

A tale of disturbance and unsettlement: incorporating and enacting deconstruction with the purpose of challenging aspects of pedagogy in the nursery classroom

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ABSTRACT This paper illustrates some of the repercussions, particularly the advantages, in adopting deconstructive approaches to those meanings which are brought to an account of young children's play within a teacher research enquiry. In describing and interpreting an example offered here the objective is not to fix a definitive or accurate explanation to it. Instead, the ambition is to disperse rather than capture meanings, to offer multiple and open ended interpretations and in so doing disturb the equilibrium of the reported perspective which gave rise to the account. Through such an approach, it is suggested, we can challenge ingrained ways of knowing and doing which inhibit opportunities to question 'authoritarian fictions' present in the way we often describe the learning of young children, which because they are habitual and collective have come to be regarded as 'natural' and 'truths'.

How does school-based practitioner research function in framing and guiding classroom practice? This paper arises from an enquiry assuming the premise that the practitioner researching in his or her classroom brings about changes both through acting in the classroom itself and in producing writing commenting on this classroom practice. That is, descriptions of classroom practice, made by the practitioner, effect changes in the reality attended to by this practitioner. The writing generated in this process can be seen as both responding to past action and guiding future action. In short, in describing my classroom, I affect the way I see it, thus the way I act in it and hence the way I subsequently describe it (since it has been changed by my actions). In engaging in this circular hermeneutic process, teacher/researchers pass through a sequence of perspectives, each capable of generating various types of writing and each susceptible to a variety of later interpretations.

In commencing the enquiry an essential dimension of our task was concerned with how the research process, conceived in these terms, enables the practitioner in organising the complexity of the teaching situation, with a particular emphasis on how 'monitoring change' can be converted to 'control of change'. But it was this very desire for control, and the difficulties we encountered in trying to document it, which led us in to a certain skepticism with our original proposals. We began to question whether this central motivation clouded our vision from the very complexities we sought to capture. What began as an attempt at a reconciliation of the hermeneutic underpinnings of our practitioner research enterprise with post-structuralist analyses, turned more into a disruption of our initial assumptions. Thus we switched from a somewhat rationalist

focus on effecting productive change through a systematic process towards moving from premises where initial assumptions are necessarily a little less secure.

This paper is a consequence of this shift in our focus. It suggests that writing from a location of indeterminacy may be a more useful means of unsettling what Spivak (1980, p. 75) refers to as 'mindset'. The paper argues that by acting from the premise of 'not knowing' rather than 'knowing' and by acknowledging the excess of meanings and the endless possibilities deriving from this we may loosen the ties that ordinarily guide us into over-familiar and well trodden styles of accounting for what we see. The challenge, as Stronach (1997, p. 17) suggests, rests in the: *the impetus of not-knowing, in not-ever-knowing, but in continuing to learn something of that 'not-ever' of knowing.*

The paper falls into four parts. To begin with a brief account is provided of the broader research enquiry being carried out from which this paper arises and of the school where the empirical work was located. Secondly, we outline the theoretical context being assumed by the paper. The third section presents the core of our argument. It begins by describing some of the repercussions of adopting a post-structuralist framework when examining social practices as part of a teacher research enterprise. It is at this juncture that we examine some of the tensions which lie between those locations occupied in offering such accounts including those of 'teacher researcher' and 'feminist teacher' and the ways these positions connect/disconnect with post-structuralism. Having, albeit briefly, described our ambivalent embrace with post-structuralism the paper offers an example of children's play in a nursery school to illustrate an applying of deconstruction and in so doing indicate how different questions concerned with practice can be opened up. Finally, in a brief fourth section, there is an attempt to summarise and some tentative conclusions are drawn.

Research Context

The research enquiry has taken place within a project entitled 'The teacher researcher and emerging power relations in the nursery' based at Manchester Metropolitan University.

The project team comprises the two authors. The initial aims of the project were:

- to provide an account of how children's identifications, as evidenced in their use of language, contribute to their own evolving identity, with particular reference to gender.
- to create a theoretical framework for examining and structuring the teacher's professional engagement, which accommodates personal shifting perspectives.
- to collate examples of children's speech as data in critically examining the social norms governing their classroom activity.
- to create a record of everyday teaching, critically examining the social norms which guide teacher practice, directed at enhancing children's critical capability.
- to develop an action research methodology, which emphasises textual production as both a monitor and catalyst of professional change.

Work for the project has focused on extensive empirical research carried out over four years by a teacher in her own nursery classroom (Jones), combined with more theoretically oriented work with University colleagues. This followed three years of related work by the teacher for a course leading to the award of MA in Teaching (by Research). The specific focus throughout has been on how children in the nursery

classroom become initiated into conventional social practices. In particular, gender relations have been examined in the formation of the children's identities. This work has been carried out from the perspective of a teacher researcher who, simultaneously, has kept an eye on the research process she is initiating. That is, she is, at the same time, concerned both with the evolution of gender relations in her own classroom and with the procedures and structures through which she builds her perception and reports on this. In doing this she is bringing into question some of the practices implicit in the cyclical approach underpinning Action Research (e.g. Elliott, 1991), *en route* to developing research strategies more sensitive to her own specific concerns in both classroom and University contexts.

The nursery in which the research is taking place is part of an inner-city primary school, in Manchester. The school lies in a district where the assorted ills of urban poverty including unemployment are clearly evident. Furthermore, it is an area where certain social structures have undergone changes. The children who attend the nursery reflect these shifts. To give an example; the notion of 'family' within the nursery encompasses those children who are cared for solely by a single parent, as well as parenting by married couples, unmarried heterosexual couples, same sex (female) couples and foster parents. A core of twenty children attend the nursery full-time whilst the remaining ten places are reserved for twenty three year olds, who because of their young age, attend on a part-time basis. There is an even division between these children: ten opt to join us in the morning leaving the remaining ten to attend in the afternoon. The teacher works alongside a nursery nurse. The children focused on in this paper all attend school on a full time basis.

Theoretical context

The post-structuralism of writers such as Foucault and Derrida has given a new prominence to the role of text and discourse analysis in building understandings of human action. (For a helpful introduction see Coward and Ellis (1977). Meanwhile, Henriques et al, (1984) provide a more educationally oriented discussion.) An important thrust of this work is that the categories implicit in the use of language itself reveal much about the community which generated it and the perspective of the individual user. In describing the world this individual says a lot about herself and the way in which she sees her actions gearing in to the world. Similarly, there are cultural conventions in describing the world, which reveal the culture's understanding of the world and hence something about the culture itself. This self-reflexive and generative dimension of language has provided the starting point for much recent social research. As Coward and Ellis (1977, p. 1) put it "the study of language has opened up a route to an understanding of mankind, social history and the laws of how a society functions". But in an interesting twist, especially present in the work of Foucault (e.g. 1991), there has been a shift to an analysis of the relationships between discursive and non-discursive relations, as located in social institutions and the practices they engender (Smart, 1985, p. 43).

Such analysis can provide a productive framework for individual growth and, in particular, teachers working on developing their own professional practices. Within the field of education, recent practitioner oriented research accommodates an understanding

of how researchers are practically related to the situations they investigate, where their actions, as teacher/researchers, are seen as an essential part of situation being described (e.g. Adler, 1993; Elliott, 1993, pp. 193-207; Lomax, 1994; Schon, 1983, Silcock, 1994). Also, such research paradigms are increasingly being employed in programmes of professional development within both initial training (e.g. Francis, 1995; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Hanley and Brown, 1996) and masters level work (e.g. Cryns and Johnston, 1993; Brown, 1996). Associated with these moves is a burgeoning literature on teacher narratives, emphasising the teacher's perspective as represented through the accounts they give of their professional situations (e.g. Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Olson, 1995). This paper focuses on some of the theoretical perspectives which emerged in pursuing the enquiry outlined above. In particular, it examines how post-structuralist analysis offers some useful insights for those building accounts of teacher perspective within the context of teacher research. Its focus will draw on a few key writers whose writing has suggested an interesting challenge to conventional wisdom within educational research that the task is to resolve meanings and strategies in a definitive way. These range from radical educational theorists (e.g. Davies, 1989; Walkerdine et al, 1989; Lather, 1991; Stronach et al., 1997) to feminist theorists (e.g. Hekman, 1990; Moi, 1985), to literary and cultural theorists (e.g. Hall et al 1992; Eagleton, 1983; Barry, 1995). Foucault and Derrida however, have been especially influential in the enquiry and it is their work which will underly much of the analysis below.

However, as indicated in the introduction, adopting a post-structuralist perspective and incorporating practices of deconstruction into research practices is not a straightforward nor an unproblematic affair. For in many ways such theories and practices cut across and work against the notion of the individual coming to know, particularly when that individual aspires to being a feminist. In some ways, to attempt to combine the locations of 'feminism', 'critical pedagogy' and 'postmodernism/post-structuralism' is to tie oneself up in a series of paradoxical knots. Hence, in adopting a feminist stance, as is being attempted in this paper, albeit within the form of a paper aimed at a research journal, it is necessary to criticise the fundamentally homocentric nature of subjectivity and as a consequence work at expelling the stigma from notions of 'femininity'. However, is this possible when the (post-modern) subject is conceptualised as splintered and plural? Or, to rephrase this slightly, is it still conceivable to have a politics of subjectivity when there is no longer a viable subject? Similarly, can the 'self' achieve self determination from the post-modern site of fractured and multiple selves? Such questions could lead to resignation, despair and, as a consequence, inactivity. Alternatively, the notions of uncertainty and ambiguity can be set to work to interrogate and interrupt the, 'methodological will to certainty and clarity of vision' (Stronach & Maclure, 1997, p. 5). What might well then be created is a 'more fluid and less coercive conceptual organisation of terms which transcends a binary logic by simultaneously being both and neither of the binary terms' (Grosz, quoted in Lather, 1991, p. 13). What follows then is a form of self critique or analysis aimed at first foregrounding and then disrupting any paradoxical inscription within binary logic (cf. Hutcheon, 1989). What ensues in this writing is an attempt to engage or enact with deconstruction in order to mark out a number of things including for example, those 'realities' which are constructed within the context of the nursery classroom and the treatment these receive in

a more theoretically oriented domain. This critique is mounted from a variety of positions embracing being and feeling simultaneously the insider\ outsider, the observer\ observed and practitioner\ theoretician. Curiously, by writing about the children's game there is a sense in which the play is then framed by the writing. An effect of this is to place the teacher researcher both in and outside the frame making her both the subject and the object, the observer and the observed or, as Rhedding-Jones (1996, p. 24) puts it, as a 'subject of/in discourse'.

Deconstructing some children's play

One strategy employed within this paper is to perceive a story which a group of children tell through the vehicle of play as an allegory. Conventionally, allegories whether in the form of a poem, a play, a piece of prose or, as in this instance a children's game, operate on two levels. There is the surface plane where there is apparent meaning but below that lies deeper complexities and where the symbols and characters of for example, a story enacted through play, stand in for and are illustrations of truth including moral and spiritual truth. However, in this writing allegories are being perceived and used a little differently. Here, there is no expectation that by perceiving the children's story as an allegory a truth about the children or their lives will be revealed. Instead, the hope is that as a consequence of reading the children's story as a multilayered tale and by engaging with deconstruction certain pedagogical beliefs and assumptions will be destabilised thus creating a space whereby they may be reconsidered, problematised and where our own investments in them can be scrutinised. These points will be extended later.

For the past year a journal has been kept in which the teacher researcher has documented various aspects of classroom life including her interactions with the children and their social encounters with one another. The writings in the journal, based on her own observations are hurried jottings which are then used as reference points to allow for subsequent, more extended reflective pieces. These writings, whilst clearly subjective, allow an initial rendering of a particular incident such as a description of children's play as complex followed by an opportunity to move beyond making positive and limited assumptions about such complexities. What this entails is a shift from supposedly unproblematic descriptions of a particular incident to offering in its place stories or 'fictional framings' (Hassan, 1987, p. 118) about a constructed world. The journal, as it has been written, does not attempt to 'tell it how it really is'; rather, it has become a means of chartering and articulating some of the varied and various variables including the tensions and bewilderment, for the teacher researcher, when working within this particular environment. In the subsequent analysis of this material outside of the school context there is a further shift away from seeing the context of the nursery classroom as 'real' towards 'fore grounding how discourse worlds the world' (Lather, 1993, p. 675).

In researching from positions of possibility rather than the positive, and by incorporating deconstruction into the methodology with a view to deliberately blurring certain binary oppositions, such as subject/object and fact/fiction, we, within our enquiry, depart from more traditional action research paradigms where a prevalent view is that individuals can, as a consequence of consciousness raising exercises, come to 'know'. The intention of

this paper is to illustrate how practices of deconstruction have been incorporated into the practitioner-research task within this enquiry, in ways which will allow the teacher to tease out and unravel some of the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of her practice. The intention then is not to destroy or abandon such underpinnings; instead, the deconstructive practices employed here aim to unsettle specific foundations with a view to opening them up, and in so doing create possibilities for rereadings.

Deconstructive enquiry, whilst more familiar within the field of literary criticism is, additionally, incorporated into the work of several critical education theorists (e.g. Lather, 1991; Spivak, 1993; Stronach & Maclure, 1997). What binds these theorists is that all in their various ways seek to question, disturb and worry those established ground rules which stipulate our ways of cognising. In other words, they aim to ‘challenge the legitimacy of the dominant order’ (Lather, 1991, p. xv) whilst functioning within it. This attitude underpins our task here.

The example of play

(journal entry 20.9.95) Carly is in the Home Corner. She has on a random collection of dressing up clothes including one of the battered hats and a too long skirt. She piles several handbags and shopping bags on to the doll’s buggy. Finally, one of the doll’s is placed precariously on top of the heaped bags. She makes her way from the home over to the reading area. Here, the doll is placed on a chair whilst Carly sets to putting various books into the bags. It would seem that for Carly, the reading corner has temporarily, become the shops. Meanwhile, Peter and Nathan enter the Home and take the table cloth and one of the cot sheets. They bring these to me and ask to have them tucked into their necks of their jumpers. Cloth and sheet are now capes. Both boys immediately place their arms straight out in front of their bodies in a ‘super hero flying’ pose and together they run off to the construction area. At this point, Matthew, Ryan, Colin and Michael enter the Home and begin to rearrange the chairs into a straight line. Ryan is the first to sit down on a chair. He puts his arms straight out and it is clear from both the noises he is making and the swaying of his body that he is ‘driving’. The other boys imitate him. Perhaps because of the noise and general hubbub the two super heroes, Peter and Nathan, are drawn back into the Home. They now have lengths of Mobilo (construction toy) tucked into the waistbands of their trousers. They take the home’s two remaining easy chairs and add them to the existing line of chairs. Now, the only means of getting back into the ‘home’ is via a small gap. The boys, when sitting, all adopt more or less identical positions. That is, their arms are held straight out in front of their bodies whilst their hands grip at imaginary steering wheels. They sway from side to side whilst emitting engine like noises. Colin then leaves his seat and begins to collect different items out of the home. The ‘driving’ stops as Colin proceeds to give out some of these things.

Colin: (passing the kettle to Ryan). *You’ve got to have the oil- it’s special.*

Ryan: *Yeah, the oil will make my boosters go fast.*

(Ryan gets off his chair and, using the kettle, applies oil to the chair legs.)

Colin: (giving the tea pot to Matthew and the jug to Michael). *You've got to have it-you put it in- it's special.*

Matthew and Michael also 'oil' their 'cars'.

Colin then retakes his position as one of the driver's. As he begins to drive he calls out:

Colin: *Mine's fastest - its got special boosters.*

It is as if he has challenged the other boys. The driving now has a furious quality; tyres screech and engines roar. It is brought to a halt by Michael. He stands, faces the boys and pronounces:

Michael: *Mines a police car- it goes fastest 'cos I catch baddies.*

At this point Carly, pushing her buggy approaches the 'home'. She uses the buggy to try to nudge and widen the gap which the boys have left in the line of chairs. Nathan raises his length of mobilo construction into the air and, simultaneously calls out:

Nathan: *I'm a power ranger. (a T.V. 'super hero') I'm shooting up high... higher than the sky (he waves the mobilo) ... higher than the moon.*

Peter, the other 'super hero' also raises his length of construction toy. The boys do not address Carly but she appears to be watching them attentively. The boys on the chairs, having watched Nathan and Peter then continue with their 'driving'. Carly makes a couple more attempts at using the buggy to widen the gap then gives up and makes her way back to the book corner. After a brief moment the two caped boys return to the construction area. They are quickly followed by the rest of the boys.

As has been said, our purpose in perceiving this example as an allegory is not to see the play as a mirroring of the 'real'; rather, it is an attempt at revealing certain blind spots of the writer/interpreter's own conceptualisations (Lather, 1991, p. 91). Hence, the children's story, which ostensibly concerns itself with a home, some drivers and a mother is being seen not as a description or a depiction of life but an inscription. Thus, in writing about the children and their play it is very likely that the researcher has been prompted into actively selecting, transforming and interpreting that which she has chosen to see (cf. Zeller, 1987, p. 93).

It is perhaps not accidental that out of the many stories which the children act out within the nursery environment each day that the account provided centres on the ways young children both construct and take up gender positionings. Because of the teacher researcher's own locations including those of 'feminist teacher' and 'woman' the ways in which she focuses and the readings that she brings to images are enmeshed in and entangled with those hopes and desires which she has for the children she teaches and for herself as their teacher. What follows is an attempt to disturb those foundations in which these hopes and desires are rooted.

An oppositional tale.

At this point consider the line of chairs that the boys have constructed as being a representation of a dichotomy. This has, as its underlying paradigm, a male/female

opposition with an inevitable positive/negative evaluation (Cixous, 1975, p. 115). Given this, the children's play can then be perceived as a series of oppositions and where not only are the boys and the girl aligned against one another so too is the nature of their play; certain characteristics or qualities are positively or negatively valorised. Hence, using the above text the following two lists of polarities could be created:

(+)	(-)
super hero cape	long skirt & battered hat
racing cars	buggy
driving	shopping
super hero	mother
noise	silence
group activity	solitary play
moon	shops
'baddy' capturer	nurturer
swords	shopping bags

One ramification in listing as opposites the play of the children is to produce a heavily stylised and unitary model of gender qualities and where certain generalisations and assumptions could be made both about the nature of the play and about the boys and the girl. Hence, it is possible to read the boys play as being concerned with and centring on an idealised notion of hegemonic masculinity. In creating their characters and positioning themselves as either super hero or racing car driver the boys have drawn from, been informed by and relied upon a very prescribed and narrow notion of masculinity. As Davies points out, a key element in the boys construction of their male characters is: '... the fact that the *idea* of what it is to be male is constructed in opposition to the idea of femaleness'. Davies (1989, p. 89) continues,... this means that the boys must at least in part position themselves as masculine through oppressive acts of domination and control of their environment and non-masculine others (author's own emphasis).

In this story, some of this control of the environment comes, we believe, as a consequence of several symbolic transformations. Hence, various domestic artifacts such as chairs, jug and kettle are altered into cars and oil cans respectively. Additionally, the cot blanket and the tablecloth are metamorphosed into super hero capes. Such conversions have a double-edged consequence; first, household objects are removed from the traditionally female realm of the home and transferred into the more masculine arena of the pit stop and garage whilst, simultaneously, they add to the boy's power. Now, as racing drivers and super heroes the boys are forceful dynamic agents who have connections with and perform in the world outside of the home.

By contrast Carly, with her 'symbols' of 'motherhood' that is, her baby, bags and buggy is steeped in and anchored to the private world of the home. The story does indicate that Carly performs several of her own transformations; for example, through donning adult clothes she swaps 'girl' for 'mother' whilst books are converted into 'shopping'.

However, there is a sense, we believe, that those things which give her play both its impetus and its substance also work at tying and constricting Carly in a number of ways. First, as a consequence of them she is fettered to a very particular version of 'femininity';

she is the 'carer' and 'nurturer', in fact the 'good mother'. Positioned as such Carly is the negative 'other' to the boys positive 'heroes'. Perhaps it is not too surprising that when Carly tries to reenter her home her attempts are so tentative. In a sense, how can they be otherwise when the one area where her control is assumed and recognised has been disrupted, tampered with and finally incorporated into an opposing discourse. The gap that the boys have left in the line of chairs must, it would seem within this reading of the story, remain a tantalising space. Thus, Carly can see that which she desires but because of a number of reasons including maybe some sense of her own powerlessness 'it' must remain a dream which lies visible yet just out of arm's reach.

Tantalising gaps

However, what we now want to propose is that the gap which has been left in the line of chairs be conceptualised as a metaphorical opening or a rift in the male/female dichotomy. Here, in this space or gap our aim is to make the familiar unfamiliar. To accept the familiar, oppositional reading of this story, is to both assume and accept that the familiarly known is properly known. This is why Derrida is important. He cautions against 'accepted' and 'correct' readings of texts; rather his advice is to (re)examine the minute particulars and in this way we may come to perceive how our meaning-making has become enclosed within the desire to make the definition coincide with the defined. In short Derrida urges us to change certain habits of mind (e.g. Derrida, 1976, p. xviii). Rather as Spivak (1987, p. 78) puts it, we face 'a weave of knowing and not knowing which is what knowing is'. For Derrida, language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning, and as a consequence he rejects both the notion and the desire to seek from a text a 'final, unified meaning that in turn might ground and explain all the others' (Moi, 1985, p. 9). "Language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" (Derrida, *ibid*).

Making a gap in the oppositional reading of the children's play

An effect of reading the children's game as an oppositional tale is that the children themselves are reduced to singular entities. Carly, immersed as she is within domesticity, can be read and hence understood as a metaphor for an essentialist notion of what constitutes a girl/woman. That is, through the make believe world of play and through the donning of 'dressing-up' clothes Carly becomes an embodiment for what is 'real' about 'womanhood'. One consequence is that, even though Carly's disguise is both striking and remarkable, its effect is to render her invisible. The text literally stops seeing her whilst the boys through transformations of the ordinary and the mundane take centre stage and, as is evident from the text, occupy the teacher's gaze.

The gap

When she does reenter the text she is perceived to be nudging at the gap with the buggy. Given that the teacher has observed Carly leave the home she can perhaps justifiably assume that the girl wants to gain access to the 'home'. Furthermore, she could make

another justifiable assumption that the reason Carly cannot widen the gap is because the boys intimidate her. That is, their loud voices and raised arms thwart her efforts.

However, there is room here for the play of interpretation. For example, it could be that whilst Carly may have wanted to return to her 'home' she finds that because of certain symbolic transformations her 'home' is now neither hers nor is it a 'home'. Just as Carly was able to change the book corner into a 'shop' and books into 'goods' similarly, the boys have made their own switches. It might be that Carly's withdrawal from the home is not because she is 'defeated' but that she has understood the embedded logic of the game. Now to return to this 'home' is illogical as clearly it is no longer a 'home'.

Reading 'solitary play' negatively

Within the oppositional reading of the play 'solitary play' is read negatively. By deconstructing the notion of 'solitary play' we want to foreground two issues. First, following Derrida we want to assert that dualisms are always both oppositional and hierarchical, never neutral; thus the need to interrogate the conceptual organisation which has structured the oppositional reading of the play. Second, deconstructing a sexist world has to be resolved through the dismantling of patriarchal binary thought because it is here that people are constituted as one part of the male-female dualism and where the 'feminine side' is always seen as the negative, powerless instance.

Gapping 'solitary'

The word 'solitary', whilst it does have a range of meanings has, we would suggest, within the nursery come to be understood and used in a very particular way. To elaborate, around the word 'solitary' a breadth of meanings revolve. For example, these might include the notion of 'independence' and the reliance on one's own 'resourcefulness'. In the nursery, these traits are regarded as key qualities. However, 'solitary' also comes tinged and tainted with negative meanings. These circulate around acts of separation, often undertaken for punitive and medical reasons, and where individuals are deliberately kept away from fellow beings. Hence, 'solitary' when used in conjunction with 'play', whilst denoting an activity undertaken by an individual, also works at devaluing both the individual and the activity. Carly's qualities, including her independence and resourcefulness have in this instance been subsumed by the term 'solitary', and consequently, are demeaned. This depreciation is further heightened because of the metaphor which Carly has chosen and which is the vehicle for her fantasy. However, this then prompts the question: what are Carly's other metaphorical choices? That is, within the context of the nursery classroom, what other metaphorical openings are made available to her and the other children which would allow them to take up multiple positionings and which furthermore would acknowledge that subjectivities are not stable but variable and ever-changing? Before going on to address these questions we shall try to reemphasise two points which have been made. The first is concerned with the fixing of an essential meaning. The second centres on knowledge making.

The desire to fix a singular meaning

First, we hope that we have gone some way in illustrating that it is not possible to attach an essential meaning to the children's story. The process of knowing, and this is our second point, is about moving ourselves. An engagement with knowledge processes requires shifts in thinking. It is not about standing on the same spot and where reassurance is gained from comforting assumptions and familiar stories.

To read the above story and to privilege an exclusive meaning is in itself a discursive practice drawn from traditional literary criticism theories. Within the constrictions of this paper it is possible to only offer a sketchy simplification of some of the prevailing ideas and features which were regarded as the common bedrock of the theories (Barry, 1995, p. 34). Such characteristics would include the promotion of literature as a vehicle for enabling us to understand the 'truth' about human 'nature'. Additionally, traditional literary texts were characterised by linearity, clear authorial voice and closure. However, because notions of subjectivity or human nature were conceptualised as male this had the inevitable repercussions of creating the conditions for naturalising the social power relations of patriarchy and hence patriarchal binary thought (Weedon, 1987, p. 139). However, gestures such a deconstruction, seek to undo this logocentric ideology with a view of going beyond the static closure of binary opposition. Whilst working within the system of the logic, one undertaking of deconstruction is to overload and deliberately strain the system by indicating its own paradoxes and ambiguities such that it implodes. This is what we are trying to do, and need to continue to do, with the story of Carly and the boys.

Let us now return to those questions which were left dangling.

Metaphorical gaps and openings

Previously the questions posed were: what other metaphorical openings are made available to the other children which would allow them to take up multiple positionings and allow for shifting subjectivities? What efforts are being made within the nursery to shift dualistic discourses?

There is evidence we feel, that very real attempts are made to disrupt aspects of the nursery curriculum in the hope that difference and diversity can be accommodated within the classroom and where additionally, stereotypical and 'sex appropriate' behaviour is discouraged. Similarly, ways are sought to disturb and unsettle attitudes, including complacency, towards the status quo. For example, stories are read with the hope that they will upset some of the children's expectations. The characters in these books are not depicted as uniform and coherent; rather, they display contradictory qualities.

However, whilst it is comparatively straightforward to move, mix and manage play equipment and resources with the intention of deliberately fuzzing certain conceptions which are brought to these things, what is much more complex and deeply challenging is the confronting of hierarchical dualistic thinking; particularly within our own accounts. We shall elaborate this point by returning again to the children's story. Specifically, recollect the moment when the teacher helped the boys transform cot blanket and table cloth into super hero capes. This is, interestingly, the only point in the story when the children step outside their narrative- making for some adult help. Could this have been a

moment when the teacher might have made a difference? In a sense the answer is yes and no. For there to be a 'yes' answer what has to be disrupted is the teacher's own immersion in what Walkerdine (1990, pp. 324-5) refers to as 'pedagogy of choice'. This 'pedagogy of choice' is prevalent both in this teacher's classroom and in nursery education generally. It has a long tradition and is underpinned by a belief in rational thought. A central tenet is that the 'freedom' to 'choose' allows for children to develop 'normal and satisfactory emotional development' (Lowenfeld, 1935, p. 324). If not given this 'freedom' so the argument continues, the consequences are severe because (those) '...forces unrealised in childhood remain as an inner drive, for ever seeking outlets, and lead men (sic) to express them not any longer in play, since this is regarded as an activity in childhood, but in industrial competition, anarchy and war' (Lowenfeld, op. cit. p. 324-5).

Whilst many years have passed and too many wars have been waged since these words were written nevertheless, the dream which surrounds the 'pedagogy of choice' can still be found lingering within the classroom. Here the hope is that, if children are left alone to act out stories they will, 'become agents responsible for their own actions, whose interactions are based on rationality alone, having left the irrational behind them' (Walkerdine, 1990, p. 8),

Interrupting this discourse requires that the teacher interrupts the boys 'choice' and attempts to introduce deviations. Perhaps if the teacher had suggested a different use for the cot sheet and table cloth she might have created the space for the boys to reconsider and hence have the chance to develop a less restrictive metaphor and one that resisted a particular form of idealised hegemonic masculinity. As it was, in helping, the teacher gave the game some kind of tacit approval and unwittingly endorsed the boy's story. What was then missed was an opening where both the teacher and the children could have learned.

Concluding remarks (but not a finishing).

Maybe post-modernism's greatest potential is that it can serve as a caution to those who find themselves immersed in critical pedagogy. In this way we see poststructuralist analysis as helping us in working at cracking or opening out aspects of the social world of the classroom, particularly our own entrapment within specific discourses. As Shapiro notes (1991, p. 120) power is every where and exists 'even amongst the forces of liberation trying to overthrow domination'. What is then made possible are opportunities to concentrate on the anomalies or contradictions of practice and to perceive these not as failures but as the breaking down of rational thought. Once fractured, they are then 'the creative source of new understandings, new discourses' (Davies, 1989, p. 139). In seeking, as a teacher, to ensure gender equity within the nursery the task, whilst clearly involving a disruption of the male-female dualism, cannot be achieved via acts of oppression against the boys. Deconstruction obliges a reconsideration and a reconceptualisation of what it means 'to disrupt'. Similarly, more generally, in formulating a research strategy predicated on a desire for 'improvement' or 'knowing better' we need to acknowledge the heterogeneity in conceptions of how such objectives

might be understood. Gestures, such as deconstructive practices, aim at showing how beneath the text's apparent unity of purpose lie internal contradictions and inconsistencies and it is these which defeat endeavours at attaching singular and permanently reliable meanings. So whilst we still have hopes and dreams that critical pedagogy may work towards greater justice and humanity, postmodernism works at tempering these desires. Is this caution such a bad thing? Not when it is remembered that such dreams and desires have been built upon a universal discourse that whilst privileging some denied many including 'women, the poor and other subordinate and dominated groups of human beings' (Welch, 1985).

Let us bring this paper to its present conclusion by contrasting the dream of rationality referred to very briefly above with the moon which the boys sought to reach and then go beyond. As a metaphor within the logic of binary oppositions the moon was the feminine other to the male sun and as such it was mysterious, poetic and irrational (Cixous, 1975, p. 115). However, what we are suggesting, is that under the guise of exploration, development and civilisation the Western world has robbed the moon of this identity and in so doing has left it stained, tarnished and polluted. Perhaps in aiming for the moon the boys have set their sights on an ignoble scrap yard.

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