possibilities for making changes, just as in fairy tales” (Paley, 1984, p. 87). In the classroom, pretend play set a condition that required the players to open themselves up to heroic possibilities. It allowed the children to enter into an enchanted space provided by the fairy tales. The word “pretend” announced the commencement of play where the ending was yet to be decided.

Pretend play, akin to a game play, was governed by rules which were often made up by children as they went along. The children required each other to be committed players so that the play was sustainable. As a result, they spent an inordinate amount of time talking about and negotiating their roles in the play. Often such negotiations began with the word “pretend.” For example, Katrina asked Albert to “pretend you saw her reading it instead of cleaning.” Albert took the cue and growled, “Stop reading!” He continued playing the role of the wicked witch. Later on in the play, Albert asked Katrina to “pretend that you like fight. I do all the work. You do all the...stuff. I read a book. Arrgh!” However, the story ended abruptly as the teacher called the children to clean up and get ready to go home.

Pretend play was characterized by spontaneity, which allowed children to retell stories without having to provide a conclusion. Their stories as such had multiple possibilities as the children were free of the constraints of how a story should end. The stories in pretend play had no endings akin to the fairy tales. During the retelling of the fairy tale of “Hansel and Gretel,” the children left their story abruptly when the teacher interrupted them to clean up the play centres. The story was left open-ended. The next day, the children continued the retelling of “Hansel and Gretel,” as though they had never been interrupted. Paley (1997) identifies this phenomenon as “narrative continuity” (p. 75).

In their play, the children experienced a variety of emotions as a result of their interactions with others. Through their pretend play, they zealously interpreted the living

world. The children realized that “life is pain, but compassion is what gives it the possibility of continuing” (Campbell, 1988, p.139). Katrina’s pain of being rejected as a princess was eased by the compassion the “bunnies” had for her. They protected her by telling Sally that her behaviour towards their princess was not appropriate. The bunnies’ acceptance of Katrina as their princess allowed her to continue playing her desired role, one in which she could regally move about the classroom with her attendants. Other emotions the children experienced in the classroom included anger and a strong desire to correct injustice. Sita experienced the pain of being excluded from the play when Sally, Emile, Rose and Darlene denied her access to the princess puppets. Sita complained that there were not enough of such puppets to go around. Another girl, Carol, angrily complained to me that some girls were “hogging” the princess puppets. She likened the girls to the two selfish sisters of Beauty who refused to share. She iterated that the girls should behave like Beauty, who was kind and generous. The social experiences of some children depended on how articulate they were in expressing themselves in a language that was not their native tongue. They expressed their emotions in different ways. Sakura was very interested in dramatic play. However, she was not included in the dramatic play of the children using the puppets. Sakura did not have the facility to speak fluently in English. Under such a difficult situation, Sakura invented an opening in the children’s script and inserted herself in the children’s play by taking the role of a cat. The children responded by patting her. At one time, she managed to gain access to the Rapunzel puppet but it was not for long. Rose took it away from Sakura. Arshad had similar problems with language.



He kept away from the dramatic play centre. He showed interests in the puppets when there were no children around. I saw him taking the elephant puppet around the class when the other children no longer had any use for it. On a different occasion, the children demonstrated joy in their exploration. Darlene and the others who participated in the recreation of "Rapunzel" showed us that they interpreted the story with emotions of defiance and joy. The children learned that the identities they desired to assume had to be agreed upon by others in the community for the pretend play to go on. Not all of the children were spared the difficulties that came in establishing relations with one other.

### Living Curriculum

Children's play with fairy tales is the living curriculum. Pretend play is a serious endeavour and therefore it is necessary to be sensitive and mindful in our attitude towards such play. The concerns of academics of the empirical-analytic and critical paradigms, educators, parents and myself are addressed by the children's play. Concerns related to preparing the young for the future and achieving social justice were played out by the children through the fairy tales in the classroom in a generative way. In their play, the children were already addressing serious issues on identity. By doing so, they remind us that they are active meaning makers and capable of addressing issues pertaining to our living world. The subtleties of their play call us to be more attentive to the complexities surrounding the issue of identity and fairy tales, which refuses to be a simple case. The children's play highlighted some of the underlying complexities. For example, their

interpretation of “The Elephant and the Blind Men” was grounded in their desire to explore the roles of being extraordinary individuals. As such, they retold the story according to the ideals of heroic acts. In doing so, the boys inadvertently relegated the girls to minor roles. The girls retold the fairy tale of “Rapunzel” based on their ideals of an active heroine who refused to be a passive female. Throughout their play, the children made visible the hidden threads of a patriarchal discourse. The boys and girls, through their various interpretations, bared the tensions and complexities surrounding the identity of both genders. In their quest to understand power, the children were willing to co-opt the identity of the witch in “Rapunzel” and “Hansel and Gretel.” However, the children were uncertain as to how to deal with the darker side of power. As a result, they were simultaneously caught between the tensions of desiring power and resisting the fear of the dark side of power embodied by the witch. The curriculum the children generated is a living one, full of tales from the Earth. The children ventured out of the walled classrooms via fairy tales into an enchanted space where they, as perceiving and thinking persons, explored the living world and interpreted life generously, in whole and in part.

It was in the world of pretend play, that I observed that it is impossible to frame ourselves with clarity, given that we are yet to experience what is to come. Vast possibilities of understanding our selves in relation to others are yet to be discovered. The empirical-analytic and the critical approaches to fairy tales have ignored the complexities surrounding the issue of identity. Experts such as Bettelheim (1975) and Egan (1986) frame children’s experiences of stories with the aim of improving mental health and the

quality of education in schools. The children in this study refused to foreclose on the fairy tales by rushing toward certain endings. They were willing to dwell in a liminal zone exploring important and difficult questions about self and life. As educators, we need to be generous and grant children the space and time to engage in such exploration.

I, as a researcher, was not spared from the difficulties and tensions of being in the midst of a living curriculum. I witnessed the joyful interpretation of fairy tales. Some children transformed passive princesses and evil witches into strong women who questioned hidden patriarchal values in the stories told. I witnessed also the hurt and pain some children suffered at the hands of other children. There were many instances of such pain in the children's pretend play; Katrina's relegation to supporting roles in the scripts, the exclusion of Sakura from the dramatic play because of her language difficulty and the teasing Samuel received from the girls due to his inability to articulate himself well. Some of the children's play resembled the dominant gendered scripts. I found the boys positioned the girls at the margins of their superhero play. The girls, on the other hand, were reluctant to permit the boys to play in the witch's kitchen, a feminine domain. I also found that some girls (Darlene, Sally and Emile, amongst others) relegated other girls (Katrina, Sita and Sakura) to the margins. I was, at times, caught up by the tensions surrounding the children's play and came to realize some of the difficulties present there. It became clear to me that there are often oppressive messages underlying fairy tales. Yet, I am reluctant to adopt a political stand and suggest a blanket recommendation that teachers intervene directly and try to raise the children's consciousness regarding

oppression. To be pedagogic, our actions in the classrooms must be governed by particular situations/events and relationships with particular children.

As I act towards children, I feel responsible to act out of a full understanding of what it is like to be in this world as a child. And so, for the sake of this child or these children I want to be suspicious of any theory, model, or system of action that only gives me a generalized methodology, sets of techniques or rules-for-acting in predictable or controllable circumstances. (Manen, 1990, p.155)

I tried not to adopt a top down approach to the difficulties I encountered in the classroom. For example, the teacher was puzzled that I did not tell the moral of each tale to the children after storytelling. He would have preferred that I engage in a discussion after the story was told to the children. I realized that such an action would foreclose other ways of interpreting the stories and this I explained to him. There exist a particular form of joy and satisfaction in self-discovery. He was quite understanding and we resolved the matter by creating a space just after the storytelling where the children were invited to address to me any concerns they had regarding the story. Some of the children had, at different times, approached me with their concerns. I told the fairy tales to the children but left the interpretation of the tales to them. The hermeneutic approach is “critically oriented action” where through reflection one becomes attentive to taken-for-granted issues and highlights them, thus bringing “us to the edge of speaking up, speaking out, or decisively acting in social situations that ask for such action” (Manen, 1990, p. 154).

Madison (1988) argues that hermeneutics' supreme task is its serious "critical, emancipatory endeavor" to maintain "openness of human discourse" (p. 51) and oppose any discourse which claims access to truth and thereby curtails dialogue. Providing political action as a way to resolve tensions in the classroom tends to shut off dialogue. A case in point was when Sally grabbed the princess puppet from Carol and refused to let her play in the dramatic centre. Carol complained to the teacher. The teacher was called upon to address the issue of inappropriate behaviour. Carol, Sally and the teacher resolved the problem through conversation. Sally returned the puppet to Carol and allowed Carol to play in the dramatic centre. The encounter between the children and the teacher was a pedagogic one. The teacher reacted accordingly to the situation which the children presented to him. Discussion as to what was fair and unfair was part of the conversation that existed in the classroom. Specific situations which arose from the children's interactions with one another provided them with living examples to encounter and negotiate difficult moments in their lives. The teacher then responded with "pedagogical thoughtfulness" and "pedagogical tact" (Manen, 1991).

More research is encouraged in the area of identity and narrative, especially with regards to early childhood education where children are receptive to learning through stories, especially fairy tales. We have to think of providing generous spaces in the classroom where children are given opportunities to engage in meaning making about themselves. The more we understand how children make meaning through narratives to inform their identities, the more reluctant we will be to close our doors on fairy tales. We

must attempt to continue in our journey to acquire a deeper understanding of fairy tales and remember that our journey is sparked by our interest in understanding who we are.

### Returning to Familiar Paths

The question that my daughter addressed to me only served to agitate my thoughts into re-membering what it was like to be a child in the world of fairy tales. “To ask a question means to bring into open. The openness of what is in question consists in the fact that the answer is not settled” (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 363). Through their play and conversations, the children showed me that there were multiple meanings to be experienced from their encounters with fairy tales. These meanings, ephemeral in nature, must be seen in relation to the community of children. The children’s identities shifted and changed according to the kinds of relationships they established with one another. As such, there is much hesitancy on my part to close my research with recommendations as if they would, like magic in fairy tales, erase the complexities present in the curriculum. If anything else, my research work bears witness to the difficulty of naming fairy tales as tools to be used for educational, social or political goals. Fairy tales offer a pedagogical dimension in which a liminal space exists to embrace and celebrate the multiple interpretations of human experiences. In the liminal spaces, the children retold familiar classical fairy tales through play within the context of their own time and place, thus providing new blood to revitalize our understanding of self and other.

The teacher helped me to remove the portable stage, now rickety and worn by the children's play. The three contiguous sides of the stage, smudged with the children's dramatic renderings, resonated with children's stories. Every grain of the stage echoed familiar tales. The open side beckons us to hear again the familiar tales. The children's stories, like the Great stories, will continue to recur in a spiral journey.

The children were still playing when I left them. The teacher had started on the new topic of farm animals. The volunteer parents layered the castle walls with some new coverings depicting a barn. The drawbridge was taken away and stored. The treasure box was now filled with farmer's hats, boots, scarves and a host of attire related to farm life. The children were excited. Albert donned the cowboy hat and boots. "Pretend you are a farmer," said Samuel. The play continued.

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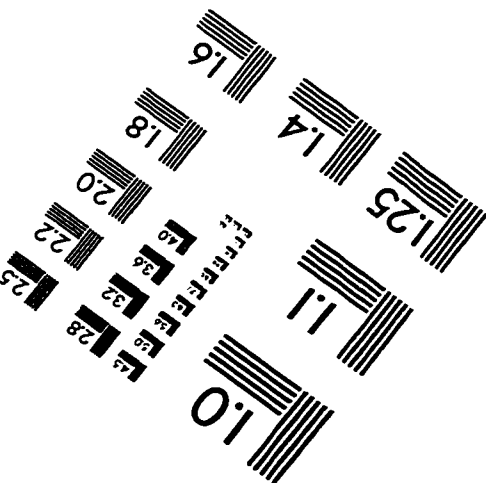
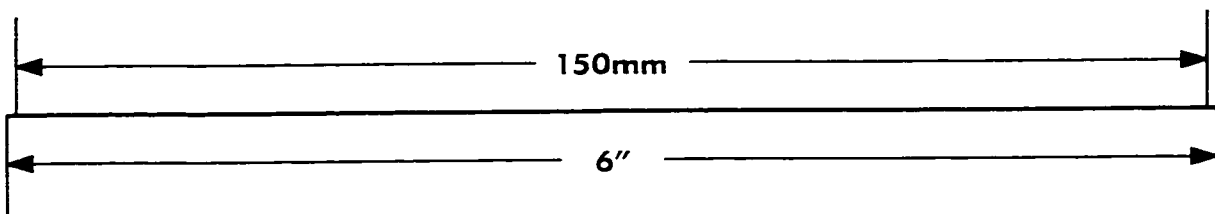
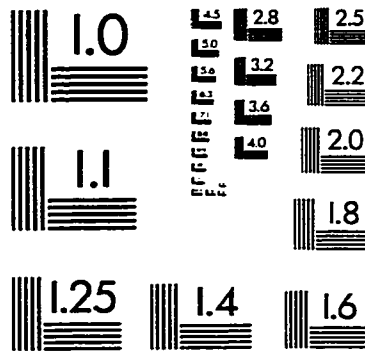
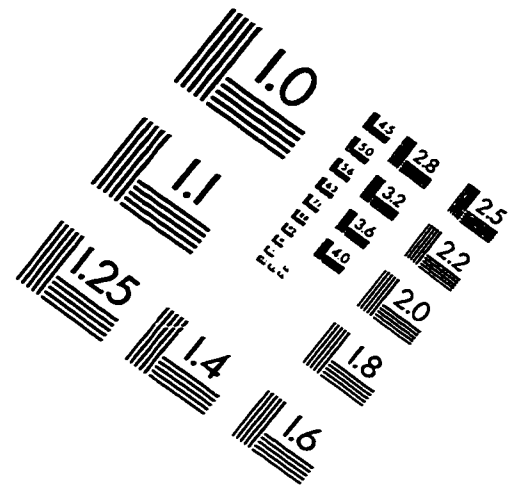
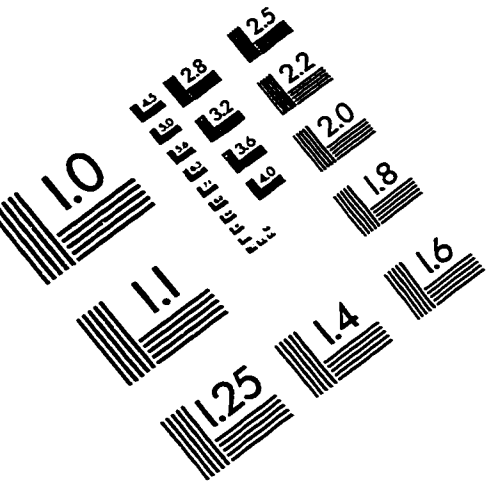
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