



# Stories 'with the Characters Reversed': Children's Opinions of Feminist Children's Stories in Early Education

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## Abstract

The study presented investigates the understanding of feminist literature by preschool children in a Spanish school. To carry out the research, semi-structured interviews with 65 students were performed, in order to discuss the story, *The Paper Bag Princess*. The data analysis was conducted under a poststructuralist lens, using the cultural matrix of gender as a tool for analysis. This document collects the results obtained from the following categories of analysis: emphasis on female beauty, discourse of romantic love, comparison with traditional stories (category maintenance work) and alternative discourses of femininity. The findings of the study indicate that boys and girls use two different strategies when coming in contact with feminist tales: comparing the feminist story to the, hitherto, considered 'correct' or natural order and correcting every element that challenged the structures of the cultural matrix.

**Keywords** Feminist tales · The Paper Bag Princess · Poststructuralism feminist · Preschool

The Spanish Organic Law for Effective Equality between Men and Women of 2007 introduced measures for the integration of the principle of equality in education laws and policy. Among the main measures to combat sexism in the classroom, the law includes "the rejection of sexist content [...] with special regard to this in textbooks and educational materials." However, as Marina Subirats (2017) points out, these legislative measures are rarely contemplated within schools due to the generalized thought, among the education community, that, having achieved legal equality between boys and girls, there is no longer a difference between sexes inside the classrooms. As some authors such as Subirats (2017) and Miguel (2015) suggest, being far from having achieved real equality between boys and girls; inequality within schools is reproduced in a subtle way: through a hidden curriculum that reinforces gender inequality. The hidden curriculum consists of unintentional learning that, wrapped in school routines and customs, promotes a series of unconscious expectations about what it means to be a man or a woman in society (Ochoa, 2005). Through the main transmitters of sexism during childhood (i.e., games,

toys, language, and children's stories), the differential gender system is reinforced within the school where characteristics traditionally understood as feminine (i.e., passivity, emotionality, weakness, etc.) are perceived as inferior to those linked to the dominant model of masculinity (i.e., violence, domination, activity, etc.). The school context acts as a reproducer of unequal relations between the sexes, that are legitimized by the broader social and cultural context. Therefore, one of the main objectives of educational research is to explore how this implicit curriculum operates within the classroom.

In her well-known masterpiece *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales*, Davies (1989) explores the discourses of gender that 4 and 5 year-old boys and girls would base their arguments upon when arguing about some of the feminist stories; among those, the author highlights the story *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980). Davies turned to children's stories as a means, based on fiction, which served to study the implicit gender discourse from early ages. Among the main findings, Davies (1989) highlighted that many of the children rejected some of the feminist messages as erroneous or wrong, resorting to the traditional moral order to make sense of the stories. Davies (1989) concluded that the problem was that boys and girls were positioned within the gender binary that understood the distinguished characteristics of the female as opposed to those of the male. Similar results were obtained from more recent research that aimed

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at exploring children's understanding of the story *The Paper Bag Princess* in girls who were in primary school (Flint, 2020 and Paterson, 2014). Paterson (2014) found that older children had different interpretations of the story. While some boys and girls understood that the story, *The Paper Bag Princess*, needed some restructuring to fit the normative scripts about gender, others enjoyed the feminist story.

Based on the study by Davies (1989), other investigations have been developed that deepen the understanding of feminist stories by students who are in primary school, a context where it can be confirmed that the students interpret the feminist stories from the gender discourse which they are already familiarized with at these ages (see for example, Baker-Sperry, 2007; Bartholomaeus, 2016; Eriksson Barajas, 2008; Jackson, 2007; Kostas, 2018; Wasserberg, 2012; Wason-Ellam, 1997; Westland, 1993; Yeoman, 1999). However, the truth is that there is a lack of studies to give continuity to Davies' study, deepening the understanding of feminist stories by children of preschool age. In the context of the broader literature, in recent years more attention has been paid to the gender discourses that circulate in preschool classrooms (see for example Callahan & Nicholas, 2019; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019). Nevertheless, as Callahan and Nicholas (2019) suggested, the understanding of the gender category by preschool boys and girls is still not sufficiently studied. This is due to the generalized belief that at these ages, boys and girls still show difficulties in understanding and discussing gender issues.

In this study, we continue Davies' (1989) work. We explore the gender discourses on which 3 to 5-year-old children attending a Spanish school relay and then discuss the story, *The Paper Bag Princess*. This well-known picture book tells the story of Ronald and Elisabeth, a prince and a princess who have plans to get married. Those plans are interrupted when a dragon kidnaps Ronald and burns the princess's castle along with all her dresses. For this reason, Elisabeth is forced to dress in a paper bag to come to Ronald's rescue. When she manages to outwit and defeat the dragon and enter the cave where Ronald was kidnapped, Ronald rejects her and asks her to return when she is dressed as a real princess. Angry and disappointed, Elisabeth berates Ronald for his unfair behavior and walks away from him forever.

### Post-structuralist Theory: Boys and Girls as Active Readers

Post-structuralist theory focuses on the different gender discourses available in a given social context and on the way in which children learn gender in their daily interactions. In this context, it is understood that they can practice diverse or even contradictory discourses of gender, resisting, at times,

the discourses of dominant masculinity and femininity (Kostas, 2018; Rodríguez & Peña, 2005). Post-structuralist theory suggests that children do not act as passive readers, reproducing dominant gender discourses, but, in their interaction with literature, they explore new gender discourses (Änggård, 2005; Bartholomaeus, 2016; Dallacqua, 2019; Davies, 1989; Jackson, 2007). When Davies (1989) read to children the story *The Paper Bag Princess*, she found that some girls defended the position of the protagonist as an autonomous and independent princess. Davies (1989) also noted that the girls' conversations revolved around the idea of romantic love in traditional stories. In this way, some girls explored non-normative gender discourses, but inevitably experienced contradictory positions because they were constrained by normative gender practices and discourses, and; more strongly, by the romantic heterosexuality discourse.

Suggesting the concept of a "heterosexual matrix", Butler (1990) studies the way in which the practices of masculinity and femininity are formed from repetitive acts and within a heterosexual hegemonic model. This heterosexual matrix is unstable and malleable, and boys and girls can also use strategies to position themselves outside of it. The maintenance of the heterosexual matrix requires a collective process continually recreated from everyday social and cultural practices (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Blaise, 2005; Renold, 2006). These heterosexual practices are also reinforced in children's literature. This literature portrays images of romantic love between princesses who conform to the canons of feminine beauty; and princes who value princesses for their ability to adapt to this ideal of beauty. In this respect, Flint (2020) found that some girls between 6 and 7 years of age were already making use of normative discourses about women's bodies, qualifying Elisabeth, the protagonist of the story *The Paper Bag Princess*, as fat and not very sexy. Here it can be seen that talking about princesses, makeup, clothes, weddings, or boyfriend/girlfriend relationships produces great pleasure from an early age (Adriany, 2019; Blaise, 2005; Renold, 2006). As Paechter (2017) points out, participating in these practices allows some girls to feel part of the adult world centred on heterosexuality. The "cultural gender matrix" has been a valuable analysis tool in our study because it has allowed us to explore the reaction of boys and girls when listening to a story where the characters challenge the matrix structures. In our study, we explored the way in which children, in a specific school context, discuss gender messages that are reflected in feminist literature. This discursive process revolves around the discourses to which they have access through traditional literature, their closest family circle and other media such as television.

## Previous Research on the Understanding of Feminist Stories

Following the study of Davies (1989), recent research has shown that gender dualisms exert an important influence on the interpretations that children make of feminist stories (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Bartholomaeus, 2016; Kostas, 2018). Kostas (2018), for example, held reading groups with children to discuss a feminist version of Snow White's story and found that they reproduced the binary construction of gender, identifying weakness with femininity. They understood that Snow White, in her position as a mine worker, had sacrificed her femininity to be like a man. Kostas (2018) concluded that most of the children lacked a discursive story that would allow them to support a female character who had subverted the dual gender order. Some studies have also shown that boys and girls are active producers of meanings that do not always operate within gender binaries (Ånggård, 2005; Jackson, 2007; Paterson, 2014; Sipe & McGuire, 2006). Along these lines, Dallocqua (2019) found that, although students maintained dichotomous thinking to discuss a feminist version of *Rapunzel*, they were also proud of Rapunzel's ability to challenge some gender norms. Paterson (2014) found this ambivalence in the speech of boys and girls who enjoyed listening to the story, *The Paper Bag Princess*; but who, instead of applauding Elisabeth when she defeated the dragon without using violence, thought that Elisabeth had been too weak.

The existing research in this field indicates that the degree of previous experience with feminist literature; age, gender of the participants, or the level of education of the mothers can influence the interpretation that children make of feminist literature (Kostas, 2018). Regarding the importance of previous experience with feminist literature, the research that Yeoman (1999) conducted in a school where the teacher held reading sessions with children to discuss transgressive stories has been revealing. Yeoman (1999) discovered that they were able to imagine their own transgressive stories with female heroines because the experience they had about disruptive stories had broadened their "intertextual knowledge", providing them with tools to disrupt the dominant gender order. More recently, Wasserberg (2012) also found that the understanding of gender in 10 and 11-year-old students had been transformed after the prolonged discussion of several alternative stories. Although at the beginning of the discussion many of the children said that housework was a female job, in the last discussion sessions they reproduced more egalitarian gender discourses.

Regarding the influence of age in the understanding of gender, the longitudinal study carried out by Trousdale

and McMillan (2003) with an eight-year-old girl and then again at twelve years of age has been significant, evidencing that the participant's points of view about fairy tales had changed significantly with time. They observed that, at eight years of age, it was credible for the girl to believe that a woman could be physically strong; however, at age twelve, the girl already understood the socially imposed limits on the manifestation of women's physical strength. In this regard, Trousdale and McMillan (2003) found that age had an important influence on the understanding of the gender category. Along the same lines, some research suggests that it is important to pay attention to age in the learning process of the gender category (Trautner et al., 2005). More specifically, some recent studies state that there is a need to further explore the knowledge that young children have about gender, since between 2 and 6 years of age the learning of the gender category increases rapidly (see for example Callahan & Nicholas, 2019). The work we present pays attention to the gender discourses used by boys and girls between the ages of 3 and 5 years (corresponding to the preschool stage of the Spanish education system) when they discuss feminist stories. Drawing on the work of Davies (1989), we use the feminist short story, *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980), as a fiction-based medium that maximizes opportunities to elucidate knowledge about gender that young boys and girls have. In this way, we pay special attention to the way in which students relate to the story and to their interpretation of the feminist messages it includes.

## Method and Participants

The research we present takes an ethnographic approach and was carried out in a school in the Principality of Asturias, in the north of Spain. The objective of this study was to explore the socialization of boys and girls in the school years of preschool/kindergarten. Preschool/kindergarten is not compulsory in Spain but it is free, so their schooling is practically universal throughout Spain. This stage consists of three school years (three, four and five years of age) that serve as a preparatory stage for primary education. The school is privately maintained, so it has mixed funding in which the State provides funds to complement those that come from the religious order that owns the school. Education in privately maintained schools in Spain is free, which is why the socioeconomic level of the students does not differ between these schools and the public schools. In addition, it should be noted that to access the school we had the support of the Government of the Principality of Asturias, which had previously authorized the development of the research project. However, entry to the center also had to be authorized by the school itself. In this sense, as Atkinson

and Hammersley (1994) suggest, access to the field of study is one of the most complex issues in ethnographic research. For the development of this research, we wanted to access the three courses that make up early childhood education in Spain, which required the consent, not only of the management, but of three teachers and also of the families of 65 students. Although this negotiation was long, after several meetings with the management of the center, all the agents involved in the negotiation process accepted the presence of the observer within the field of study.

In the first phase of the research, 150 hours of participant observation were carried out with a total of 65 students in the preschool/kindergarten years (35 boys and 30 girls). In that school, 50 hours of participant observation were carried out in each course. In this first phase of the research, the researcher was introduced to the classroom with the children during complete sessions. During these sessions, the researcher established a spontaneous relationship with the children, aiming towards establishing a friend-like or classmate-like relationship, rather than that of a teacher. This role of friend or partner allowed us to establish an open relationship with the participants who, after the first observation sessions, stopped seeing us as a strange presence in the classroom. Therefore, through this role, we assumed a privileged position within the school; allowing us to enter into the daily dynamics of children, in their games and in their conversations. In the second phase of the research, three group interviews (one group interview in each school year) were made with a total of 30 students (5 girls and 5 boys from each course) in order to read to them for the first time, the feminist story, *The Paper Bag Princess*.

We chose *The Paper Bag Princess* because the story addresses feminist issues relevant to the study, such as the ideal of feminine beauty or the discourse of romantic love. This was the favorite story among the boys and girls in Davies' study, precisely because it is interesting to note how Elisabeth assumes seemingly contradictory roles throughout the story: she goes from taking the place of an educated and in-love princess, to embarking on an adventure where she takes an active and heroic role. It is true that the story has also been described as excessively simple for carrying out the classic reversal of gender roles between protagonists (see, for example, Kuykendal & Sturm, 2007). However, we think that the story includes a more complex plot than it may seem a priori. Elisabeth does not assume a traditionally masculine role since she uses intelligence, and not violence, to rescue Ronald from the clutches of the dragon.

It should be noted that the story *The Paper Bag Princess* presents a surprising plot for children through an unexpected twist that places Elisabeth at the center of the narrative. The story plays with the expectations of children who are motivated to intervene to make sense of events. In the next section we show how many of the participants discussed

the story while making an emotional commitment to the characters, engaging in the story and even re-imagining it. This occurs because, as Sipe and McGuire (2006) point out, children may try to transform those stories that conflict with their previous experience. We consider that the story, *The Paper Bag Princess*, presents a simple, but powerful and impressive feminist argument, which makes it a useful resource to encourage discussion about gender in young boys and girls. The objective of this article is to present the data obtained in the second phase of research.

## Procedure

After the first stage of data collection in the school, group interviews were conducted. Previously, all the parents had given their consent to the centre's director so that children who wanted to, could participate. The teachers responsible for each course gave approval to the story before proceeding to read it. To carry out the group interviews, we chose a room close to the ordinary classroom that did not have school furniture, but rather had a large space that allowed the children to sit in a circle on the floor to listen to the story. We also thought that it was important to carry out the interviews outside the ordinary classroom, in order to prevent children from understanding these as part of academic work. To do this, we reminded them that the activity would not be evaluated, as there were no correct or incorrect answers, and that the only purpose of the meeting was to discuss a story with as much honesty as possible. Each group interview lasted approximately 50 min and was divided into two phases. First, the interviewer read the story. Then, a discussion was carried out based on a script of very general questions such as: Which character is the one that you liked best? Do you think that Ronald acted well? And Elisabeth? What would you have done in the place of Ronald or Elisabeth? Therefore, the interviews were semi-structured and the children also proposed the debate topics they considered most relevant.

It is necessary to take into consideration the discursive capacity of students according to age, as well as the possible difficulties of the interviewer to understand the responses of some of the children at such a young age. At three years of age, the children did not have enough vocabulary to express their opinions, while at four and five years, they displayed the knowledge they had about gender in their discussions. To facilitate the interview with the three-year-old boys and girls, illustrations of the story were relied on. The interviews were recorded in audio and subsequently transcribed. Then two researchers read the transcripts several times and discussed the material, developing a general category system. Next, the two researchers categorized the information separately. When they met again, the two researchers found that there



was unanimity in assigning the information to each of the categories. The three most common topics in the interviews were identified, resulting in the following categories of analysis: emphasis on feminine beauty, discourse of romantic love, comparison with traditional stories (categorical maintenance work) and alternative femininity discourses. In the results section, the most representative discourse fragments of each of the categories are shown.

## Results

### Emphasis on Female Beauty

The ideal of feminine beauty refers to the socially constructed idea that physical attractiveness is one of the most important assets in women, becoming an aspiration that all women must strive to achieve (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). Elisabeth had to relinquish the epitome of feminine beauty that princesses embody in many traditional tales, and for this reason many of the boys and girls understood and supported Ronald's reprimand. To defend these arguments, some of the five year old girls supported the discourses that adults give them about gender. They took as a reference the heterosexual relationships of their closest social circle to discuss the story, claiming their participation in the heterosexual gender matrix (Butler, 1990; Paechter, 2017):

LM: Why do you think Ronald and Elisabeth did not get married?

Andrea: Because boyfriends tend to love girlfriends that don't get angry. Also, the boyfriends always want their girlfriends to be beautiful, because my father always tells me that my mother always dresses me with beautiful clothes and that is true. (5 years old)

María: (interrupting) And my mother tells me that she always makes me beautiful because she wants to make me beautiful and buy all the things for us to be beautiful (5 years old)

Andrea: Oh, of course, you are always the one who tells people what to do and you are the coolest!

The arguments of Maria and Andrea showed their desire to be part of the adult world, participating in practices related to emphasized femininity. Both girls found in the discussion an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge about fashion, in order to demonstrate that they had successfully assumed their position as girls. At one point, some of the girls seemed to even enjoy making themselves heard, while arguing and competing with each other to demonstrate their knowledge of female beauty ideals. In this manner, Andrea's argument is a clear example of how girls from an early age understand that women should strive to fit into these feminine beauty standards. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003)

suggest that this emphasis on female beauty acts indirectly as a means of normative social control for girls and women. Obviously, this social control over the appearance of bodies is not only determined by children's stories but also by a multitude of cultural products aimed at children, such as cartoons and all the related merchandising.

Most of the five-year-old children thought that Elisabeth was the culprit of the unexpected ending because she had made the mistake of challenging this basic norm of femininity and presenting herself in such "a mess" before the prince:

Andrea: Oh, why didn't they get married? (Seemed surprised) (5 years old)

LM: Why do you think they didn't get married?

Andrea: Because they got angry with each other

María: Oh, because she was a mess.

Carolina: They didn't get married because the princess had to be beautiful, of course, princes usually tell the princesses that they want them to be beautiful. (5 years old)

LM: Do you think it was right of Ronald to tell Elisabeth off?

Ángela: No (5 years old)

LM: Why?

Ángela: Because Elisabeth was beautiful!

Carolina: Elisabeth, you are wearing an old bag, it seems wrong to me! (She screams, as she points to the page where Elisabeth is dressed in the paper bag)

The story explains how the dragon burns all of Elisabeth's belongings. Consequently, Elisabeth had no alternative and was forced to come to Ronald's rescue dressed in a paper bag. In this context Ronald was in trouble and Elisabeth's dress seemed the least of his problems. However, most of the children felt that Elisabeth had not tried hard enough to look pretty for the prince, which led to the fatal outcome. Following the logic of the story, it seems fair for Elisabeth to walk away from a prince who has not understood or appreciated her risky act of love. The first reaction of some girls like Andrea, was the surprise at the decision of Elisabeth (see previous narrative fragment) and only one girl contemplated the possibility that Ronald could be the culprit of the fateful end when she said, "Oh, I have one thing to say ... it was the princess who did not want to marry the prince because he did something bad to her" (Carla, 5 years old). However, Carla exposed this possibility as if it were a personal belief and the story had not left enough evidence of Ronald's unfair behaviour towards Elisabeth. These meanings of gender seemed difficult to access for children who had heard a different story; a story in which Elisabeth decides to be "a mess" when she presents herself before the prince (Davies, 1989). Ángela added that Ronald did wrong to fight Elisabeth "because she was beautiful" (see previous discursive fragment), so she understood that the beauty of the princess

was the most valuable aspect of her persona and a sufficient reason why Ronald had been kind to her.

### Discourse of Romantic Love

Davies (1989) found that some children reconstructed part of the feminist stories to adapt them to their gender expectations. In our research, some girls also did a reconstruction of the original story to reinforce the romantic love discourse sustained by the gender matrix:

LM: Why do you like that photo Nora? (3 years)  
 Nora: because the princess is running  
 LM: Ohh really? Where is she running to?  
 Nora: to the castle  
 LM: And what was she going to do in the castle?  
 Nora: work  
 LM: Work? Where was Elisabeth going to work, Nora?  
 (Surprised)  
 Nora: to get married!  
 LM: and what did the princess have to do for work?  
 Nora does not answer  
 LM: Who was she going to marry?  
 Nora: with the prince  
 LM: But did the prince want to marry her?  
 Nora: mmm... yes

Nora's reaction can be interpreted as a resistance to the feminist story, trying to reconstruct part of the story and selecting those elements which fit her gender expectations (Sipe & McGuire, 2006). Nora returned to the starting point where Elisabeth appears as the beautiful princess immersed in a romantic love story and assured that the prince and the princess wanted to get married. At the same time, she made a creative interpretation of the story, including novel elements which were not present in the original story. Nora described a princess who took an active role when she ran to the castle to work, moving away from the traditional princess image of her waiting for the arrival of the prince. Nora's answer is surprising because she was describing the first photograph of the book in which Elisabeth appears with Ronald in a more passive role. Here, the feminist story allowed Nora to explore other feminine discourses. Similarly, Änggård (2005) found that girls mentally rewrote stories to fit their own purposes. We must also take into account the language development of children at this age and the possible difficulties that this could have caused in the development of the interview with the three-year-old children. Therefore, it was difficult to know how well the three-year-old participants had understood the story's argument and their opinion about it. Despite the fact that the interviewer made an obvious effort, we do not clearly know where Nora thought that Elizabeth worked (see previous narrative fragment). It was unclear if she placed the protagonist in the labour market or

in the domestic sphere. Zara (3 years old) also chose the first image of the story, but made a different interpretation of it:

LM: Why do you like that drawing Zara?  
 Zara: because the princess is in it (3 years old)  
 LM: And what is the princess doing?  
 Zara: falling in love with the prince  
 LM: And why do you like it that they are falling in love?  
 Zara: because they are boyfriends  
 LM: What happened at the end Zara? Do you remember?  
 Zara is thoughtful  
 Beltran: (interrupts): They did not get married  
 LM: That's right, they did not get married in the end ... Why didn't they get married?  
 Zara: Oh, because the prince did not like the princess  
 LM: And do you remember why?  
 Zara: because she was bad.

In traditional fairy tales there are strong associations between beauty and goodness and between ugliness and badness, so that evil women with a bad temper are often portrayed as unattractive characters (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Lieberman, 1972). Following this idea, it is probable that, while many of the girls understood that the princess was ugly, Zara also understood that "she was bad". Davies (1989) also found that many of the children interpreted the episode where Elisabeth was dressed with a paper bag as a magical transformation where the dragon bewitched the good princess, transforming her into a bad princess. Although Nora and Zara made different interpretations of the story, both reconstructions revolved around the romantic mythology that reproduces the traditional stories, leaving in evidence their unconscious desire for romantic love stories. At four and five years of age, most of the girls asked for a romantic version of the story:

LM: What did you think of the story?  
 Carolina: Bad because if the prince marries the princess then they have to get married (4 years old).  
 LM: How would you like the story to end?  
 Angela: Well, for the prince to have been happy and that he would have told the princess that he wanted to marry her (5 years old)

As Parsons (2004) claims, traditional children's stories prepare girls for romantic love and heterosexual practices. The main problem that many of the girls encountered in the feminist story was that the prince and the princess did not reach the happy ending of marriage and eternal love that are so often seen in the classic stories. In the same line as Kostas (2018) proposed, some girls resorted to the marriage discourse to imagine alternative endings, and therefore framed within the heterosexual matrix. In addition, in the previous

discursive fragment we see how Andrea is more concerned about Ronald's annoyance or anger than at the humiliation which Elisabeth had suffered, wishing that at the end of the story Ronald "would be happy" and would have "told the princess that he wanted to marry her" (Angela, 5 years old). In this way, Angela understood that Ronald could make the final decision to marry the princess, obviating that it was Elisabeth who decided to leave the prince forever.

### **Categorical Maintenance: A Story with the Characters "Backwards"**

Davies (1989) observed that the behaviours assumed by the characters in the story gave rise to a "category maintenance work" on the part of the boys and girls who tried to demonstrate that the behaviour of "the deviant" was wrong. To explain the apparent mistakes committed by the protagonists of the feminist stories, the children went on to use elements of the traditional moral order. In this same line, in our research, some of the five-year-old boys and girls said that the story was written "backwards" and María (5 years old) said that she wanted to be told the story "from the end to the beginning". Most of the children, from the age of five, proved to be strongly familiar with traditional fairy tales. They made a collective effort to "correct" the elements of the tale that endangered the structures of the gender cultural matrix. As also seen in the study of Bartholomaeus (2016), the "intertextual knowledge" and, thus, the previous knowledge about traditional stories that students had, as well as the relationship with other media such as movies or TV shows etc., hindered the understanding of feminist messages that were included in the story. As an example, we see in the following discursive fragment how Pelayo, Amaya, Carolina, and María rejected it, threatening the stability of the normative gender matrix:

Amaya: They did not get married because in the other stories it is always the princes who save the princesses

Pelayo: Because in this story, the characters that are going to be saved, each one is backwards

LM: And why is it backwards?

Pelayo: Because it is always the princes who saves the princesses

LM: And why are the princes the ones who are going to save the princesses?

Elena: Girls are weaker

LM: Do you agree Amaya?

Amaya: No. Because some princesses can be stronger than boys!

Carolina: I want a story where the prince saves the princess

LM: And why do you want a story where the prince saves the princess?

Carolina: Because that way we see the truth, because that's how we see how beautiful everything is and we can say how we like it. Because then we can say that we like everything and we don't have any objections.

LM: But then this story is not a true story? How should the story be then?

Carolina: No. It's just that everything is backwards there.

Pelayo: The one to be saved is the princess. Ronaldo has to go save the princess.

Carolina: and the son would have to go too if they had a son

For most boys and girls, Elisabeth's active and heroic personality was hardly recognizable within the limits of the normative gender matrix. Many of the boys and girls did not have alternative gender frameworks to help them support a model of masculinity that was fragile and needed help in order to free themselves from the dragon's claws. This univocal idea that some boys and girls had about masculinity impeded their acceptance of the figure of a prince who needed Elisabeth's help to overcome adversity.

A clear example was the intervention of Pelayo (5 years old) when he said he would have preferred "that the dragon took the princess and that the prince saved the princess", reinforcing the roles traditionally imposed on the prince and the princess. When asked the reason for this distribution of roles, they relied on the strong/weak binary of gender, understanding that vulnerability was an elementary principle of femininity that prevented the princess from assuming a heroic role in the narrative (see previous narrative fragment). It is possible that the discourses available to children, where femininity is related to weakness, prevented them from understanding the heroic act of Elisabeth when confronting the dragon. On the other hand, when asked to imagine a different ending, more in line with their expectations, some girls like Carolina thought about a perfect ending where Ronald and Elisabeth could form a family and have a child (see previous narrative fragment). Thus, some boys and girls not only tried to correct the gender elements that were unrecognizable within the gender matrix, but also included others that contributed to its reinforcement.

Amaya also challenged the dichotomous gender vision and assured them that some princesses could be stronger than boys (see previous narrative fragment). Similarly, Carmen said that, if she were in Elisabeth's place, she would have preferred to go to rescue the prince instead of Ronald having gone to rescue her. In turn, Carolina, although she said she preferred a story where the prince saved the princess (see previous narrative fragment), at the beginning of the discussion had assured that her favourite part of the story

was "when Princess Isabel saved Prince Leonardo" (even though she confused the names of the characters).

### Alternative Discourses of Femininity

Although most girls supported the discourse of romantic heterosexuality, they also explored alternative femininity discourses, participating in multiple gender discourses:

- LM: ·Elena, what would you have done?  
 Elena: Save him (5 years old)  
 LM: And what would you have said?  
 Elena: to get out of there because the dragon would eat him  
 LM: What if he tells you that you're badly dressed with the paper bag?  
 Elena: Well ... he's also a little badly dressed because he has some black here! (Points to a picture of Ronald) [...]  
 LM: What ending would you have chosen for the story?  
 Celia: that they got married (5 years old)  
 LM: So, you think that the prince did well to tell the princess that she should change her dress?  
 Celia: No, not that.  
 LM: What end would you have put to the story?  
 Celia: I would have liked them to get married at the end  
 LM: Do you think it was ok what prince said to the princess?  
 Irene: No, I did not like what Ronald did (5 years old)  
 LM: What do you think, Daniel?  
 Daniel: (he stays silent for a while) It seemed good to me that he yelled at her  
 Celia: Say that isn't true! You have to say that it wasn't [ok for you] (addressing Daniel)  
 LM: Oh, I think it's important that we all speak and say our opinion.

Some girls, like Elena, followed the logic of the story and rapidly understood that Ronald, inevitably, needed Elisabeth's help to escape from that cave. Thus, Elena put emphasis on Ronald's appearance, understanding that Ronald was in danger and, therefore, was not in a position to complain about Elisabeth's clothes (see previous narrative fragment). However, when Elena was asked to choose a title for the story, she changed the original title to: "The Princess Dressed Very Beautifully", recovering the normative discourses related to the ideal of feminine beauty. For Irene and Cecilia, despite them understanding the position in which Elisabeth was and recognizing that Ronald had not behaved well with her (see previous narrative fragment), they also reproduced the discourse on romantic love which conditions the imaginary world of many girls from an early age.

Therefore, as Davies (1989) suggests, although individuals are capable of changing the polarized social structure by practicing new and different forms of discourse, at the same time, they are constrained by existing structures and practices in society. In general, and despite acknowledging Ronald's unfair behavior towards Elisabeth, many of the girls would have liked Elisabeth to have been more indulgent with Ronald. In this way, romantic love is presented as something unbreakable that Elisabeth made the mistake of challenging.

### Conclusions

This study sprouted from the research of Davies (1989) to explore how children who were three, four and five years of age interpreted a feminist story. We have found that, as age increases, gender boundaries become more visible to students. The story, *The Paper Bag Princess*, constitutes a clear challenge for the normative gender matrix by questioning some of the elements that make it up, such as feminine aesthetics or discourse of romantic love. Most of the boys and girls framed the story in an unintelligible space and made a collective effort to show their commitment to the gender matrix. To do this, they used two strategies. On the one hand, they compared the feminist story with the order they understood as correct or natural and, therefore, with the traditional stories with which they were familiar. On the other hand, they corrected those elements which challenged the order of the cultural matrix. Both strategies were used, to a greater extent, by boys and girls from five years of age on. As in the Davies study (1989), the boys and girls of this age discussed the story in dichotomous terms, carrying out categorical maintenance. However, this study also reveals that at three years of age some girls began to include elements of the traditional gender order during the reading of the story too. Although it was difficult for the girls to correct or penalize Elisabeth's behavior at their age, they used the strategy of "ignoring the main story" and devised their own narrative based on the knowledge on gender that they already had acquired through traditional literature. In this way, the cultural gender matrix functioned as a filter during the interpretation of the feminist story, guiding the responses of the students.

While it is true that some boys and girls challenged the gender matrix on specific occasions, they also had very strong gender expectations, being disappointed with the story and blaming Elisabeth for the fateful ending. In contrast, Paterson (2014) observed that some boys and girls in elementary school, although they also had strong expectations relating to gender, were content with Elisabeth's decision to leave Ronald and enjoyed the original story. It is also important to bear in mind that, as Trautner et al. (2005) point out, boys and girls of primary age enter a phase of relative



flexibility with respect to gender. Nevertheless, we must take into account that the research was carried out in a specific context, so the results cannot be extrapolated to other contexts. As a future line of investigation, we consider that the development of longitudinal studies that explore the understanding of feminist stories may be of great interest. Developing longitudinal studies with boys and girls, from kindergarten to primary education, would allow us to broaden our knowledge about how feminist stories are interpreted by those same boys and girls from the gender discourses they have access to at different times of their lifetime.

## Implications for Future Research

As previous research has shown (see for example, Bartholomaeus, 2016; Earles, 2017; Wasserberg, 2012), the boys and girls in our study had very strong gender expectations that conflicted with the narrated story. These gender expectations are mediated by the large amount of information that boys and girls receive through a multitude of transmitters of sexism such as advertising, toys, and children's stories. For this reason, in line with the approach of Ana de Miguel (2015), we think that it is necessary for the teachers to start by being clear about the difference between the official curriculum and the hidden curriculum. While the official curriculum is made up of the set of activities, content, and objectives that are intentionally worked on in school, the hidden curriculum contains a peculiar potential because it is instilled unconsciously in school structures (Santos, 1996). It is true that, since the 1978 Spanish Constitution was approved, where the principle of non-discrimination on grounds of sex is set out in Article 14, Spanish legislation has been introducing various measures to combat inequality between the sexes within schools (see the Organic law against gender violence, 2004; Organic law for effective equality between men and women, 2007). However, teachers must begin by understanding that sexism is currently being introduced into the classroom through other more subtle channels and that the school acts as a privileged space to reinforce these sexist behaviors. Obviously, we are not blaming school institutions for the inequality between boys and girls, since the school acts as one more institution within a much broader and deeply androcentric social context. However, teachers must assume that they have a responsibility in terms of equality and that taking a position of non-intervention ensures the reproduction of sexist roles within school institutions.

As Subirats (2017) has already acknowledged, we think that within schools, a review of children's literature and other educational materials should be initiated, while making an effort to introduce non-sexist materials into the first stage of schooling. In this aspect, it is important to note

that in Spain there has been a large influx of feminist children's literature in recent years. Some of the most well-known titles are *Cuentos de Buenas Noches para Niñas Rebeldes* (Bedtime Stories for Rebel Girls) (Favilli & Cavallo, 2017), *Las Chicas son de Ciencias* (Girls Study Sciences) (Cívico & Parra, 2018) or *La Cenicienta que No Quería Comer Perdices* (Cinderella That Didn't Want to Live Happily Ever After) (Salamero and Sierra, 2009), among many others which are easily found in large bookstores. However, we must bear in mind that the mere presence of feminist material in classrooms does not, by itself, guarantee coeducational practice. Within schools, spaces for dialogue and discussion should be opened to awaken a critical attitude from an early age. Teachers can start by doing some simple practices, such as introducing changes in the roles of the male and female characters in some traditional stories, during the same reading process, and then opening a space for dialogue. Starting with this easy-to-use intervention can help teachers to become aware of the number of gender messages that boys and girls already have internalized from early childhood. The school must therefore become a place where all gender messages can be criticized and questioned. Otherwise, as suggested by Miguel (2015), we will be tolerating that education remains in the hands of television, Youtubers, and mass media that promote sexism.

Therefore, it is important that other key agents of socialization, such as the family, take an active role, from early childhood, in favor of equality between the sexes. Clearly, educating about feminism at home encompasses more complex issues such as co-responsibility in caregiving and household chores. However, feminist stories can be a useful educational resource for those parents who want to reflect with their children on gender issues, such as the myth of romantic love or the ideal of feminine beauty, which a priori may seem very complex to achieve. For this, families must begin by being clear that there are no stories intended only for boys or only for girls. There is the common mistake of thinking that feminist stories are a resource to work mainly with girls, as if only they should be aware of the unequal situation that women experience within society. This also occurs in large part due to the sexist conception that stories with female protagonists are intended for a female audience. However, children's stories recently published in Spain such as *Las Chicas Son Guerreras* (Girls are Warriors) (Cívico & Parra, 2017) deal with feminist issues, such as sexist violence or gender stereotypes, on which families must reflect with both their sons and their daughters. In order to alter unequal relations between the sexes, it is not enough to educate girls in feminism, but it is also necessary to promote more inclusive and empathetic models of masculinity from the first years of life.

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