
“Why Does She Hear the Heartbeat?” Helping Pre-service Teachers Question Power and Gender in Children’s Literature

By Suzanne M. Knezek

Introduction

When I was in elementary school, the librarian, Mrs. Hill, was one of my best friends. I loved to read adventure stories about cowboys, horses, and life in the West, but the other kids considered such tales to be books for boys. Mrs. Hill helped me avoid teasing by reserving a stack of books for me each week. She would hand it over with a wink and usually with a *Nancy Drew* text placed carefully on top. At the time it never occurred to me to ask why none of the stories I loved were written by women or featured major female characters in positions of power. Now I ask those questions all the time.

Frame and Purpose

During the past several decades a great deal of scholarship has focused on engaging students in critical readings of literature. These readings encourage students to actively question texts and their authors about issues of power in relation to gender, culture, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and geographic location. Pre-service teachers, however, are often inexperienced with what it means to actually engage in critical reading and are even less sure of how they can facilitate such readings with children. Apol, Sakuma, and Rop found that when opportunities to engage in critical readings are “explicitly offered them, many of these teachers-in-training actively resist” (429). Such findings trouble me greatly because I teach children’s literature primarily to female pre-

service teachers. I know the children's books they encounter may under-represent or misrepresent traditionally marginalized populations, including girls and women. A constant concern is that these teacher candidates will resist questioning how gender is represented in children's literature. To address this issue I have included books written by and about women on the lists of required readings for my courses. I am aware, however, that it is not enough to simply correct the literary canon by substituting "Cather for Twain" (Obbink 40). Instead, we need to change both the canon *and* the way we teach people of all ages to read.

Part of our attempt to rethink the traditional "masculine" canon needs to begin on a deeper and more fundamental level: we must begin by challenging the very way we think about texts and the questions we bring to them. Once we have begun to formulate different questions and to practice different modes of reading, it becomes possible to adopt "revisionary tactics" toward literature and the canon -- tactics that are not just theoretical moves, but which enable students to see women and their experiences, and which provide female readers and writers (including those in our classes) with a context and tradition connecting them to a larger community of women (Obbink 40-41).

How, I wondered, will teacher candidates respond when required to write and discuss in ways that ask them to engage in Obbink's revisionary tactics? In this article I describe elements of an assignment created to assist pre-service teachers as they began to critically question and discuss varied children's texts. I also share discussion samples that highlight how one small group responded when asked to

question, write about, and discuss representations of power specifically as they related to gender in one picture book and one young adult novel.

Methods and Materials

Participants and Setting

The data analyzed for this inquiry were gathered from one section of a semester-long, required children's literature course taught primarily to undergraduate students in a teacher preparation program offered at a large, suburban university in the Midwestern United States. Students enrolled in the course were generally in their third or fourth year of the program. I taught the section of the course that provided data presented here, but several other sections were offered at the same time. I worked with a team of instructors who designed the course syllabus and assignments and collaborated on a larger, long-term study investigating various ways pre-service teachers responded to children's and adolescent literature. The data gathered and analyzed for this study was a subset of the data in the team's larger study and included written artifacts from teacher candidates and transcripts of audiotapes from their literature discussions. I also kept an instructor's journal, which featured my field notes and summaries of what had happened inside and outside of class, reflections on the nature of critical response, and any other notes I had taken about related conversations, interactions, and readings.

Of the 27 students enrolled in the course, 25 agreed to take part in the study. The majority of the students were European Americans, but there were also several African-American and Asian-American participants. Most of the students were

between the ages of 19 and 23, with a few who were 24 to 27 years old. Of the 25 participants in the study, 22 were females, and the rest were males.

Data samples highlighted in this paper came from one small group of students as they discussed power and gender in two texts. Students were randomly assigned to groups, and four members of the featured group agreed to participate in the study. They are identified in this article by pseudonyms Lari, Sara, Erin, and Kris. A fifth group member chose not to participate so all comments and writings from that teacher candidate were removed from the data collected. Data from the four group members who agreed to participate are included here because they forward themes found in analyses of data from all participants. However, it is important to note that these are just snapshots or vignettes that cannot fully capture the rich nature of all the discussions that took place.

I am a middle-class, European-American woman and was 40 years old at the time of this study. As the course instructor I was both a participant and researcher in this qualitative study, and I chose to frame it in the tradition of teacher research that Cochran-Smith and Lytle defined as “a systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by teachers” (3). I gathered and recorded information, documented experiences inside and outside the classroom, and created written records to implement the teacher research model described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle.

Analysis

The teacher candidates’ written and illustrated artifacts included assigned papers and art objects created in response to texts, transcriptions of audio-taped discussions, and anecdotal records in the instructor’s journal. All were gathered and analyzed using

grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss). Grounded theory is built on the premise that, as a researcher reads through and codes the data, theoretical concepts will emerge.

Researchers who use grounded theory generally ask questions such as, “What is the situation?” and “What’s going on in this data?” As I was trying to understand what happened when teacher candidates were required to engage in critical readings of and discussions about the ways power and gender were represented in texts, I wanted to approach my data without preconceived theoretical notions about what I would find and to be open to themes that emerged as salient and common elements in students’ responses to texts.

Literature for Discussions

The four books used in this study were *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak), *Voices in the Park* (Browne), *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan) and *The City of Ember* (Du Prau). Books were chosen for the larger study by the instructional team based on five factors. First, consideration was given to the overall excellence of the texts, i.e., literary and genre characteristics, reputations and recognitions of authors and illustrators, and quality of illustrations. Second, genres like science fiction and fantasy, which are often underrepresented in classroom libraries, were included. Third, we questioned representations of diversity and looked for texts that reflected accurate and widely varied perspectives. Fourth, a balanced mix of genders in both protagonists and authors was a definite goal. Fifth, we located literature that would challenge our pre-service teachers as they built knowledge about reading and

responding to children's and adolescent literature. In this paper I have incorporated data collected in relation to students' discussions of two of the four required texts.

Assignment Description

Reader response theory advances the idea that, depending on life experiences and purposes for reading, there are many ways that readers can respond to text (Rosenblatt). This concept is important because it implies that, if given the chance, the teacher candidates participating in the book discussion groups would likely respond to those books in a range of complex ways. I, along with the other members of the instructional team, wanted to understand, anticipate, and then institutionalize some of the more common reader responses in the form of class assignments and activities. We then drew upon the work of literature discussion scholars, such as Daniels, McMahon et al., and Wilhelm, to establish reader response role descriptions our students would take on when reading and talking about children's literature. In doing so we hoped to have teacher candidates experience what it was like not only to read and respond to literature in multiple ways, but also to reflect upon and have a deep understanding of the response roles, the perspectives those roles help them develop, and why reading from multiple perspectives might be important. In total, we established five roles: facilitator/personal, textual, intertextual, artistic, and critical. Descriptions of all roles are detailed in *"But I'm Not Good At Art": Pre-service Teachers' Understandings Of Artistic Response To Children's And Adolescent Literature* by Knezek. Because this study focuses solely on elements of the critical response role, expectations for that role appear below.

The person responsible for critical response

- explores questions about issues of power surrounding race, class and gender (who has power in this book and who does not) and voice (who is heard in this book and who is not)
- talks about the book's expressed and implied beliefs
- talks about what the author might want readers to believe, how the author works to make that happen and what the author seems to assume about readers and about the subject (Knezek 17)

Every teacher candidate was expected to take the lead for all roles by the end of the term, so everyone was responsible for the critical response role at least once during the semester. On the day of the discussion, critical respondents came to class with a two-to-three page paper that addressed expectations in the role description during discussions that usually lasted 30 minutes. It was their job to make sure that members identified who had power and voice in the book, especially when it came to race, class, and gender. Preparing response papers prior to discussions required critical respondents to begin reading critically as soon as they opened the book.

Findings and Discussions

When I analyzed the data collected for this study, I became aware that two major themes were emerging. In the next two sections I provide examples of the themes found in transcripts of the small group discussions that occurred.

Do Silence and Absence Matter?

Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak), a classic picture book, details a young boy's journey through a fantastical land where he becomes king, only to return back home again all in one night. When discussing gender and power in their first small group session, Sara and Kris had a brief exchange that provides an example of the first of the major themes that arose from the analysis of this data: whether or not discussions of gender and power matter when women are not seen or heard in the text.

Kris: Sara, I know you must have had a difficult time trying to come up with a critical response...

Sara: I did because, like, for the critical response, it's like, you have to evaluate the book on like who has the power in relation to race, gender, and class, but none of them related to *Where the Wild Things Are*. The only one raised in this book is the parent and the child relationship so I don't think the gender really mattered because initially the mom has the power, but, um, the power, in the end falls in the boy's hands because he's like, "Okay, I'm going to be king and go away to this land where you can't tell me what to do...."

In this example, Kris, the group facilitator, invites the critical perspective in by acknowledging that Sara had to do it, but she also resists the idea that such a reading can be done by telling Sara she must have had a difficult time with the role. Sara, by stating that none of the issues she was asked to consider related to *Where the Wild Things Are*, also initially resists the notion that a critical reading can be

achieved. However, she does go on to discuss issues of gender when she highlights the power dynamic between the mother and child in the book.

The character of the mother in *Where the Wild Things Are* is never shown in the illustrations. Instead, she is heard only on the first few pages when she calls her son a wild thing and sends him to bed without dinner. Because she is conspicuously absent physically and her voice is never heard again, she is largely absent and silent in the text. It appeared to Kris and Sara that this meant there was not much, if anything, to say about power and gender in this text. Yet feminist and literary scholars would argue that this is just the issue that teachers need to help students read against in the classics that make up the canon for all ages (Obbink 1992). Instead of asking why the only human character seen in the book is a white male, why he has the majority of the power throughout most of the text, and what impact that might have on those reading the book, group members accepted the lack of female presence and voice and did not argue Sara's premise that "gender really didn't matter" in critical readings of *Where the Wild things Are*.

Who Are We Without Them?

Esperanza Rising (Ryan,) is a novel-length piece of historical fiction that contains a great deal of social commentary. It is unique in that it presents little known information about the struggles of Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the Great Depression and does so primarily through female characters (including the main character, Esperanza) dealing with loss, change in socioeconomic status, prejudice, gender issues, and familial relationships. In their discussion of this text,

Lari, Kris, and Erin captured a second major theme: whether or not women can be happy and whole without family or men by their sides.

Lari: Okay, so I wanted to start out tonight our discussion with, um, how the book started out with Esperanza and her father and lying on the ground and feeling a heartbeat, how she didn't hear it in the middle when she was alone, and how it ended...with Miguel lying on the ground and listening to the heartbeat with her. So what does that all mean? Why does she hear the heartbeat?

Kris: At the beginning she had this intense feeling of family with her father and she could sense it; she could hear the heartbeat then. But when she was traveling she had just lost her sense of her father, and her family, and where she was going, and she couldn't, she couldn't hear it. And then towards the end I thought it was pretty interesting that she had tried once more and then she could hear it again. And she was lying next to Miguel.

Erin: You know one of the things...when, when you say that, when you think about it, it bothered me a little bit that she could only hear the heartbeat when there was a man lying next to her. Going back to this idea of gender and power made me think that. But the way that you're talking about it now puts a very different spin on it and, you know, being somebody who knows she is a part of something greater and being lost from that for a time period. And then coming back to it, but in a different way.

Kris: I did think it was about gender at first. I thought, well, maybe she's just hearing the heartbeat of the man next to her and, like, she can't hear her own heartbeat or the heartbeat of the land without a man there.

Lari: I never thought of that! I always thought the heartbeat was the sound of her heartbeat in the earth. But if that was true, then why can't she hear the heartbeat when she's alone? Oh that bothers me. Why does a man have to be there for her to hear it?

In this exchange Lari began the discussion with a question she thought had nothing to do with power and gender, only to be introduced to a different way to read the text by her group mates. Especially interesting is Erin's contribution, in which she initially comments about disliking the notion that Esperanza could only hear the mystical heartbeat in the presence of a man. She then goes on to build on Kris's interpretation in seeing Esperanza as someone who has grown beyond herself – as someone who “knows she is a part of something greater.”

It is true that Esperanza matures a great deal over the course of the book. At the beginning she is characterized as a spoiled girl who is adored by her father. By the end of the text Esperanza has survived terrible personal and socioeconomic loss, learned to work hard, and largely triumphed (with, of course, the support of her childhood friend and potential love interest, Miguel). At least one question remains, however, for critical readers considering power and gender: Could Esperanza have made it without the help of others, especially Miguel?

While Lari found the question about the role of men in Esperanza's life to be distressing, it is a key question to consider. After all, *Esperanza Rising* is a text written by and about women – just the kind of book that challenges the established literary canon. Yet Lari, Erin, and Kris found that, after actively employing a “revisionary tactic” and simply questioning just who had power and who didn't in the novel, the messages it conveyed about gender were not necessarily as positive and clear as they had originally thought.

Because these findings are based on data gathered in a single class, they cannot be generalized. They do show, however, that when this section of pre-service teachers read quality children's literature and were invited to write about and discuss that literature in structured and meaningful ways, they began to overcome resistance to critically questioning texts. They interrogated the messages the books forwarded about gender and power, the representations found (and not found) in them, and the intentions of their authors. It follows, then, that teacher educators must “confront the task of learning to re-envision texts, to reposition ourselves, and to re-imagine the traditional questions that have included white men and excluded women (and men of color) from full participation in a literary tradition and from our larger system of social power itself” (Obbink 43). In doing so we can help pre-service teachers and their future students to find their own power by asking *why* they hear certain heartbeats (messages) when they read. Is the sound their own -- or is someone else dictating a rhythm and message?

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