CASTLES, GENDER, AND CHILD CULTURE: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF MEDIA AND PLAY

by

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ABSTRACT

SHANNON R. MONTGOMERY. Castles, gender, and child culture: A critical examination of media and play. (Under the direction of DR. ERIN MILLER and DR. MICHAEL PUTMAN)

This dissertation revealed two distinct types of castles which are marketed to boys and girls: Fortresses for boys are embedded with the masculine stereotypes of violence and active agents, and Palaces for girls imply domesticity, passivity, and a need for protection. Applying a feminist poststructuralist lens, this qualitative study aimed to examine how children accepted or transformed these gender norms transmitted in popular media symbols of castles, while socially constructing culture through play. Two families, with two to four siblings between the ages three and nine, were audio-recorded playing with different castles, and discourse analysis was used to understand the role of media and gender norms during play. A key finding was how children incorporated media into gender segregated types of play, masculine action-adventure play with fortresses and feminine dollhouse and storytelling play with palaces, which reinforced traditional gender binaries and limits children's imagined roles. This study adds to the growing literature on critical media pedagogy with elementary aged children. It also provides insights into how gender norms are constructed and challenged in the relationship between child culture and popular media.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the idealist and outcasts, those who envision a better, more inclusive world and sustain the creative spirit to change it.

Listen to the MUSN'TS, child,

Listen to the DON'TS

Listen to the SHOULDN'TS

The IMPOSSIBLES, the WON'TS

Listen to the NEVER HAVES

Then listen close to me—

Anything can happen, child,

ANYTHING can be.

- Shel Silverstein

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I offer sincere thanks to all my professors and mentors who exposed me to alternative voices that stretched my thinking, provided safe spaces for uncomfortable conversations, reminded me to breathe, and relentlessly pushed me to become a better scholar and a better person. None of this could have been possible without their collective mentorship and support.

I offer sincere thanks specifically to my chairs, Dr. Erin Miller, and Dr. Michael Putman. Dr. Miller has been my chair, mentor, boss, sounding board, cheerleader, and my biggest fan. Her teaching and dedication to her students, thoughtful and intentional curriculum development, inspiring research on castles and critical whiteness theory, deep and reflective conversations with me, and the hours she spent pouring over my writing have not only shaped me personally and professionally, but also provided a vision for my own teaching and mentorship to future educators. She taught me how to write, to find and harness my voice, not just for academia, but for myself. Dr. Putman's tireless work slogging through draft after draft, yet never tiring or failing to give thoughtful, sound advice, was invaluable throughout the dissertation process.

I offer sincere thanks to Randy Haven-O'Donnell, my sixth grade teacher, who saw something in me and was the first teacher to encourage me to be a leader and an activist. She gave me the belief that I could, and should, make a difference in the world.

I offer sincere thanks to my life-long best friend, Andrew Hughes, for teaching me the value of knowledge and exposing me to alternative lifestyles and modes of thinking, especially during my formative development into adulthood. I will always value

the years we spent together and for pushing me to make the transition from the classroom into academia.

Finally, I offer sincere thanks to all my friends and family, near and far, for their unwavering support and encouragement, but particularly to my mother, Mary Overby, who shaped my activism and feminism from an early age, showed me the world, and continues to inspire me to be courageous and open minded in all of my pursuits.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I am not a pretty girl. That is not what I DO. I ain't no damsel in distress, and I don't need to be rescued. So put me down, punk. Wouldn't you prefer a maiden fair? Isn't there a kitten, stuck up a tree somewhere? - Ani DiFranco, "Not a Pretty Girl"

Background

Dr. Miller had me hooked at the word "castle." Working on my doctoral coursework in Urban Elementary Curriculum and Instruction, I knew I was interested in how to blend my love of education, play, and social justice. I had been toying with ideas ranging from similarities between game tutorials and instructional design, using games to bridge cultural divides, and simulations as possible instructional tools for teacher education programs. When Dr. Miller paired castles with white supremacy, a door blew open in my mind. The beginning of her manuscript, co-authored with Dr. Tanner, was the story of their strongest memories of a castle: his playing *Super Mario Brothers* and saving Princess Peach from the castle at the end; hers, building intricate, delicate sand castles in classic European style with her family.

Naturally, I began to reflect on my own childhood memories of castles, but rather than having one that stood out, a flood of associations came to me. My earliest would be from my fairy tale books: Rapunzel, the helpless princess locked in the tower, awaiting rescue by her knight in shining armor; or Cinderella, this time locked in domesticity, again awaiting rescue. Even as a child though, these stories were not my favorite and as

an adult, I am immediately reminded of examples of resistance to these narratives, such as the lyrics of "Not a Pretty Girl," the Ani DiFranco song quoted above, or *The Paperbag Princess,* a favorite read aloud from my teaching days, where the princess saves the prince, with a twist at the end. Thinking of my *favorite* childhood castle, I thought of *Labyrinth,* a movie I watched over and over as a child, and still often listen to while I game. In this coming of age story, Sarah must find her way to the castle at the center of the labyrinth to rescue her brother from the evil Goblin King, David Bowie. While the women in the center of these stories behaved differently, as passive versus active agents, I realized a common theme in *my* interpretation was castles as prisons.

Fascinated with the different interpretations of castles, I used my practice interviews in my qualitative research methods class to speak with two of my colleagues, both people of color but with different gender identities. The man had a love of fantasy and gaming and after mentioning *Game of Thrones*, he described castles in what I have come to think of as the more traditional, historic meaning of castles, strong and solid edifices built of stone, with moats and walls and crenellations for physical defense. In fact, his strongest memory was of visiting castles on a high school trip to Europe. He positioned himself as ruler of the castle, perhaps in time of plenty with wealth and full bedrooms, and perhaps in times of solitary isolation in a decrepit kingdom. When abstracting, he related the castle to firewalls on computers. For him, the castle clearly served a defensive purpose, a physical (virtual or real) barrier, protecting those within from enemies without. I came to term this kind of castle Fortress, a reference I will use many times in this dissertation.

My female colleague's stories were very different. She immediately related castles to princesses, using Barbie and princess interchangeably. She spoke with some emotional difficulty of not having a Barbie that looked like her, princes who never loved her back, and a longing for skinniness and blond hair. But when she abstracted the concept of castle, relating to it as an adult, her familiar confidence returned as she spoke of the ways she is building her castle: working on her PhD, having a car, a home, a family. All of these were pieces of a castle, something that represented social status and showed "I made it." The castle she thought of in both instances was not a Fortress, but the Disney castle, which I later termed Palace. It represented wealth and status, still security, but one of a financial and personal nature.

I tell this story for two reasons. First is to allow you, the reader, to share in my journey of finding a topic, a glimpse of who I am and how my questions emerged from the data and focused over time. Secondly, this story allows you to see the nuanced, fragmented, and varied interpretations of castles, while being able to recognize larger themes threaded throughout, such as security. As is befitting of cultural studies, there are many interpretations and many lenses through which to examine symbols, such as the castle. I hope to represent the nuance and complexity in the construction of social norms within the broad frame of gender, while recognizing the roles of race, class, body image, personality, and interests cannot, and should not, be disregarded. The following section will detail a pilot study, which set the stage for this dissertation's feminist poststructuralist theoretical framework I use to examine the castle as a media symbol in child culture.

Castles, Toys, and Media: A Pilot Study

I wondered what castles meant to young children today and decided to collect data on toy castles marketed toward elementary-aged children. Perhaps not surprisingly, my most significant finding was related to two distinct types of castles marketed very differently to boys and girls: Fortresses and Palaces. I visited two toy stores, one large box-store nearby and another small, specialty shop within a 20-mile radius. Not only was I interested in taking photographs of castle toys, I wanted to see how the toys were arranged differently between the two types of toy stores. In each store, I set about systematically examining each toy aisle or section and took pictures of every toy castle or toy with a picture of the castle on the packaging. When I was finished, I had collected 35 photographs of different castle toys and created a spreadsheet where I described and critically analyzed each toy to answer the following questions: How are gender and race portrayed in the marketing of castle toys? What hegemonic norms or roles are or are not transmitted? What is the relationship between castle toys, media, and corporate branding?

One particularly relevant theme that emerged from the analysis of the spreadsheet was the way the castle was represented. As a general rule, out of the 35 pictures taken, there seemed to be two distinct castle types available to children: Fortresses (40%) and Palaces (51%). I coded castles as Fortresses when they fit the traditional, European style of the military fortification of a castle, built solidly of stone and wood, with walls and crenellations and battlements (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Fortress Style Toy Castle

However, castles were also represented as tall, willowy, decorative edifices, more in line with rich Palaces than the military like Fortress (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Palace Style Castle Toy

In fact, my codes of Palace and Fortress were grounded in the data based on what the toys were called (i.e. Frozen Palace, The Nether Fortress, etc.). However, I also noticed that it was not just the architecture style that differed between these two castle types, but also the pictured surrounding terrain of the castle toy. Fortresses, also generally marketed

towards boys, were set with backdrops of craggy, harsh (i.e. dangerous) terrain, while Palaces were in settings with placid lakes, manicured lawns, and lush forests (i.e. peaceful). Only three examples (9%) had elements of both fortresses and palaces, thus coded as undetermined. One disconfirming example stood out from all the rest, the LEGO Elven castle (Figure 1.3), and a trip to Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lego_Elves) informed me this had been an intentional move on LEGO's part to include more adventure in their girl toys and media.

Figure 1.3: Fortress and Palace Style Toy Castle

However, it was still found in the girl's aisle of the large box store and the glaringness of the difference only highlights the Fortress-Palace dichotomy found in the vast majority of castle toys.

Using this descriptive data, I examined the implications within and the relationships between the codes in order to answer my original research questions. Each question is restated and a provisional answer based on my data collected provided.

Research Question 1: How are gender and race portrayed in the marketing of castle toys? What hegemonic norms or roles are or are not transmitted?

The data collected in this small sample of pictures of castle toys implies that royalty, defined as those residing in positions of power within the castle, is primarily White and female. Furthermore, not only are girls represented more in castle toys, but the toys are marketed very differently to boys and girls, with implications of danger, adventure, and military might available in boy play and girls being limited to domestic or housekeeping roles similar to dollhouse play. The emphasis for girls is also wrapped up in beauty standards, such as a focus on hair and makeup, with the outcome of marrying a prince. The following memo written about Figure 1.4 provides an illustrative example of the female role implied in the marketing of castle toys to girls:

> *My notes on Mattel Barbie Princess Castle Playset make me cringe inwardly. While writing a literature review today, much of the literature focused on the capitalist consumer culture that was taking over childhood. Reading the words on the box, "3 Fantastical Levels! Fully Furnished!" and noting the domestic and clothing oriented nature of the rooms the dollhouse included (kitchen nook, bedroom, wardrobe, bathroom, etc.) made the gendered and consumer nature stand out clearly. To make matters worse, the box also said, "Adult assembly required," so no building blocks for girls here!*

Figure 1.4: Mattel Barbie Princess Castle Playset

In fact, 88% of the Palaces were clearly marketed towards girls, while 89% of the toys coded as Fortress style were marketed towards boys. One disconfirming example, The Elven castle mentioned earlier, only serves to highlight the regularity of this Palace-Fortress dichotomy (Figure 1.3):

> *The one exception to the pink and gold, peaceful, dollhouse palaces was the LEGO Elves toy set, Ragana's Magic Shadow Castle. It is also interesting that this is not a Disney Princess trope. At first glance, the difference is obvious. The castle is primarily black and a deep purple. While the towers have some decorative, twisty spires rather than the more practical fortress turrets, these additions seem to add an ominous rather than decorative feel. Even the jagged mountains in the background suggest danger more than the snow-topped peaks by peaceful lakes in the palace backdrops. As seen in an earlier boy toys, there is also a catapult shooting at the castle.*

Furthermore, though there were representations of people of color, these were only found in the girl's toys. There were no boys of color represented in any of the castle toys, which practically speaking means there are no figures for black boys to relate to, in order to picture themselves in a powerful role in the castle. In essence, the message when seen through a critical lens is the castle is meant to keep out "these types," the bad guys, the criminals. While there are many interpretations of the lack of representation of black boys within castles, when viewed through a critical race lens, it could be linked to the dehumanization and criminalization that denies them opportunities to be normalized in childhood play. As discussed earlier, even when girls of color were portrayed, they were usually darkened versions of the same European featured and dressed royalty with similar facial features and long, straight flowing hair. All were skinny and represented traditional hegemonic beauty norms as well. Again, when viewed through a critical lens, the normalization and importance of white, skinny beauty standards can be interpreted as the dehumanization and sexualization of all women, and especially so for women who do not fit the contemporary beauty standards. The following is an excerpt from my memos, highlighting race during my analysis (Figure 1.5):

Figure 1.5: Barbie Endless Hair Kingdom Dolls

Barbie Endless Hair Kingdom doll was the first example of a doll representing a person of color, though I had seen an earlier figure in the LEGO Aladdin toy castle. As I gazed back and forth between the White Dreamtopia Rainbow and the Black (or Hispanic, hard to tell) Endless Hair Barbie dolls, I was glad I had photographed them together. It struck me how similar these two Barbie dolls appeared, really the only difference was a darker shade of plastic used, and darker hair and eye color. Her hair was black but also long, straight, and shiny. Her facial features were identical to the White Barbie except for eye color. Her unrealistic body was made from the same mold. Therefore, though I'm categorizing this toy as a Black doll, whether it is or not is questionable. Perhaps the one feature that gives nod to Black culture (but also may be seen as stereotypical, I'm not sure of the boundaries here) is the accessory is a weave that puts twists in Barbie's hair. The irony of the social significance of Black women's hair is not lost on me, as even the name of this Barbie

references. It leaves me with the feeling that though the company may be trying to incorporate Black culture, it is coming across as racially stereotypical. The castle in the background is clearly a palace, featuring traditional pink and purple girl colors, matching the dress and accessories of the doll. Tendrils of pink roses wind up the castle towers. A pink crown rests upon her head.

Thus, I maintain that based on this data, castle toys seem to be lacking in representation of people of color in positions of power, as well as maintaining hegemonic gender norms expected from boys and girls.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between castle toys, media, and corporate branding?

Disney, LEGO, and Playmobil were by far the most prolific companies marketing castle toys during my particular visits to toy stores. All of the major brands had connections to child media, either in the form of games, movies, or Netflix series, illustrating the close tie between media and corporations within popular child culture, and the cross branding of toys, games, movies, and shows. The smaller toy marketers were more likely to promote a generic, fairy tale based source of castle toys rather than a close connection to specific movies or games (Figure 1.6).

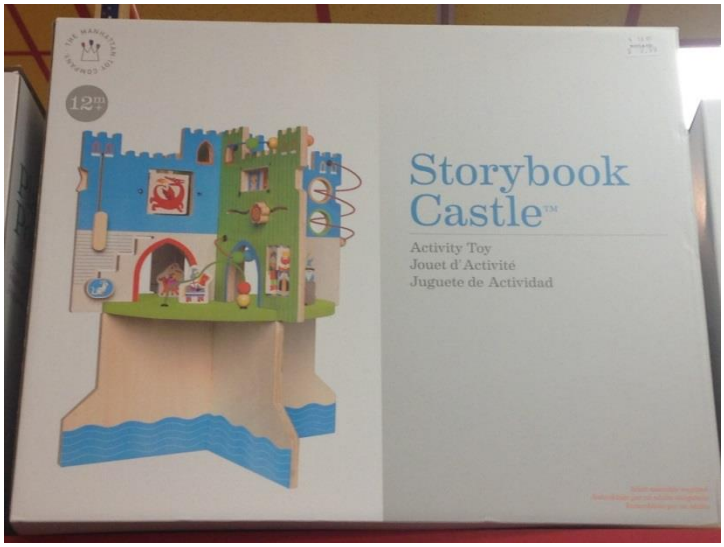

Figure 1.6: Generic Storybook Castle Toy

The implications of this perhaps not-so-surprising finding, especially when taken in conjunction with the findings of hegemonic norms perpetuated in castle toys, is that corporations seem to play leading roles in transmitting and maintaining traditional values based on both gender and race within child culture through the vehicle of child media and the subsequent branding of toys and accessories. How these norms are maintained or transformed by children in their actual play with these toys will be discussed in this dissertation, though this pilot study provided support for the transmission of hegemonic norms by corporations when marketing to children.

The pilot study's major limitations were in the sample size of the data, as well as a valid and reliable instrument designed to identify themes within toy marketing. Since I was the only researcher, a sample of 35 photographs was relatively large. However, to be able to make any real generalizations, or to conduct correlational analysis, a much larger sample would be necessary. Furthermore, the decisions on how to code the toys based on gender, race, company, media source, and castle type sometimes proved difficult. An instrument especially designed, and preferably tested for reliability and validity, to

analyze these themes in children's toys could prove beneficial and strengthen the findings. At the very least, having multiple researchers examine and code the data separately would have also strengthened the initial findings.

The data from the pilot study identified a problem worthy of examining: the transmission of segregated gender norms embedded in the marketing and narratives surrounding castles marketed to young children. The rest of this chapter is dedicated to the problem statement and significance with a conceptual diagram depicting how children's personal agency and marketed messages interact to create a socially shared and negotiated child culture with implications for critical media studies in classrooms. A brief overview of the methodology is included, as well as a positionality statement in which I recognize my own situated reality and self-reflexivity.

Problem Statement

The significance of the castle symbol is interesting to study through a critical lens, primarily because it represents a setting: the historic and social time period of the medieval period, known commonly as a time of male-dominated European conquest, when women and servants were seen as property of the castle, and a ruling elite class held power based on lineage. While young children will of course alter the symbolic meaning of the castle, placing it in a more current and age appropriate framework they can relate to through media, the castle continues to set the stage for the quintessential King Arthur myths of Knights, a beautiful princess, military defense, and extravagant weddings. However, after the stage is set with the time period and culture firmly placed, the castle recedes into the shadows unnoticed. The castle is not an active character; it has no lines and rarely moves the plot the forward. Seen as stage dressing, the castle itself is

largely forgotten, taken for granted, and therefore *unexamined*, while at the same time being rife with cultural norms and assumptions, a hidden symbol.

Examining hidden symbols in child culture is important. After violence erupted during a recent White Nationalist protest in Charlottesville, Virginia, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) published a statement calling for research and education focused on critically examining cultural practices and symbols of prejudice, power, and privilege, in order to empower all our students and teachers to build a more just society (AERA, 2017).Differences among people become prejudices when those in power practice social control by assigning *value* status to differences along the lines of race, gender, religion, and so forth (Memmi, 2000). These values are transmitted culturally through symbols and narratives in an effort to seem as natural and scientific as possible, and are often adopted without question, therefore becoming damaging stereotypes (Memmi, 2000). Toys and marketed narratives, more closely tied now than ever, are examples of cultural transmission of symbols and narratives to children at very young ages. The lack of representation in castle toys perpetuates the narrative of white power, wealth, and beauty; the strongly gender-segregated toys imply limited gender roles and norms.

Though this study specifically highlighted gender norms based on the Fortress or Palace motif, it is important to remember these are never fully isolated from race, class, religion, sexuality, and other identity markers (Collins, 2017; Mayo, 2014). It cannot be stressed enough that castle toys also have the potential to limit children on the basis of race, as the figures are almost exclusively white, as well as normalizing traditional marriage, since there are no examples of same sex marriages in castle play or popular

media. While this particular study focused on gender, other identity markers can, and should, also be studied by researchers, teachers, and students.

Gender Related Terms and Definitions

Before continuing, it is important to understand how I am using terms related to gender, definitions which are often contested and in flux (Mayo, 2014). As I am studying young children, the focus will not be on sexual orientation, but gender and biological sex, three terms that are all distinctly different. First, it is argued that biological sex, identified as male/female, is different from gender, identified in the terms man/woman or boy/girl. Gender, what it means to be a *normal* man or woman, is a social construction carrying all sorts of connotations about roles, norms, and values based on differences (Mayo, 2014). To illustrate the difference between sex and gender, a transgender person could be born male but self-identify as a woman if she feels more comfortable in a feminine role, as defined by society. A person whose biological sex and gender match is termed cis-gendered. Gender identification can be viewed as a self-identified continuum, with some trans-gendered people choosing to have a full biological sex change, while others may stay the same sex but only change their gender identity. For some, gender identity is fluid and may even change from day to day (Mayo, 2014).

Gender norms are communicated by assigning labels of masculinity and femininity to cultural artifacts, narratives, and even personality traits. The latter example is especially interesting, as the word “trait” implies an inherent, biological difference, rather than a value laden socially constructed one, thus playing into the notion of making prejudice seem natural or deserved, an essentialist perspective (Liben, 2016). What is stereotyped as masculine versus feminine sends important messages about people’s roles

and value to society based on gender. Dinella, Fulcher, and Weisgram (2014) explain gender and masculine/feminine traits as follows:

> Masculine traits reflect instrumental personality traits, such as being independent and assertive, and feminine traits reflect expressive personality traits, such as being nurturing and sympathetic (Spence, 1993). Masculine and feminine traits can be viewed on two independent continuums with individual differences existing within gender groups (see Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Thus, both men and women could possess varying levels of both masculine traits and feminine traits. (p. 494)

Other than taking issue with the word "traits" and suggesting "norms" be substituted to reflect social construction over biology, the distinction between gender and masculine/feminine categorization is important because it becomes more problematic from a social justice perspective. As referred to earlier, when differences are assigned *values*, prejudice is born (Memmi, 2000). Much of American culture is sorted into categories of masculine and feminine including colors (pink and blue), clothes (skirts, makeup), movies (action-adventure, romance), leisure activities (dancing, sports), toys (dolls, action figures), domestic roles (grilling, cooking), and so forth, all carrying implicit messages and stereotypes about the expected social roles and values of men, as instrumental and active, and women, as expressive and passive, for example.

As suggested earlier, viewing masculinity and femininity as continuums is a helpful method for examining society's tolerance for crossing gender norms. For example, since the 1960s it has been argued that women have gained more freedom of movement on the masculinity spectrum, while men enjoy less freedom on the feminine

spectrum (Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Rosenberg & Sutton-Smith, 1960). However, it must be kept in mind that categorizing things as masculine and feminine is problematic to begin with, as it perpetuates the imbedded messages of what it mean to be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl. Understanding the process of how children learn what it means to be gendered, how they interact with structural messages and use personal agency to adopt or resist gender binaries, is the purpose of this study. Toys and media narratives are one structural influence on children's ideas of masculinity and femininity binaries.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Toys have been defined by researchers as "cultural tools [that] are steeped in societal values, expectations, and norms for behavior that may influence how children envision possibilities for play with such cultural artifacts, as well as how they envision the potential for their own interactions within broader sociocultural contexts" (Black, Tomlinson, & Korobkova, 2016, p. 66). In other words, movies, literature, games, and toys are closely related and contain societal values and representations that are marketed to children through corporate branding.

However, while corporations have overtaken children's media and branding, as detailed later in Chapter 2, children are not simply passive consumers of media messages, but also active agents in the creation of culture. Child culture is contextual, and not only is it impacted by many other factors such as schools, family, and other social institutions, it is also negotiated socially through play with peers (Bass, 2010; Simmons, 2014). Leaders in children's play groups employ cultural capital to organize and decide on the games based on their own reinterpretation of media and socially transmit this to other

children, often using gender and age as social markers of who is included and who is not (Willett, 2015). Thus the consumption of media is mediated through play, rather than reflected or derived, as the "social relationships…inform the way children understand and negotiate consumer cultures and the meanings of consumer items and texts" (Willett, 2015, p. 417). Thus, children act as active agents in interpreting structural messages about gender and constructing culture during play with others, suggesting a feminist poststructuralist lens (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018).

In order to clearly understand the poststructuralist framework I was using, I found it helpful to conceptualize it as a metaphor of two strings: one string representing the structural sites of social reproduction and the second string representing the child's socially constructed identity. The string of social reproduction is made up of different threads, which can symbolize family, church, schools, and so forth, and I am particularly focusing on the thread of popular media. Likewise, the string of identity is comprised of threads including race, class, religion, sexuality, and so forth, and I am particularly focusing on the gender thread. However, to completely disentangle one thread from the others would unravel it, so it is important to note when and where the threads intertwine with one another. When multiple children play together, they each bring their strings and their strings interact and construct culture socially, a weaving of individual strings into a tapestry of culture. This is what I am observing, following the threads of gender and media to observe how culture is constructed during children's play, as depicted in Figure 1.7:

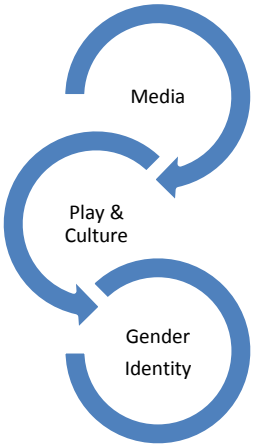

Figure 1.7: Conceptual Diagram

The conceptual diagram (Figure 1.7) is best represented by a feminist poststructuralist framework. While constructivist theorists focus on the bottom circle, how groups construct culture during social interactions, and structuralist focus on the top circle, the messages people receive from the broader structures in society, poststructuralism sees both of these as interacting with each other, people embedding structuralist messages and then recreating these in social groups as if they were their own (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018). Thus it is important to focus on both the structuralist messages as well as the personal and social agency. Furthermore, while the structural messages come from multiple sources, such as parents, teachers, schools, and peers, this study focuses particularly on gender messages children receive from the media, though further research into the roles of families and other social institutions would also be valuable.

While the poststructual framework shown in my conceptual diagram (Figure 1.7) depicts the broad outline of how culture is constructed socially and structurally, which was used to frame my questions and organize findings, my particular focus on gender also requires the use a feminist lens, a coupling of theories used in similar studies

(Kostas, 2018; Leiberman, 1972). Feminism is a topic which has been extensively written about and while it is not my intent to detail the multiplicity and fine grained delineation of subgroups of feminism, I will use a simplified, broad strokes definition and briefly discuss the feminist waves. More attention to how this study fits within 2nd wave feminism in particular is discussed in the implication section in Chapter 6.

First wave feminism began in the early 1900's and was primarily concerned with the suffrage movement in which women fought for women's right to vote and to be seen as legally human and not the property of men (Chamberlain, 2016; Gray & Boddy, 2010; Munro, 2013). In the 1920's, second wave feminism began with a focus on women's roles in the home and workforce, concerned with equality and the tenant of "the personal is political." There are many subcategories of feminism in the second wave including liberal, socialist, radical, cultural-difference, social welfare, lesbian, black, postmodern-academic, and postcolonial-third world feminisms (Gray & Boddy, 2010). Despite these different subgroups, mainstream feminism has been charged with only attending to white, middle class women's concerns and this marginalization of women of color was taken up in third wave feminism and includes the works of bell hooks, multiplicity of feminism, and illuminating voices of color within the movement (Gray & Boddy, 2010; Munro, 2013). Fourth wave feminism is generally thought to be influenced by the internet, specifically the use of social media, to share personal stories, organize activism across larger spaces, and hold people accountable for sexist behaviors (Chamberlain, 2016; Munro, 2013).

The latest form, neoliberal feminism, is sometimes included in the fourth wave, focusing on "women can have it all" rather than choosing between family and careers

(Miller & Plencner, 2018; Rottenberg, 2017). Neoliberal feminism has been heavily critiqued by feminists identifying and leading earlier movements, such as bell hooks, for placing responsibility on women to work and be care givers, as well as continuing to marginalize voices of women of color. Rather than fighting against capitalism as many earlier feminists did, the neoliberal movement seems to embrace capitalism, and some researchers have accused the media, such as the television show, *Supergirl*, in selling and branding neoliberal feminism (Miller & Plencner, 2018).

In this particular study, I have used a broad feminist lens, most closely aligned with second wave feminist notions of women's roles in the home and workplace, and have also included how boys are also constrained to norms of masculinity that are harmful to both boys and girls. Use of a feminist lens means I am focusing on the embedded norms related to gender binaries, which are seen as problematic in the ways they limit humans by sending gendered messages of what is socially appropriate for boys and girls, later mirrored in larger societal issues such as the wage and labor disparities, and sexual harassment and rape, and homophobic teasing related to male violence, as will be further discussed in the Implications section of Chapter 6.

Overview of Methods and Research Questions

In hopes of understanding the relationship between media and gender, depicted in the conceptual diagram, my research question was as follows: How are gender norms are reproduced and resisted through socio-dramatic play with toy castles? In order to answer this question, the following sub-questions are included:

a) How do identity markers (such as race, age, child interest) intersect with gender in children's stories and dramatic play?

b) What social roles do children play in the socio-construction of gender norms?
c) What popular media (shows, games, literature) are referenced during play with different toy castles?
d) What gender roles are embedded in these particular toys and media narratives?
e) How are gender roles in children's stories and art created, using different castles as props (such as fortress or palace, pre-made or child built)?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative study to examine how elementary aged children socially constructed gender norms when playing with castle toys, marketed and gendered by popular media companies. I observed two families with at least two siblings between ages three to nine for roughly five hours a week across three weeks as they engaged in socio-dramatic play with a variety of castle toys, including using toy castles as props to plan and perform castle stories, creating castle based puppet shows, building castles and thrones, and watching media related to castles. I conducted informal interviews during play, as well as a semi-formal focus group interview at the end of the three weeks. Participants were also encouraged to be co-researchers, examining my data of castle toy pictures and their own stories for themes related to gender. Data collected included transcribed selections of audio recordings of castle play and gender discussions, observation guide field notes, and a narrative observation journal entry after each visit. I read transcribed castles stories aloud to children to revise as they saw fit, as a member-checking device. For data analysis, I drew heavily from Critical Discourse Theory (CDT), discussed more in Chapter 3.

Positionality Statement

Before moving on to the literature review in Chapter 2, it is important to understand my own positionality, which affects why I chose a feminist poststructuralist framework, as well as the questions and design surrounding my study. Like everyone, who I am is best represented by a mish mash of generalizations and nuance. My identity and the stories that shape it, colors my research lens, from the questions I ask to the patterns I see in the data. Understanding ourselves, and communicating those selves, is integral for understanding others, which is the goal of social sciences. Understanding ourselves involves knowing our value systems, recognizing lenses and biases, and our position in modern society. One of the best ways I have found to understand and share my positionality is through poems and stories:

I come from
No Barbies or MTV because they
set up unrealistic body images. I come from
my mother's hip, backpack counterbalanced, on her
grad school campus, and her thesis on
Artificial Intelligence. I come from
computer geeks who refused to buy a Nintendo, but
computer games were *good for your brain.* I come from
Oregon Trail, and
Carmen Sandiego, and
that repetitively boring one used to drill math facts. I come from
climbing trees in frilly dresses,

tugging at the shorts underneath I *had* to wear because

boys were dumb, *and only want one thing*. I come from

Montessori, latchkey, make your own lunch and set your own alarm,

childhood of independence. I come from

model airplanes and DIY clubhouses. I come from

middle school dances, and make up, and perms. I come from

limitless choices and horizons,

from a pedagogy of self-esteem and possibility. I come from

the world is my oyster entitlement,

a freedom to go anywhere, do anything, be anyone.

(Pause and Breathe)

I didn't understand why

I had to have the pink cup. It wasn't so much that I was the

only one who had a pink cup, I

often liked to stand out, to be

different in some way. But

it wasn't even a *pretty* pink.

It was a faded, slightly-yellowed, barely-pink

pastel, but more to the point,

why wasn't it my choice?

After a day of

mud fights, frog hunting, and rock jumping with my cousins, why did I

have to have a pink cup? Why was *I*

suddenly limited? My cousin

recently reminded me of this story,

laughing and reminiscing at the ensuing family fight, as I reached for a pink cup,

without even considering the color.

Because I am at the place, not where I

have to have a blue cup to prove a point, but rather

that *the color of the cup really doesn't matter. At. All.*

The color in no way changes the cup's functionality, and neither

does my gender. For me,

my coming of age story is one of coming

face to face with

limits. Being white and middle class

meant I didn't experience as many limits as many other women, there were

less roadblocks and walls, but

my teenage-self still

pushed the limits I found. My adult self

likes to think I still do. I'm afraid

my teacher-self didn't push

the limits enough. Because one thing I learned is that,

sometimes, when you push against the limits,

they push back.

Hard.

The awareness of identity and social norms at a young age, my tendency towards non-conformity, and the hard-knocks that ensued, shaped me as the feminist researcher I am today. It continues to shape the work I do, the questions I ask, and the patterns I notice, or am drawn to, in data. But gender, race, and class are not my only identity markers. I have one final self-confession. I am, unapologetically, a gamer geek.

To position myself more specifically, I am a fantasy role-playing gamer geek. As insiders to the culture will recognize (and outsiders most likely roll their eyes), geek culture is made up of multiple sub-categories, such as the difference between geek, nerd, and dweeb depending on overlapping layers of obsession, academics, and social competence. There are also the cool geeks, who play *Call of Duty* and other first person shooter games, and the nerdier geeks (me), who prefer more cooperative or turn-based gaming. Then there are the *really* nerdy geeks who LARP, or Live Action Role Play, dressing as characters and fighting with play weapons. Of course, like all cultural groups, the lines between these are blurry and gamers often cross over into many or all of the categories. In my specific case, I have a soft spot for fantasy role playing games. While being a girl was the most likely reason I wasn't introduced to the role playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* at an early age (being a girl in the geek culture as always been a cultural taboo, *perhaps* less so today), my media and toys consisted of a heavy dose of fantasy and science fiction. So after learning quite a bit by playing the computer game *Baldur's Gate*, based on the role-playing game, and my husband led me through some practice rounds, I fully embraced *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Over the course of about five years, my husband and I played weekly with various gaming groups. For the uninitiated, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a tabletop role playing game

from the eighties. A group of people "adventurers" use rule books and dice to create and act out characters, while another player, the "dungeon master" runs the monsters, villains, and other characters the party comes across. This game is regarded as pretty far nerdy on the geek scale, in large part dueto the reliance on tomes of dusty books and dice and (basic) mathematics. While calculations and rules-lawyering sometimes slows the game down (I swear, I am not arguing the wording on the surface area of a fireball *one more time*), the fun of sitting down with friends and snacks, cooperatively engaging in play, using our imaginations to solve problems, being creative in a way even the best sandbox PC games cannot emulate, acting and performing for our peers, kept the players coming back, week after week.

Just as being a woman shapes my feminist theory, being a fantasy role-player shapes both my interests in castles, a major theme in my research, as well as my fascination with socio-dramatic pretend play, the child term for the adult version, known as role-playing. Even in popular media, the possible social and cognitive benefits of role-playing games are being explored, especially for children with autism and other difficulties integrating socially. While this study does not utilize the more rule-based nature of a table-top role-playing game, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, socio-dramatic play with toys as props still captures the cooperative, storytelling play with less restrictions than a defined "game." Introducing the castle as the setting of the story allows me, the researcher, to define a context for the ensuing play, a situated culture of specific norms and place, namely the modern interpretation of the medieval time period. In this way, I am playing the role of a hands-off dungeon master, who sets the stage, and then allows players to completely create their own stories. Later, I will position characters in

ways that are surprising and break gender norms, acting as a participant observer pushing against the cultural limits, engaging children in conversations about what it means to be a boy or girl, what our roles are, and when we can push and when we cannot. Ideally, children will learn to question hegemonic norms perpetuated in popular media, leading to a society where personal potential is expanded rather than limited, identity is self-defined rather than outwardly imposed, and differences are valued rather than feared.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I analyzed data from a pilot study on toy castles marketed as Fortresses to boys and Palaces to girls, each representation encompassing a host of messages about the roles of men and women in modern society. This was the basis of my problem statement, and the significance of these hegemonic gender norms, as well as the purpose and implications for this study were discussed. I also briefly described my methodology, included a positionality statement, and introduced my feminist poststructural theoretical framework. Chapter 2 will provide an in depth literature review and the methodology and ethics of working with young children will be detailed in Chapter 3. The findings and discussion will be shared in Chapters 4 and 5, and Chapter 6 will include a discussion of the implications and recommendations for parents and educators wishing to counter hegemonic gender norms. This study is significant as an example of collaboration between cultural and education studies, as it seeks to understand and influence the construction of limiting gender binaries through a critical examination of capitalist and patriarchic norms sold by globalized media corporations to today's youth.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In Chapter 1, I told the story of my research design and frameworks and briefly touched on the importance of using a critical lens to examine gender norms in early child culture. This is of significance because America continues to face a great economic divide by patterns of race and gender. Over the past 20 years, economic growth for "those at the bottom have not seen any gains …and the lions share or the gains have gone to those in the top third of the income ladder" (Rose, 2014, p. 3). Critical theorists claim the purpose of schools, as arms of the state, is to reproduce this economic stratification, thus maintaining the power of the dominant class (Au, 2012; Giroux, 1993, 2001; Gramsci, 1971; Mayo, 2014). However, they encourage educators to resist by creating spaces for emancipatory, democratic education that privileges voices of marginalized students. They argue the skills learned will not only increase their chances of economic mobility, but perhaps more importantly lead to an emancipatory, democratic civil society which attempts to disrupt the single-story narrative and provide space for self-definition (Collins, 1990, 2017). In other words, there is a need for counter-hegemonic work in child culture in order to resist the status quo and work towards equity and critical media, and curriculum studies are ways teachers can work towards achieving this. While this particular study focuses on gender norms, with some discussion on how race and class intertwine in the play I observed, similar studies focusing on other identity markers, such

as a critical race theory framed by intersectionality and highlighting the voices of Black children's castle play, would also be beneficial.

In this chapter, I will broadly begin with a discussion of how ideology is shaped by hegemony and symbols as tools for social control and the maintenance of inequity, followed by a review of the research focused on how children in particular create culture socially during play. These two areas will then be connected by a specific examination of hegemonic gender norms found in children's toys and media narratives.

Hegemony, Resistance, and Symbols

Hegemony

Influenced heavily by Marx, Gramsci was one of the early critical theorists and broadened Marxist theory to include political and social power structures in addition to the economic theory Marx posited (Carroll & Ratner, 1994; Mayo, 2014). Gramsci noted there are two superstructures within society with different methods of functioning: one is civil "private" society which functions through hegemony, or the domination of one culture's values over all others; and two, is the political "state" society which functions through political command and laws (Gramsci, 1971; Mayo, 2014). In order for political domination to be successful, Gramsci argued the dominated must consent, which is where the hegemonic domination of the civil society comes into play, by transmitting implicit value systems across social institutions such as schools, churches, media, and so forth (Carroll & Ratner, 1994; Collins, 2017; Giroux, 2001; Mayo, 2014). In other words, hegemonic ideology is used by the state as a form of social control, indoctrinating members early enough for these values to seem natural and "common sense" across multiple areas of children's lives (Gramsci, 1971; Mayo, 2014). Gramsci (1971) argues

the taken-for-granted-ness of these assumptions as a good indicator of hegemonic domination, thus requiring an act of counter-hegemony to continue the struggle of emancipatory education.

In close alignment with Gramsci's critical theory of hegemony expanding out as political, economic, and social forces of domination is black feminist thought, specifically Collins's Matrix of Domination (1990). Rather than seeing society as two superstructures, Collins claims domination occurs across three levels: the personal (individual), group or community (cultural), and social institutions (systemic). Furthermore, she also posits a system of interlocking oppression contingent upon race, gender, class, age, religion, sexuality and so on that is not additive. In other words, it does not position one identity marker in hierarchy above others and then adds to it, but rather as interlocking oppression through one overarching structure of domination (Collins, 1990, 2017). Thus, power is a complicated relationship between many identities, reflected in both the gender identities of the participants in this study, and how they represented castle characters as powerful along a matrix of identity markers.

In summary, critical theorists argue economic stratification is reproduced when individuals, communities, and social institutions use ideological control to indoctrinate youth into cultural norms and acceptance of roles, even when it is against their best interest. Educators interested in social justice curriculum can create sites of resistance using emancipatory education with the aim to disrupt single story narratives found in broader society, which perpetuate the dominant class' hegemonic norms to maintain the status-quo. Critical consciousness educators argue for critical spaces, where marginalized students may challenge negative representations and resist by creating counter-narratives.

Counter Hegemony: Critical Media Pedagogy

Earlier education philosophers, such as Freire and Dewey, focused on emancipatory education, a philosophy embraced by critical curriculum theorists (Apple, 2009; Au, 2012; Giroux, 2001; Lewis, 1990; Wood & Hedges, 2016). These theories have been built upon and modernized in the field of critical media literacy, where students strengthen literacy skills by interpreting and questioning messages in popular media by asking when, where, why, and by whom; these theories focus on ideological factors relating to the relationships of texts, readers, and power (Gainer, 2013; Gainer, Valdez-Gainer, & Kinard, 2009; Lewis, 1990; Low, 2011; Morrell, Duenas, Garcia, & Lopez, 2013; Vasquez, 2017; Wood & Hedges, 2016). One goal is to make students' relationship to media more explicit by "analyzing and deconstructing new media genres such as film, television, and print media using critical literacy lenses such as feminism, Marxism, and postcolonialism" (Morrell et al., 2013, p. 3). Another is to have students create their own media, whether it be stories, webpages, research, podcasts, or any other format, digital or otherwise, which allows children to share their own narratives and self-definitions in order to combat the threat of stereotypes and negative representation (Gainer, 2013; Gainer, Valdez-Gainer, & Kinard, 2009; Low, 2011; Morrell et al., 2013; Vasquez, 2017; Winn, 2011).

Examples of this include hip hop and slam poetry curriculums (Low, 2011; Kim, 2011; Morrell et al., 2013), elementary students examining popular advertisements, such as McDonald's Happy Meals (Gainer, Valdez-Gainer, & Kinard, 2009), and drama for incarcerated girls (Winn, 2011). These examples all highlight possibilities and argue for

emancipatory education which, "while problematizing classroom and public texts, teachers help students to interrupt and analyze texts that are often considered natural or neutral" (Vasquez, 2013, p. 8). As Collins (2017) theorizes, behind the violence is the hate speech, and behind that is micro-aggression, and behind all of that is *ideology*, a belief system of what is right and moral. It is the *ideology* of distrust and nationalism, which benefits the wealthiest and harms the most vulnerable, that needs to change. The change begins with a critical examination of social norms, asking questions about embedded messages in corporate, capitalistic media, who they benefit, and who is missing from our shared media narratives. By teaching young children to ask these questions and encouraging them to create their own representations, educators can foster spaces of resistance in an effort to make a more democratic, emancipatory society. Symbols have long been used in propaganda to transmit hegemonic norms, thus providing fertile ground for educators and students to critically examine as sites of cultural discourses.

Symbols, Propaganda, and Culture

Symbols and culture are inseparable. In fact, while sociologists and anthropologists have long argued the exact definition of culture, whether it is defined "as everything one would need to know to become a functioning member of a society" or "as the publically available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning" (Swindler, 1986, p. 273) the use of symbols to teach functional societal roles and to legitimize knowledge and meaning is clear. Language itself is a system of symbols, representing value-laden cultural concepts by linking the sounds and images (signifiers) to complex ideas and concepts (signified) (Lemert, 2010). One example of

how symbols are used to shape cultural beliefs and actions are the use of flags and other national symbols (such as the Bald Eagle) to foster nationalist values and patriotic actions. At their worst, symbols are used as tools for propaganda agendas designed to reinforce stereotypes, as seen in the Nazi propaganda materials, or racist images used as sports mascots (Callais, 2010). In fact the literature is rife with global examples of visual symbols used to promote nationalist, cultural agendas, as well as critiques of symbolic representations (or lack thereof) of racial and gendered norms in children's literature, as previously discussed and cited.

One example of the use of visual symbols to perpetuate hegemonic norms is Roberts's (2013) study of how British activists used photography to create a cultural narrative of the educational colonies after the Spanish Civil War. The use of photographs, legitimized by the belief that pictures reflected reality, served to perpetuate the stereotypes of clean, orderly colonies as opposed to the supposedly savage, poor, and dirty cultures prior to colonization. Roberts dismantles this notion by addressing how these photographs were constructed by colonialists with an agenda. For example, he points out the pictures of the educational colonies feature clean children and the accompanying text encourages good hygiene alongside advertisements for soap products. Not only does this position of imagery imply negative images of the pre-colonized culture, it also actively suggests capitalist values of consumption associated with positive imagery of cleanliness and order, thus associated with wealth.

An even older example of the use of symbols to influence cultural values and norms is found in Stadin's (2005) research on how Sweden became a European power in the seventeenth century through the use of masculine visual imagery in tracts, personified

by the ruler Gustavus Adolphus, in order to present power domestically and internationally. However, when the kingdom passed to his daughter, Christina, the masculine imagery underwent substantial changes, as she became the first of the Swedish monarchs representing "a woman at leisure" (p. 61). This image is still retained in much of the literature on female representation in toys and media, as is discussed more fully elsewhere. Stadin (2005) also claims the royal visual imagery from her reign set the stage for the female allegory by presenting half-real, half-allegorical representations of the Queen. The gendered and racial values suggested in these studies of visual imagery inform my own analysis of how the modern day symbol of the castle is used to influence child culture.

Many of the examples of visual symbols discussed so far focus on imagery created by the government to perpetuate a nationalist agenda. However, in modern times, the media, often owned by global corporate entities, is the main method of transmitting symbols related to social norms and roles (Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, & Collier, 2014). Other examples of negative cultural representations in media can be seen in Luk's (2014) critique of Hollywood's representation of Hong Kong in the 1955 film, *Soldier of Fortune* and in Crim's (2010) article denouncing the use of Nazi imagery in *Starship Troopers*. Specifically related to child culture, Disney has come under scrutiny by critical theorists for its marginalization of cultures for approximately forty years, a topic I will expound upon later.

Symbolic Inversion of the Castle Symbol

In order to connect the theoretical paradigm of hegemony with pragmatic, practical action targeted toward critical elementary curriculum, I suggest a deconstruction

and reconstruction, a symbolic subversion as Bourdieu suggested (Stack, 2008) of the modern symbol of a castle, which is ubiquitous in child culture. I was introduced to the concept of castle as a symbol of white supremacy by a professor at my university, Dr. Miller, and I became fascinated with the hegemonic norms implied in castles, especially with a strong connection of this symbol within fairytales, fantasy, Disney, and princess Barbie.

Historically speaking, the castle is a representation of conquest, defense, and the living quarters of the elite royal ruling class across Europe. Symbolically, it permeates fairytales and often acts as a prison for a princess waiting to be saved by the brave prince. I argue that the castle represents the intersection of colonial conquest and violence, gendered power inequality, and barriers between the wealthy and poor. It is a symbol of European domination and hegemonic ideals that permeates children's literature and culture. Furthermore, using the castle toy as a symbol for cultural critiques, as opposed to fairytales as other researchers have focused on (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018; Lieberman, 1972), is beneficial because of its multi-textual nature of toys, which are related across movies, books, games, and other types of cultural artifacts in popular media. Briggs (2007) argues toys are ideal for reading as social semiotic texts because of their intertextuality across multiple texts in child culture and capitalistic control of these messages by media companies. By examining a symbolic toy for embedded messages, researchers, educators, and students can recognize gender norms across a wide range of media narratives and texts (Briggs, 2007).

While there has been much research on gender and race in children's media narratives, the symbolic image of the castle has largely been overlooked. Critically

examining meanings of castles may add to critical education by leading to the development of critical literacy pedagogy wherein children and educators look at the castle symbol in media and play with a lens towards power imbalances, as well as can be used as a framework in classrooms for critically examining other symbols that permeate child culture. Further recommendations for how educators can construct critical curriculum in relation to this study are discussed in Chapter 6.

In summary, an ideology of prejudice is in part maintained through the use of hegemonic norms, and symbols are a common method of transmitting these norms. However, this also means these norms can be countered with a critical curriculum and symbolic inversion. Next, I will focus the review of the literature to the role of play in the construction of child culture in particular, followed by an examination of the specific hegemonic gender norms expressed in children's toys and media narratives.

Child Culture and Play

The study of childhood culture has been long researched in sociology and is generally based on the 1969 anthropological work of Opie and Opie, who argued that child culture is separate from adult culture "with its own stories, rules, rituals, and social norms" (Bass, 2010, p. 337). Further research on child culture takes a social constructivist view, positing that children are active agents in creating meaning and rules that are socially created and shared, especially during play (Bass, 2010; Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Liben, 2016; Trawick-Smith, Wolff, Koschel, & Vallarelli, 2015; Vasquez, 2017). These meanings are also affected by societal values, racial identity, and norms, and pecking orders are taught to each other through play and discourse. In fact, much of child culture is defined not only by race, gender, and social class, but also

largely by age, with even elementary aged children categorizing each other as "big kids" and "little kids." Furthermore, researchers have taken a social structural view on child culture that assumes children are treated differently by institutions based on age, which influences their traits, and therefore generational differences become a structural marker (Bass, 2010; Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Vasquez, 2017). As discussed in the poststructuralist framework in Chapter 1, the social structural argument thus creates a tension between child agency and the influences of the adult societal structure, in this particular instance between gender identity and media, and this tension is explored by children during play as they socially construct cultural meaning.

Play Theory

As is so often the case, there are many theories of the definition, roles, and functions of play in young children. Most commonly known is the "play as progress," a developmental approach which sees play as practice for adult behavior and includes the widely cited Piaget and Erickson (Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Sutton-Smith, 1997). However, Sutton-Smith (1997) also detailed other functions of play including biological/behaviorism connected to the feel-good reward centers of play and games, the evolution which describes an instinct to create cultures and social connections (Papadopoulou, 2012), as well as play as imagination, fate, power, identity, self, and frivolity. Each interpretation discusses different kinds of play in different contexts as play is complicated; when taken as the beginning of culture creation, in the tensions between fluid play with identity and social interactions, and with the use of imagination and symbolic interaction, children first begin creating and transmitting culture. For children, what can be imagined in play becomes what they can imagine for themselves later in life

(Briggs, 2007; Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Wohlwend, 2017). From a socio-constructivist paradigm of child culture, there is a tension between the children as active agents in constructing their own culture, and the messages the adult culture attempts to impose on them through media, corporations, families, and social institutions, as will be discussed further.

Consumerism, Media, and Child Culture

Consumerism and media also constrain child agency. The competitive, deregulated capitalist economic structures send an ideological message which "encourages competition, consumption, self-interest, wealth, status, and possessions" (Kasser & Linn, 2016, p. 124). Bass (2010) references a study suggesting the commodification of childhood began with an advertisement for a children's clothing line in 1917 and by the 1960s children were recognized as "a legitimate child consumer acting on his/her own needs and wishes" (p. 340), reflected in clothing departments stratified by age and gender. The gender stratification of clothing means companies can sell twice as many clothes, one set for boys and one for girls, limiting the hand-me down nature and increasing clothing consumption among consumers.

As technology and globalization have advanced, the impact of consumerism and media on child culture has increased. Disney, in particular, has been called out by many researchers for its increasingly powerful influence on child culture (Artz, 2004; Briggs, 2007; Mjøs, 2010; Giroux, 1998; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2004; Wohlwend, 2017, 2009). Mjøs (2010) cites that since 1990, every television show for children has also included some form of merchandise, especially Disney, which has been marketing merchandise to children since the 1930s and has since become a globalized

company which represents the "world's largest licensor of merchandising and consumer products" (p. 1035). Artz (2004) also writes about Disney's power, naming the company a "global media giant—second only to Time-Warner-AOL" (p. 117). Not only are companies profiting off merchandise derived from merchandise, but some even begin as merchandise and have media based off them, as was the case with both *Strawberry Shortcake* and more recently *Pretty Cure*, both cartoons based off dolls where television ratings are used to bolster toy sales, rather than the other way around (Hartzheim, 2016).

When media companies control children's play, Hill (2011) argues "children are being deprived of a 'full' childhood or series of experiences that distinctly differentiates them from that of the adult world and meets their needs as children" (p. 348). Children are increasingly exposed to consumer media in the form of television, movies, video games, and digital media in much the same way adults are, and specifically children ages four to twelve "are increasingly defined and viewed by their spending capacity" (Hill, 2011, p. 348), as their play being coopted by advertising and consumerism of toys. Play, once the site of creativity and imagination for child culture, is increasingly being defined through the mass marketing of toys to children based on popular media, thus defining what and how children play thereby constraining individual thought and identity formation, and reproducing gender stereotypes (Bakir & Palan, 2010; Briggs, 2007; Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Giroux, 1998; Hartzheim, 2016; Hill, 2011; Kasser & Linn, 2016; Mjøs, 2010; Willett, 2015; Wohlwend, 2017, 2009).

These messages of consumerism have created conformity to hegemonic norms rather than resistance in child culture, which serve to "reproduce and uphold dominant power structures such as the corporation" (Hill, 2011, p. 354). Kasser and Linn (2016)

argue the ideological messages mass media send to children negatively affect value systems by infusing them with a materialistic value orientation, unhealthy eating habits, body image and eating disorders, violence and aggression, and the use of alcohol and tobacco. Furthermore, the perpetuation of gender differences in mass media advertising and branding lead to stereotypical depictions of boy and girl toys and behavior, which in turn affect and perpetuate gender norms (Bakir & Palan, 2010; Briggs, 2007; Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016). Understanding the role corporations play in cross marketing and branding toys and media narratives to young children, the discussion moves to the specific gender biases researchers have found in children's popular culture.

Gender Bias in Toys and Media Narratives

There have been quite a few studies on toys and gender, most commonly focused on the colors pink and blue in toy aisles and the gender norms implied with those colors (Karniol, 2011; Trawick-Smith, Wolff, Koschel, & Vallarelli, 2015; Wong & Hines, 2014). Particularly in regards to gender representation in LEGOs, Black, Tomlinson, and Korobkova (2016) examined how LEGOs were marketed to males and females through differences in difficulty, and the associated anticipated identities with play practice. They analyzed two LEGO lines, Friends (marketed towards girls, with pinks and other pastels) and City (marketed towards boys, with urban and dark colors) and found that while the complexity of building was equal or greater for the Friends set, LEGO seemed to miss the mark on anticipated gendered identities. The authors report the top three themes in the LEGO City sets were Work (23), Heroism (12), and Agency (10) while instances of the themes in LEGO Friends set were Leisure/Recreation (32), Companionship (9), and Food (9). In other words, the hegemonic norms were that males were expected to take active,

exciting roles in adventure and work, while girls were assigned play activities surrounding relaxation and domesticity, safety and friendship. Likewise, another study on LEGO specialty sets found they are:

> …even more directly targeted to stereotypically feminine interests and play styles. An advertisement for the LEGO Butterfly Beauty Shop, for example, urges girls to "Get primped and pretty" and to "Shop for lipstick, makeup and hair accessories! Emma and all of her friends will look fabulous with bows, sunglasses, a hairbrush, mirror, lipsticks and new hair styles" (LEGO Shop, 2015). (Liben, 2016, p. 16)

These stereotypical gender roles are found not only in toys, but embedded in media narratives as well. The pilot study on toy castles, discussed in Chapter 1, supported these gender norms found in this larger body of literature.

Many researchers have specifically focused on gender roles in Disney movies, which are highly influential in the lives of young children due to their societal pervasiveness (Artz, 2004; Briggs; 2007; Mjøs, 2010; Towbin, et al., 2004; Wohlwend, 2009). Disney movies re-interpret classic fairytales, often embellished to exaggerate the power and goodness of dominant groups or to forefront a dominant cultural narrative (Artz, 2004; Briggs, 2007; Towbin et al., 2004), which contain images of castles as the residence of royalty. Furthermore, Towbin et al. (2004) also emphasize that while adults learn most readily from written material, young children do so through video, especially as young pre-readers, making them more susceptible to the implicit gendered messages in media.

Superhero media narratives have also recently been analyzed for their gender portrayals, and have found to be likewise lacking from a feminist perspective. A study by Miller and Plencner (2018) on the television series *Supergirl* highlights the dangerous neo-liberal feminist interpretation of women who can, or at least *should*, outperform men in the workplace while also balancing family life, embodied in the character of the high powered female boss, who also brands and sells Supergirl as an object. Supergirl effectively hides her identity from her boss, who she sees daily, only by letting her hair down, removing her glasses, and putting on her sexy superhero costume, linking femininity to sexuality. Coyne et al. (2014) also critically examine the superhero roles and how the hyper-masculinized role of male superheroes and the highly sexualized role of female superheroes perpetuate gender norms in child culture from very young ages, with media messages outweighing the influence of parental messages about gender.

Wohlwend's (2009) study was particularly relevant to understanding how kindergarten girls re-narrate Disney Princess stories in classrooms where play and literacy are integrated. In this study, Wohlwend found a classroom with a permeable curriculum, one that embraced a play-literacy philosophy wherein students had access to toys from home and in the classroom and were encouraged to use play and storyboards when writing stories during writer's workshop. The author focused on a group of three girls (and two boys, though they were not focused on in this study) who engaged in Disney Princess play and analyzed the ways their personal agency influenced the stories provided by the media. While many traditional gender norms were enacted by the girls playing with princess dolls, such as centering on family life in the castle, others were challenged, such as the transformation of a princess into a superhero. Wohlwend (2009)

argues that not only does active play with toys during writing improve student ability to tell stories as opposed to the pattern writing (I like…) found in other kindergarten classrooms, but it also allows for a space for children to critically examine the hegemonic narratives of the media they are exposed to in relation to gender, race, and class.

As Giroux (1993) warns, there indeed seems to be a crisis of representation, which is supported by researchers of gender representation in Disney movies and the original fairytales they are based on. The Towbin et al. (2004) study reviewed previous literature findings that supported either a lack of representation or negative representations of female characters, as well as those of different ethnicities and LGBTQ characters across television shows. Their study focused on how these roles are portrayed (or not) across 26 Disney movies. In regard to female characters, the researchers found the following: "(a) A woman's appearance is valued more than her intellect; (b) Women are helpless and in need of protection; (c) Women are domestic and likely to marry; (d) Overweight women are ugly, unpleasant, and unmarried" (Towbin et al., 2004, p. 30). Similar findings related to female roles were discussed by researchers employing a feminist analysis of fairytales (Lieberman, 1972; Kostas, 2018). These internalized messages have an impact on young girls' identities and future aspirations (Liben, 2016), relegating them to subservient, domestic roles, which reinforce unrealistic beauty standards if left critically unexamined.

However, the representation of masculine male qualities is also detrimental to boys as the Towbin et al. (2004) found the following male stereotypes throughout Disney movies: "(a) Men primarily use physical means to express their emotions or show no emotions; (b) Men are not in control of their sexuality; (c) Men are naturally strong and

heroic; (d) Men have non-domestic jobs; and (e) Overweight men have negative characteristics" (p. 28). Again, these implicit messages shape young boys' ideas of masculinity and how they relate to each other and to women, thus perpetuating hegemonic norms and ideals that shape the social stratification landscape. Furthermore, as femininity is defined in opposition to masculinity, we can see how this defines women as emotional, responsible for their sexuality (and men's), as naturally weak and in need of protection or saving, and who work in domestic jobs—though being overweight has negative connotations for both genders. As Wohlwend (2009) emphasizes, media acts to "convey more subtle narratives about identity and status that relate to global markets and societal beliefs about gender and childhood" and represent "*anticipated identities*: identities that have been projected for consumers and that are sedimented by manufacturers' design practices and distribution processes" (p. 59). Examples of how anticipated identities are communicated through color stereotypes and types of play, such as dollhouse play for girls, will be reviewed next.

Color Stereotypes

Much of the research on children's toys focus on the gender stereotyping of colors (Karniol, 2011; Liben, 2016; Wong & Hines, 2014). Most of this research has supported the notion that gender color preferences are socially constructed as opposed to being biologically essential. A history of gender color supports the cultural construction theory by pointing out that prior to World War I, the colors pink and blue were actually reversed in gender attributes. Pink was seen as a stronger color and assigned to the masculine domain, while blue was interpreted as delicate and feminine (Maglaty, 2011).

The modern socially constructed color preferences (pink for girls and blue and bold colors for boys), clearly seen in color coded toy store aisles, "drives stereotyped-based expectations as to the association of objects, clothing, dispositions, and activities with individuals of a given gender" (Karniol, 2011, p. 120). Interestingly, Karniol (2011) replicated a study from an earlier researcher and found while children showed a preference for gendered colors, it was a weaker indicator than other gender-identity markers in toys, as illustrated by an example of boys choosing a pink Batman and girls choosing blue Bratz dolls. Wong and Hines (2014) also found toy and activity preferences linked to gender to be stronger than associations with gender-type color preferences. However, these researchers also argue that color preference could be indirectly reinforced by toy and activity preference. In other words, when a girl enjoys playing with a castle, if the castle happens to be pink, this can lead to a positive association with pink.

Liben (2016) discusses the stereotypical use of pink as an indicator of a girl's toy in the marketing of LEGO's Pink Brick Box and the following consumer comments on Amazon's webpage demonstrate pink as a gendered color:

> For example, "Laura" (on March 13, 2012) writes, "My granddaughter loves this girlie set! She's 4 and prefers playing with this set now, rather than her brother's black, grey and red Lego sets, the ones she used to spend hours playing with." Similarly, "an active mom" (August 23, 2010) writes, "My daughter & son fought over his LEGOs. she was thrilled to have her own. We're so happy they have girl LEGOs!!" (p. 15)

The author goes on to point out these comments demonstrate the girls had no resistance to playing with the non-pink sets before these were purchased, suggesting perhaps this is an intentional move to sell twice as many LEGO sets by targeting different sets to siblings of different genders, as well as suggesting some parents are literally buying into these gender binaries.

Dollhouses

Just as a review of Disney movies shows a disproportionate number of female characters as domestic and in search of love and family, these feminine norms are reinforced through toys as well. The dollhouse is a particularly relevant toy to study in relation to castles, as many toy castles are marketed towards girls as dollhouses. As girls engage in dollhouse play, they are seen to be in training for later adult domestic roles, roles which "unfortunately tend not only to re-establish patriarchal hierarchies but also to foster impossible expectations of emotional satisfaction for all inhabitants within an unchangeable 'felicitous space' called home" (Clark & Higonnet, 1999, p. 153). Liben's (2016) article discusses how domestic play translates into training for a woman to "become a 'real' homemaker," as opposed to a lawyer, for example (p. 8). This is supported by Wohlwend (2017) explanation of how dollhouses are designed for domestic play, thus acting as scripts for children's envisioning of themselves and mediating social actions.

Chen (2015) explains doll houses began in the sixteenth century as two kinds: those marketed as collectibles for adults, which focused on showing off wealth and rank, and those marketed for children, which "had a more didactic function and was seen as part of useful training in domesticity" (p. 279). Furthermore, Wohlwend (2017) suggests

the small space in a dollhouse promotes play that "creates a need to share materials, take turns, and collaborate on improvised meanings" (p. 119), suggesting a feminine style of play. Thus, the toys send gendered messages, allowing children to imagine a future limited with adult imposed gender norms (Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016). Based on the toy castle data collected, it seems castles marketed towards girls represent both the elaborate palace motif and the prestige of owning a dollhouse acts as a signature of wealth and rank within the social hierarchy, while also training girls for domesticity (Chen, 2015; Wohlwend, 2017). These patterns of gendered play expectations and training embedded in toys, such as the dollhouse, were also seen in the castle toys from my pilot study.

Castles as Sites of Hegemonic Domination

As detailed in Chapter 1, the data collected in my sample of 35 pictures of castle toys implied that royalty, defined as those residing in positions of power within the castle, is primarily White and female. Furthermore, not only were girls represented more in castle toys, but the toys were marketed very differently to boys and girls, with implications of danger, adventure, and military might available in boy play and implications of domestic, pretty dollhouses for girl play.

Disney, LEGO, and Playmobil were by far the most prolific companies marketing castle toys during my particular visits to toy stores. All of the toys marketed by these three brands had connections to child media, either in the form of games, movies, or Netflix series, illustrating the close tie between media and corporations within popular child culture, and the cross branding of toys, games, movies, and shows. The smaller toy marketers were more likely to promote a generic, fairytale based source of castle toys

rather than a close connection to specific movies or games, however the implied norms of European royalty, dress, and behavior were still present. This deconstruction of the castle symbol in child media is an example of the kind of work elementary school children can do with this or other symbols in their popular culture, as well as creating counter-narratives, subverting and reclaiming the symbol.

Summary

The literature supports the assertion that corporations are playing leading roles in transmitting and maintaining traditional gender binaries through the vehicle of child media narratives and the subsequent branding of toys and accessories. How these norms are maintained or transformed by children in their actual play with these toys is limited in the current research and remains the subject of this study. Hopefully this contribution will serve to inspire elementary educators to craft critical media lessons and symbol inversion with young students in order to empower children to engage as critical consumers and producers. To refer to the conceptual diagram from Chapter 1 (Figure 1.7) a final time before moving on to the methods chapter, children each have their own unique identity, defined in child culture first by age but intersecting with gender, race, class, body image, religion, interests, social hierarchy, and so forth which create personal agency, and when negotiated socially with peers, creates the group's cultural norms (Bass, 2010). In this vague, ephemeral middle area, the various sites of cultural reproduction such as media, family, place of worship, school, and other social institutions intermingle as children gather together in the work of creating their own culture by playing with alternate realities and stories. Informed by theory and the literature, Chapter 3 will detail the methodology of this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As discussed previously in Chapter 1, this qualitative study focused on two families with siblings between the ages three and nine, for a total of six children in all. The purpose of the study was to understand how these children were accepting and transforming hegemonic norms in play, specifically how children used their agency when interacting with gendered norms embedded in the marketing and media of castles to young children. This study aimed to fill a gap in critical media literacy research by providing a springboard for early elementary teachers and teacher educators, and to build theoretical understanding of the interaction between media and personal agency in the social construction of young children's culture during play.

Research Question

My overarching research question was: How are gender norms are reproduced and resisted through socio-dramatic play with toy castles? In order to answer this question, the following sub-questions were included:

a) How do identity markers (such as race, age, child interest) intersect with gender in children's stories and dramatic play?
b) What social roles do children play in the socio-construction of gender norms?
c) What popular media (shows, games, literature) are referenced during play with different toy castles?
d) What gender roles are embedded in these particular toys and media narratives?

e) How are gender roles in children's stories and art created, using different castles as props (such as fortress or palace, pre-made or child built)?

Participants and Setting

Participants

I recruited families with multiple children between the ages three and ten from a list of colleagues and professors via email with a recruitment flyer attached (see Appendix). Out of three possible families who responded, I chose the two largest families with the siblings closest in age, keeping the third family as a backup, which was never utilized. Both families self-identified as white, upper middle class, with professionally educated, cis-gendered parents in heterosexual marriages. The siblings in the first family were two seven year old fraternal twins, a boy and a girl. The second family included four siblings: a nine-year-old sister, and three brothers, ages seven, five, and three. Table 3.1 is a chart of participants in each family:

Table 3.1

Participants

Parent	Children
1st Family	Jack: boy, 7 years Eliza: girl, 7 years
2nd Family	Timmy: boy, 3 years Hank: boy, 5 years Jamie: boy, 7 years CeCe: girl, 9 years

Choosing young children as participants also meant attending to certain methodological choices when gaining access, interviewing, and observing, as are detailed in the following sections.

Setting and Gaining Access

I chose to observe children playing in the natural context of their home, rather than the teacher monitored environment of the school (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996; Richards, 2011; Simmons, 2014). I believe this is integral to gaining an insider's view of child culture, creating a safe and interactive environment where children have more control (Griffin, Lahman, & Opitz, 2016), especially when getting past the "socially appropriate" surface attitudes towards gender and race adults require. This also helped me position myself as a pretend non-adult, which was vital to gaining an insider's view, as well as supporting the notion of research with, rather than on, children (Davis, 1998; Griffin, Lahman, & Opitz, 2016; Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996; Richards, 2011; Simmons, 2014).

Gaining access was one of the more problematic issues within my study. I recruited families through emails with fliers, but as I was relatively new to the area, had never taught school here, and do not have children of my own, I knew very few families. Furthermore, none of the families wanted to participate in a more intense ethnographic design I had first pictured, asking for 20 hours a week for four months. I scaled back the hours extensively and included two to three families for 4-6 hours a week for three weeks. Three families agreed, though I ended up only using two of them. I am reminded of Hood, Kelley, and Mayall's (1996) article, *Children as Research Subjects: A Risky Enterprise*, which discussed how protective parents are of their privacy within the home, and the difficulty gaining access to children in research. Once I had passed the adult gatekeepers and gained consent, I foresaw gaining and maintaining access to the actual child culture as being potentially problematic. Gaining an insider's view is difficult for

ethnographers, some say impossible, since the researcher's presence inherently changes the dynamics of any situation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). However, it is particularly problematic in closed cultures with easily identifiable outsiders, as in child culture. Furthermore, adults not only are outsiders but outsiders who wield incredible amounts of power over the lives of children, meting out punishments and rewards, and providing for their needs. Children are used to being sanctioned and policed by adults, and as a past teacher, I too was used to sanctioning and policing children. In past observations, I have noticed children pause and glance in my direction, seeming to take my presence into consideration before deciding what to say and how to speak. Thus, attending to these moments and placing myself in as much of a non-authoritarian role as possible, were important considerations to gaining and maintaining access.

As it turned out, and perhaps I should have suspected, the children seemed to more easily pretend I was a child than the adults could, and I felt liked and trusted as the children treated me like an insider, for the most part. Of course, wearing my normal casual dress clothes, purple hair, cartoon t-shirts, and sparkly tennis shoes, and being able to relate and bond relatively easily with children by being rather child-like myself, all helped charm the children and accept me as an insider. When sibling altercations occurred, they did not turn to me to solve them, instead employing parental aid to settle the dispute or soothe hurt feelings. The twins in particular often argued during play, sometimes solving conflict by playing next to each other rather than with each other, or enlisting the help of parents, who were always within earshot, to settle disputes. The amount of parental supervision was interesting to me and very different from my own childhood culture of being told to stay outside and occupied until dark. I am reminded of

the cultivated entitlement parenting of middle class parents in Lareau's (2011) work, which found a higher level of parent supervision when compared to working class families, the latter of which tended to encourage more independence and less supervision. The children were constantly monitored, usually by ear. The supervising parent seemed to stay out of sight but not out of ear shot, and the children broke established rules without being noticed, such as jumping on furniture or in the case of Eliza, the seven year old girl, even sitting on my shoulders or playing horseback. While our antics sometimes seemed to exasperate parents, who corrected this behavior and encouraged their children to be polite and respectful to adults, I saw this as signals the children were accepting me as an insider.

In both families, if children did not feel like answering a question, or doing what I suggested, they did not do so out of a sense of politeness. For example, in one instance when I asked a question during the focus group interview about what happens when a princess wants to do "boy" things, like fight or defend the castle, CeCe (the nine year old girl), ran upstairs and brought down a picture book. Seeing she was going to read it to me, I tried to jump ahead to the last two interview questions and come back to the book later. She completely ignored my request, pausing and then finishing the story of a princess who disguised herself in armor and beat her brothers in a jousting competition. She had decided this story was the answer to the interview question and we would continue with the original order of the questions. In essence, the power balance experienced between adult participants and researchers actually seemed less in my interactions with the children. They gave me what they were willing to give, when they were willing to give, how they were willing to give it, and I had to learn to trust them. In

other words, generally speaking, I was able to build trust as an insider (i.e. not a tattletale or bossy person) and allowed children power during the research (Griffin, Lahman, & Opitz, 2016; Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996; Simmons, 2014).

Graue and Walsh (1998) discuss how they intentionally did not speak to the adults about the observed children out of earshot of the children, and since the parents and the kids were rarely out of earshot from each other, this was not hard to accomplish. While not active participants, the parents would tell me about how they viewed the gender of their children, and stories of children in families different from them, and I also directly asked about how toys were purchased. Again, rather than going to toy stores to pick out toys as I had somehow envisioned, these parents had more of a problem getting rid of toys, and between hand-me-downs from friends or gifts from relatives, rarely bought new toys. The one exception might be LEGOs because they apparently hold their value well, but children rarely shop in toy stores.

Researchers have also emphasized the importance of placing the researcher as a reactive learner with children, rather than the traditionally active adult role (Davis, 1998; Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996; Richards, 2011; Simmons, 2014). This was something I easily participated in, presenting castles and then stepping back to observe and take notes as the children played however they liked with them. I approached the castle art in the same manner, bringing art supplies for puppets and allowing children open choice to write books, draw pictures, or do something else entirely unrelated, as was often the case with the five year old, Hank. I took instruction from the kids, such as when seven year old Jamie asked me to draw the outline of the Minecraft Nether Fortress so he could color it, or how to make the puppet outlines so the kids could decorate them. As discussed

before, the times I did accidentally slip into the active adult role, there was resistance from the children, reminding me to go with their flow.

In other words, rather than viewing consent as a one-time agreement when the form is signed, the issue of consent is ongoing and always present. Unlike adults, children are more likely to refuse consent without outright saying so with humor, silence, or shutting the gates of participation, thus by blocking an adult from having an insider's view (Davis, 1998). Maintaining consent is just as important than gaining it, and the researcher must continuously and respectfully ask for children's consent, requesting permission to observe and interview at each visit, and showing gratitude and respect for children as participating researchers, allowing them to set the pace and activities when they so choose. Sometimes, especially when parents would ask if it was alright if we were off topic, I had to remind myself to trust the kids, to let go and not get hung up on getting that data fix, and to respect children's free time.

Materials

Research materials I developed included: a participation recruitment flier (Appendix C), adult consent and child assent forms, and a semi-formal child interview protocol. The protocol was revised later based on children's feedback and observations of play (Appendix B). To every visit, I brought a notebook for field notes and used a voice recording application on my cell phone. As backup, I brought a phone charger, as well as a handheld battery charged device. Though I brought copies of an observation guide I designed based on Simmons's (2014) recommendations for observing children during imaginative play, I rarely used it but kept the broad ideas in mind, usually preferring to take a picture with my phone rather than drawing the scene (Appendix A). For the

participants, I also brought three examples of toy castles and royal figures, described as follows:

Wooden Fortress: This is a Melissa & Doug castle given to me by a family member for my last birthday, shown in Figure 3.1. It is relatively large, made of a pine colored wood, in what I call the Fortress style. It is a traditional European castle, with turrets, a moving drawbridge, and a castle tower that can be positioned (and thus knocked off from) multiple places. It has many places for characters to stand on different levels (balconies and towers), but perhaps best of all is the dungeon, which has a sliding cage-like door and a trap door on top for dolls to fall through. The design and movable features of this castle make it ideal for action-adventure play.

Figure 3.1: Wooden Fortress

The castle came with two sets of dolls (though the blue box says *figures* and the pink box says *adorable dolls*, even though the figures are identical). There are 14 figures in all, which are comprised of four horses (three brown, one white and pink), two figures in dark colors with hoods, three white haired royal males, one brown haired royal male, one male jester, two blond royal females, and one brown haired royal female (the latter got

lost at some point during the study and is not included in the picture). The dolls are shown in Figure 3.2 and the gendered packaging in Figures 3.3 and 3.4.

Figure 3.2: Wooden Royal Dolls

Figure 3.3: Doll Packaging for Girls

Figure 3.4: Doll Packaging for Boys

Sleeping Beauty's Fairytale Castle: Figure 3.5 is a LEGO set for ages 6-12 with 322 pieces. I chose to buy this one as an example of the Palace style castle because the price was affordable for my budget, but there were also enough pieces to keep the kids busy for a while. It also included two castle toys: Sleeping Beauty's primarily pink and purple palace, and the darker, more evil looking throne room for the evil queen. The toy came with the usual set of LEGO directions for building and stickers for decoration. As is seen in the image, the colors are the socially assigned girl colors, as discussed early on gender and color assignment, and the background is mostly peaceful. Three LEGO figures are included: Sleeping Beauty, The Evil Queen, and the Fairy Godmother dressed in blue. Also, there are some small pieces used as decorations, such as a basket with fruits and vegetables, a tree, and a small rabbit, encouraging story-based dollhouse and caretaking play.

Figure 3.5: LEGO-Disney Sleeping Beauty Palace

Soft Foam Blocks: I included play with a set of soft foam blocks to explore how children chose to build their own castles without the influence of a pre-packaged, media reference toys (Figure 3.6). These were borrowed from one of my committee members and are much like the wooden blocks familiar from childhood. However, they are made of colorful soft foam, which makes for a much quieter block set with which to play.

Figure 3.6: Gender Neutral Foam Blocks

I also brought the pictures of toy castles I collected during my pilot study, two children's books on castles, and art supplies such as paper, markers, colored pencils, googly eyes, pipe cleaners, craft sticks, and glue for castle art.

Procedures

I visited each family to introduce myself, the project, and to gain consent, and then conducted formal observations of each family five times for about two hours per visit, across three weeks. Observations occurred on weekdays during the afterschool hours before dinner. All were audio recorded and I recorded an Observational Narrative journal entry within twenty-four hours of each visit. During the first two visits of castle play and stories, I took an observatory role, writing detailed field notes and sometimes took pictures as siblings played with the toys. Castle play and conversations about gender were later transcribed from audio recordings and field notes. During the next visits, which focused on castle art or media, I played a more participatory role with little to no field notes as I was busy helping the kids create puppets and art work, or actively engaging in media, such as watching *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* or YouTube videos of Disney songs from *Frozen* and *Moana*. The final visit with each family consisted of a focus group interview with the siblings, which were audio recorded and later transcribed. Usually each visit began with castle activities, but often turned into general hanging out and playing when the kids got bored. While this was fun and important in building relationships and trust, I did not actively gather or analyze data from just hanging out, unless it had something directly to do with gender or castles. While the children seemed to enjoy the study and I certainly was able to access plenty of data, I believe sometimes the study was most disruptive to the parents, as is discussed next.

Research with Children (and Parents)

As mentioned earlier, research with children is different than research with adults. Particularly for researchers using a constructivist lens where children are treated as the subjects and not the objects, this shift in the power dynamic between adult and child was uncomfortable territory for some parents. The most dramatic example of this was during the interview with the twins, Jack and Eliza. Rather than draw or build, as I had suggested they could while we chatted, they chose more active activities, such as jumping on the furniture, throwing nerf balls, braiding my hair, and sitting on my shoulders. At one point, it struck me how very different this interview was from any of the adult interviews I've ever given, and I remarked aloud on this. Eliza's response was that she's not an adult, and we laughed together. In my mind, this was a good thing. The children were comfortable, setting the pace of the interview, controlling the setting, and the data the conversations were generating was powerful. In fact, the behavior of the children reflected Griffin, Lahman, and Opitz's (2016) recommendations that interview methods be age appropriate in a safe and interactive environment where power differential is minimized and engagement is used to ensure participation. However, my remark caused the listening parent to come into the room. She immediately corrected their behavior, told them to stop climbing on me and jumping and throwing things, threatened to take pompoms from their behavior jars, and suggested as I had earlier they find something quieter to do, like draw while we talked. Jack got upset and pouted upstairs for a few minutes, while Eliza and I continued with the interview. Though well intentioned, and perhaps mistaking my remark as a plea for help, this only caused disruption to the unconventional interview.

In fact, when analyzing the transcriptions, the biggest criticism I have for myself during this interview was the ways in which I acted like *too* much of the active adult, rather than reactive to the children (Davis, 1998; Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996; Richards, 2011; Simmons, 2014). There were times when the children specifically asked for a break in the lengthy forty minute interviews and I wished I had been better about listening and stopping for a while, rather than pushing on as I did. The adult part of me wanted that data, wanted to keep the conversation focused as I would in the classroom, despite all the signs the children needed a break. It is hard to break out of this role, and parents also seem to encourage "on task" behavior, telling the kids to pay attention when I asked questions, or expressing concern for my data collection if something unexpected, such as a neighborhood friend showing up and playing something not related to castles. In addition to staying on task, parents encouraged children to be polite and respectful to adults, a social convention my role as a pretend non-adult pushed up against. For example, after a few visits when Eliza began opening my backpack to see what I had brought *us*, her behavior was corrected and she was told to ask permission first, thus emphasizing the power dynamic between child and adult, rather than lessening it.

This is in no way a criticism of these parents. Teaching children polite and respectful behavior to all people is important and should be expected. However, when intentionally conducting research involving unconventional adult roles with children, I found myself navigating between the bi-cultural worlds of parents and children. In some cases, the parents seemed frustrated I was not doing more to maintain my adult role and felt the need to step in and re-draw these boundaries. Luckily, there was never a need for me to step out of this role to ensure the health or safety of the children. While I had

explicitly talked about my pretend non-adult role in the initial meeting, this was probably something I should have addressed and discussed more with parents throughout the course of the study, and is definitely a methodological aspect which should be anticipated and further researched when working with young children.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

These visits generated multiple types of data, as detailed in the following Table 3.2, followed by descriptions of each type:

Table 3.2

Types of Data

Data Type	**Data Source**
Transcriptions	Blend of audio recording and field notes, including castle stories, informal interviews, and focus group interviews
Observational Narrative Entries	Narrative journal of my visits, interpretations, methodological choices, and experience of the observations
Images	Collected images of castle toys and figures, student art, and media referenced during play

Transcriptions: While observing and chatting with the kids, I audio recorded just about everything using an app on my phone, uploaded these to Google Drive, and then saved them to my laptop. I then listened to them in a dictation program, which while the dictation software gives a kind of beautiful random poetry which was not helpful to me, the program did allow to me slow down and speed up the recording. As I listened back to the audio recordings, choosing sections to transcribe, which included all instances of castle play/stories and conversations related to gender, I kept my field notebook handy. This helped to clear up confusing audio parts, describe the visual aspects and character

choice during play, and alerted me to relevant sections to transcribe. Because play and social interactions are multi-sensory, the transcription includes not only just the audio, but my italicized descriptions, and some initial analysis as I pondered the data. I also created headings for both castle stories (I can find and copy the stories for the kids more easily) and the interviews, including informal times when we were chatting and gender issues arose and were discussed.

In addition to the informal interviews that occur during play and art observations, I took into account what researchers have recommended when crafting the semi-formal interview questions for the final visit (Davis, 1998; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996; Simmons, 2014). As mentioned earlier, I drafted a template for types and possible questions included in the IRB and with parent consent forms, but also personalized the list of interview questions based on observations of play and gender, as a form of member checking my observations and interpretations (see Appendix). Researchers suggest when studying this age group to conduct group interviews, use props (in this case, castle toys and dolls), ask children to tell the story of their imaginative playtimes with castles, and read transcription aloud for member checking (Davis, 1998; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Hood, Kelley, & Mayall, 1996; Simmons, 2014). Furthermore, Graue and Walsh (1998) suggest writing interview questions using hypothetical questions as this resembles pretend play children, which young children are particularly familiar with, as well as the use of third person questions that focus on what "children" do rather than what that particular child does. This allows a child "to answer honestly without having to implicate himself" (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 115), thus reducing the power and policing imbalance between children and myself as an adult researcher.

Another popular form of interviewing children is known as "storycrafting." This began in Finland and has increased in popularity. In this method, children are invited to tell a story, the researcher records the story, and then reads it back to the child, allowing them to make any revisions (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Karlsson, 2013). In my case, I presented the children with a castle prop and asked them to tell me a story through their play. I then transcribed the stories and followed the "storycraft" method of reading it back to them for member checking purposes.

Observational Narrative Journal: Within 24 hours of each visit, I made a journal entry of my time with the kids, as recommended by researchers (Creswell, 2013; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Van, 1988). This is very honest and open writing, including my feelings and reactions to data collection that day. I have attempted to write in a descriptive, narrative, and honest way. While my transcriptions try to stay true to the participants' views (as much as possible), here is where I allowed for my own subjective experience and to tell the story clearly and honestly through my eyes. When comparing the transcriptions with my narrative, there are places where things are misremembered or misinterpreted, emphasizing the subjective nature of perspective and fallible nature of memory, which is also why data triangulation is important. From an educator's perspective, it is also this writing that allows me to reflect, critique, and plan for the next visits.

Images: During the visits, I collected pictures of the toy castle buildings and figure arrangements during play, children's castle artwork, and images I found online of media referenced castles during play, such as Hogwarts and Elsa's Palace in *Frozen*. All

these images, especially the ones created by the children, were analyzed for gender themes.

Creating a Data Record

Once I had collected transcriptions, observational narratives, and images, I used all three types of data to create a data record in an effort to organize and reduce the data to a manageable form for analysis. I relied on different types of data depending on the context of each visit to compile multiple forms of data into one general narrative record for each family. Since I was an observer role, the data record for the first two visits relied on transcriptions and images of castle toys. When I was in a participatory role, the data record relied more on my observational narratives and images of child art and media. I also created a spreadsheet organizing the children's castle stories and play from the first two visits for easier analysis. The final visit, the focus group interview, relied on transcription. Once I had a reduced and organized a data record for each family, and triangulated with different types of data interweaved, I began a formal analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

Once the data record for each family was created, I began my formal analysis by first classifying the sections of data as either: methodological, descriptive, interpretative, or discourse. I then drew heavily from Critical Discourse Analysis, which broadly speaking, relies on uncovering patterns of power in discourse (Ermann, Ponsford, Spence, & Wright, 2014; Gee, 2014; Hart, 2008) and in this particular case, through a feminist lens focused primarily, though not exclusively, on gender. More specifically, and as the author recommends, I used Gee's (2014) toolkit to pick and choose several of

his discourse analysis tools in order to question and analyze the language use in different ways. The following are the tools and brief descriptions I pulled from his work, shown in Table 3.3:

Table 3.3

Discourse Analysis Tools Used (Gee, 2014)

Tool	**Analysis Inquiry Questions**
4: The Subject Tool	Why speakers have chosen the subject, what they are saying about it, how they could have make another choice, and why they did not. Focus on castle stories and play, such as character and plot choices.
13: The Context is Reflexive Tool	How is the speaker shaping, replicating, or transforming gender norms?
16: The Identities Building Tool	What socially recognizable identity(ies) is the speaker trying to get others to recognize? What does their language use say about how they treat other's identities in relation to their own? What identities are they inviting others to take up?
17: Relationship Building Tool	How is language being used to build, sustain, or change relationships among the speaker, other people, social groups, cultures, or institutions?
25: The Intertextuality Tool	How is language being used to refer to other texts or social languages, specifically to media
14: The Significance Building Tool (Applied towards Discussion)	How are words and grammatical devices being used to build up or lesson significance for some things but not others?

While the data analysis process is presented in a linear fashion, the reality is that these steps are largely iterative in nature (Ezzy, 2002; Creswell, 2013), and my analysis began while I was in the field, and while transcribing, initial findings often jumped ahead to discussion based interpretation. However, formal analysis began with a re-reading and color coding of the data record for each of these tools, using the comment function to make notes of the answers to the corresponding questions. I used these to creating themes

and categories, until the data were exhausted and findings were clearly organized and delineated. These categories were reported as my findings in the next two chapters, and using the significance analysis tool, and are linked back to the research questions and literature.

While my participants and I in many ways speak to the dominant culture by virtue of being middle class and white, I was careful to include multiple perspectives and voices as I crafted my findings, as is common in cultural studies (Ezzy, 2002), in order to provide a snapshot of not only how these particular children interacted with castles (mediated through play) to construct socio-cultural gendered norms, but also to reflect on how children outside the dominant culture might be limited by the toys and cultural narratives of power and privilege as well. Therefore, while most of the analysis is of differences within the dominant culture, some attention is paid to what it might mean to those outside this culture as well.

Limitations and Future Studies

Major limitations commonly present in qualitative studies are small numbers of children and observation hours. With more resources and time, a larger scale qualitative study including more diverse families would be an interesting comparison and lead to more generalizability, such as the use of twelve families across a matrix of race and class in Lareau's (2011) *Unequal Childhoods*. However, what can be gleaned from this study is a nuanced examination of how *some* children replicate or transform gender norms, which is useful in its own right.

Future studies could examine these same questions of cultural construction and reconstruction in one family, but more in depth, ethnographically, and also include social

peer groups. This was my initial vision for the study, and while it was difficult to find a family willing to participate to that extent, an ethnography of this sort would also be valuable, as I suspect same gender peer play may look very different from cross-gender sibling play. It would be powerful to see teachers and teacher educators conducting this kind of action research in their own classrooms, examining all kinds of hegemonic norms and messages in children's popular media, and learning how children accept and transform cultural norms as a tool for social empowerment.

Summary

This chapter has detailed my methodology and Chapter 4 will contain the results of my analysis, followed by a discussion of the findings connected back to the literature in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 will focus on the implications of hegemonic gender norms and include recommendations for educators and parents.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS ON GENDER IDENTITY AND POPULAR MEDIA

Introduction

Fairytales have long been studied through a feminist post-structuralist lens (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018; Lieberman, 1972), focusing on analyzing children's gender discourse and understanding the process in which children adopt ideologies as their own for the purposes of potentially changing these processes to be more gender inclusive. This study is grounded in these research findings and adds to the literature by examining gender norms and fairytales through a slightly different lens—the castle. The term fairytale denotes a fantasy genre of children's literature and calls to mind book or movie titles defined as such. Since fairytales are usually based in European medieval times and often involve royalty, just like castles, castles are often represented in these stories. However, the term castle denotes a setting and invokes a subjective (and gendered) visual image or impression in a person's mind. It is easier to picture a castle than it is to picture a fairytale, thus the castle has power as a visual symbol, and children's drawings may be analyzed for gendered messages. Furthermore, while the castle is often linked back to fairytales, sometimes castles are found in other fantasy or action media, and the close association between the two for all my participants situates these findings nicely within the literature on gender and fairytales.

This chapter and the next one, Chapters 4 and 5, focus on my findings and relate these findings back to the literature. The first part of Chapter 4 will introduce readers to

the children's gendered identity, their process of "being" or performing, using personal agency to embody their gender identity through their interests, dress, and discourse—thus performing gender as a state of being, "doing boy or girl," as Paechter (2010) explains. In this way, readers are able to see the nuanced and different (though often binary) ways children perform being boys, girls, or a little of both. The second part of Chapter 4 will focus on the media children related to castles and a brief analysis of embedded gender norms through a poststructural feminist examination, as Lieberman (1972) and Kostas (2018) used with fairytales. Thus, Chapter 4 will focus on the bottom (gender identity) and top (media) circles from my conceptual diagram, shown in Figure 4.1. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the findings related to the middle circle, the process of using agency in a community of practice (Paechter, 2010) to either reproduce or challenge gender norms.

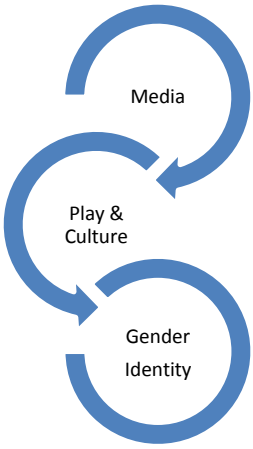

Figure 4.1: Conceptual Diagram

The research questions are also organized according to the above conceptual diagram and will be answered in each section, with the overarching research question being discussed at the end of Chapter 5.

Research Questions

How are gender norms reproduced and resisted through socio-dramatic play with toy castles?

a) How do identity markers (such as race, age, child interest) intersect with gender in children's stories and dramatic play?
b) What social roles do children play in the socio-construction of gender norms?
c) What popular media (shows, games, literature) are referenced during play with different toy castles?
d) What gender roles are embedded in these particular toys and media narratives?
e) How are gender roles in children's stories and art created, using different castles as props (such as fortress or palace, pre-made or child built)?

The overarching pattern which can be seen through all three areas of castle media, gender identity, and child culture is the reliance on binary thinking related to both gender and age. Roles are defined in terms of adult-child and male-female contrasts, an either-or binary positioning but not both simultaneously (Kostas, 2018), such as prince or princess, king or queen, queen or princess, fortress or palace, and so forth. In this study, I took a more observational role in that I did not work to explicitly challenge children's norms. However, understanding the process of how gender norms are created can help us understand how to disrupt and transform those norms using a critical curriculum pedagogy in elementary school classrooms, as will be discussed in Chapter 6 on implications and recommendations. As Davies and Banks (1992) state in their follow up study, "One of the observations made in Frogs and Snails was that there were many

different ways of being male and female and that in an ideal world we would all have access to many or all of these possible ways of being" (p. 5).

The Children, Gender Identity, and Social Relationships

As opposed to structuralism, which posits that children passively adopt ideological gender norms, poststructuralism recognizes children as active agents in adopting and reinforcing these structural norms as if they were their own, unable to recognize how ideologies, or outside structural systemic messages such as media, play a role in these social constructions (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018). Therefore, with a focus specifically on gender norms through a feminist lens, the next section will examine the way children use gender binaries to express their own gender identity and their sibling relationships with the following sub-questions associated with the Gender Identity circle.

a) How do identity markers (such as race, age, child interest) intersect with gender in children's stories and dramatic play?
b) What social roles do children play in the socio-construction of gender norms?

Researchers express gender as a way of being, a performance, as mentioned previously (Davies & Banks, 1992; Paechter, 2010). Gender identity is performed by how we dress, what we say, what activities we participate in, and the gender of our chosen friends, expressed as gender binaries of masculine and feminine. Even within gender, these binaries are used to describe differences in female identity, such as a "girly-girl" as performing feminine versus a "tomboy" performing as masculine identities, but never both at the same time (Paechter, 2010).A similar binary system is used when looking at differences in masculine culture, defined as boys acting more or less feminine (Coyle,

Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016). The following findings will describe the siblings in the two families, focusing on how the children perform their gender and sibling relationships in various ways.

It is important to emphasize that these are *sibling* play groups, not *peer* play groups. This means playmates are not self-selected, nor are of a single gender, and as family culture is different from peer culture, the children's social roles may be different from the roles they play with friends. The children performed their own distinct identities, interests, and relationship status within the group. Because all the participants were young white children from upper middle class, educated parents, these findings highlight culture is not monolithic and describes some of the within-culture differences. The following section will provide a chart (Table 4.1) and description for each family, depicting the children's biological sex, age, and gender identity performance, followed by a thick description of children's gendered ways of being, with support pulled from excerpts and quotes from the data record. The description also includes the social standing in the sibling group and self-identified interests and personality traits.

Table 4.1

Family 1

Name	**Age**	**Biological Sex**	**Gender Identity**
Jack	7 years old	Male	Masculine Conforming
Eliza	7 years old	Female	Feminine Conforming

The seven year old twins, Jack and Eliza, were very active and energetic, as noted repeatedly in my observational narrative, starting with the initial meeting to sign consents, when, in his excitement, Jack accidently hit his mom in the face with his plastic

sword. The physical energy of these two impacted the ways data was collected, how we played together, and sometimes even the patience of the parents. Eliza was often in direct physical contact with me, either playing with my hair, sprawling on my lap, horse-back riding with me as the horse, sitting on my shoulders, or just tucked up next to me watching a movie. She complimented my lipstick color and my purple princess hair. Jack kept his distance physically, perhaps because we are not the same gender, but was also very physical, jumping on the furniture, throwing soft balls, and standing in front of the television to act out the *Harry Potter* movie we watched.

Eliza was the leader of the two, often spoke in definite terms during the interview, and shared her opinions. While she and Jack often began playing together, they wanted to play differently and cooperative play ended up as parallel play, or stopped altogether. For example, when playing with the fortress, Eliza was the queen and tried to give the jester (Jack) a tour of the castle. Meanwhile, Jack wanted the jester to practice flipping, riding horses, and jumping from castle towers. These different story lines in play, or wanting to build different sections or kinds of castles, meant play ended up diverging. Another example of parallel play was when Eliza was building the Sleeping Beauty Palace and Jack decided to build a spaceship instead. Sometimes, such as when Eliza quit playing when her brother would not let her (the princess) beat him (the prince) in the jousting competition, play was halted.

Both their mom and dad mentioned on separate occasions how gender conforming the twins were, saying they did not dress them in the traditional pink and blue of girl and boy, but that the children began requesting things like clothes, bedroom decorations, and tableware that aligned with traditional gender conforming ways of being at a young age.

Eliza's bedroom was pink and frilly, with a tea set in the corner and a template for a paper doll fashion design toy on her table. By contrast, Jack's room was in dark colors, with a space science theme, and a trophy case. When a pompom from one of the behavior jars fell out, they could tell *exactly* whose it was based on the color. These gender conforming ways of being were also exhibited during castle play, for example when Jack refused to play with the LEGO palace set and told a story of tricking friends by putting a boy toy (his gray LEGO spaceship) in the pink LEGO palace box. Likewise, Eliza complained of the lack of furniture in the wooden fortress, and her stories focused on make-up and clothes, "beauuuuutiful" princesses, and bossy queens.

Overall, Jack and Eliza could be confidently described as gender conforming and they each sought to play in gender conforming ways, as depicted in Table 4.1. When I asked why they always chose characters of their own gender, they gave the following answer:

> ***Well, E, you always played the girl characters and J, you always played the boy characters. Is that true?***
>
> **E: Yes, but we just think it should be that way.**
>
> **J: Yeah**
>
> **E: Because you have to talk them. There has to be a girl voice, or it won't make exactly sense.**
>
> **J: And the girls, they have to act like nice and the boys don't really act so nice**
>
> **E: So there sort of has to be a girl and a boy**
>
> **J: Yeah, the girls have to play with girls and the boys play with boys.**

Eliza and Jack discussed definite gender binaries, claiming the play wouldn't make sense if characters were playing cross gendered roles, calling on the stereotype of nice girls and not so nice boys, and further suggesting play be segregated for these reasons. Being twins, and the only children, may have intensified their gender identity, but researchers also argue for other factors which may impact children's gender conformity including age, having a mother who works outside the home, and past experiences with gender non-conformity (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018; Paechter, 2010). In short, while there are many external structural factors that may affect gender identity, this study specifically looks at the relationship between popular media narratives and gender construction. Similar to the second family, which I will describe next, cooperative cross-gender play was difficult and usually unsuccessful.

The second group of siblings was very different from the twins. Upon first meeting them, I noted how much quieter and calmer they were, most likely due to the reminders of the youngest three year old brother, Timmy, who was often napping. The sister, CeCe, was clearly the leader at age nine, and her relationship with me was different from Eliza's. She was two years older, did not engage with me physically, and enjoyed chatting and art in the company of me and her mom. The middle boys, Hank and Jamie, ages five and seven respectively, were very physically active, much like Jack, literally climbing the walls and doing stair jumping contests, but reserved their energy (and noise) for when Timmy was up from his nap. For the most part, they also exhibited gender conforming play, playing action scenes with dolls and building cannons for long stretches at a time. The following excerpt provides a snapshot into the action play typical of Hank and Jamie:

J: See this guy! He's gonna fall. Don't save him. He's evil. He's the good guy. The bad guys destroyed it! Booom! ***(the tower falls)*** **Dun dun dun dun dun**

H: They're in jail!

J: **Arggg! Oh no! The good guy fell! The horse is gonna free them! Free them! H, the horse needs to free them.**

(H ignores him).

J: H, it can't all be…sometimes um, we have to make it sometimes the good guys get out.

H: They're rebuilding

J: Try to destroy it

(More fighting sounds)

H: One of the guys fell in jail.

This passage shows how Jamie and Hank played with the castles typically, focusing on the roles of good and bad guys, destroying and rebuilding the castle, and putting characters in and out of jail, all of which I characterized as conforming masculinity. Their interests also matched their masculine play style, with Hank liking *Star Wars*, as evidenced by his themed bedroom and Stormtrooper costume. Jamie had a Knight costume and a family story about getting upset about leaving his family to go to Knight college. Table 4.2 provides a quick snapshot of the children and their gender conformity:

Table 4.2

Family 2

Name	Age	Biological Sex	Gender Identity
Timmy	3 years old	Male	Feminine Nonconforming
Hank	5 years old	Male	Masculine Conforming

Jamie	7 years old	Male	Masculine Conforming
CeCe	9 years old	Female	Blended

The youngest sibling was Timmy, a three-year-old toddler, with wide eyes and freckles. As the "baby" of the family, Timmy could be described as charming and as CeCe suggested, Timmy was the *real* leader of the family. Children at this age often develop obsessions with one particular story or symbol, such as Jamie's Knight phase, and Timmy's current interest was to be just like Elsa from the Disney movie *Frozen,* and his dressing up as Elsa was a running theme in the family's discourse. Timmy's fancy Elsa dress (blue satin, hoop skirt, with sparkly white lace and glove) was often taken away by his parents when he left it out and didn't clean up. The status of Timmy's Elsa costume, whether it was accessible at the moment or not, is commonly discussed by his older siblings and CeCe described people as supporting, or giving in to, Timmy's desire to dress like Elsa in the following passage:

> **C: He went to his friend M---'s house, and the entire family took pity on him and gave him, let him borrow their Elsa dress. Like, he borrows everyone's Elsa dress. First thing he says when he goes to a friend's house is do you have an Elsa dress? Because he has a lot of girl friends, but he doesn't have any boy friends.**

Timmy's mom allowed the dress to come out of the attic one day for this project and watching him smashed Jamie and Hank's masculine fortress because "I wanna break it" in his fancy princess dress could be interpreted as a symbolic smashing of the patriarchy when viewed through a feminist lens. After being removed from play and counseled by

my mom, Timmy gave an apology and afterwards carefully tiptoed around the block castles, holding up his hoop skirt like a fancy lady from the movies.

I thus categorized Timmy as the most gender non-conforming of my participants, bolstered by CeCe's explanation that all his friends are girls, though it could also simply be an indication of still shifting gender norms in younger children, when they are still being created. It is important to note this does not mean he is transgender, only non-conforming to typical male social groups and play at this stage in his life. This is an example of the social construction of gender versus biological nature. Timmy is biologically categorized by society as male, but right now is identifying with—*performing*—a feminine character and feminine play groups, so socially, he is behaving like a girl. Gender conformity is fluid, and as he grows older he may or may not act in more gender conforming ways. However, this categorization is still binary in nature, so Timmy's fancy Elsa dress and girlfriends represent feminine and *not* masculine identity, a binary and within-gender difference, as discussed in Coyle, Fulcher, and Trübutschek's (2016) article on non-gender conforming behavior.

If Timmy represents gender as fluid and changeable, CeCe's gender identity highlights the notion of gender as a continuum, rather than a binary. The two middle brothers, as well as the twins, all showed rather strong gender conforming ideas of masculinity and femininity, while Timmy showed strong gender non-conforming interests and play. CeCe is a blend, somewhere in the middle of the masculine and feminine continuum, much like the girls who described themselves as "a little girly-girl and a little bit tomboy" in Paechter's (2010) study on the binary nature of femininity. She identifies as a girl, clearly drawing boundaries between herself and her brothers during

play, but as she says, she is also not a girly-girl. Thus, I classify her as somewhat gender-nonconforming, somewhere in-between masculine and feminine performance. She states her identity in the following transcription, when she complains there aren't enough castles that have *both* boy and girl traits:

> **C: Well, I like peace, but the *peaceful*, peaceful ones I'm like ugh, that is not me. Cause I like a little bit of violence, like, I like looking at body parts but I don't want weapons, so I don't really, I can't find any toy castles that I actually like, like that wooden one was good for me.**
>
> ***Why?***
>
> **C: Cause, like, I don't like the *peaceful,* peaceful ones cause I don't like pink. Pink is like, really like a bad, like I don't pink. But I also don't like weapons, so it's hard to find like an in between things, like for me. Like that's what T is, cause he wants to be like J and H, but he also likes the girly stuff. I wish there would be like, an in between set. Cause that would be better for what I'd like.**
>
> ***Did I show you the LEGO Elves castle?***
>
> **C: Yes. I love those. Those are the only personality, um, fitting thing I could find. That's the only personality thing I could find. That's the only one. Cause I'm not like a girly girl.**

Figure 4.2: Castle Representing Both Genders

Dismissing the color pink as too girly and judging the color as "bad" but also characterizing masculinity as too violent and femininity as too peaceful, her words echo those of the girls who define themselves as "a little bit tomboy" in Paechter's (2010) study. This is important as some toy companies attempt to neutralize toys by removing reference to gender completely, selling castles as neither masculine *nor* feminine, but CeCe argues the LEGO *Elves* castle shown in Figure 4.2 represents a castle for both boys *and* girls. CeCe also proudly announced she was the first girl to wear a tie with her school uniform, again demonstrating resistance to traditional gender norms, but still viewing ties as masculine and the color pink as feminine, recognizing traditional gender binaries. Additionally, her bedroom, done in aquamarine with an ocean theme, blended the masculine arena of science while still retaining femininity.

In regards to her relationship in the sibling group, she rarely attempted to play with her brothers and when Jamie asked her to play the role of the good guys with them, she rolled her eyes, saying, "Uh, no. I'm not playing that violent stuff." This meant that unlike Eliza, who interfered with her brother's play, CeCe kept herself removed from it. While the boys played action scenes and built cannons, she silently re-told a folktale with the dolls, or built her own throne out of household items she dragged into the living

room. When her mom asked her why she wasn't building with the blocks, she answered, "I prefer to use my own ideas," positioning herself as a confident and independent.

Despite her claim not to like violent play, she said she would use violence to stick up for anyone who was mean to her little brother Timmy, which led to a long conversation about CeCe being mean to Jamie. I attempted to change the subject, but Hank was particularly insistent to understand CeCe's behavior towards their brother:

C: If someone *was* mean to T, they'd get a good beat, like I would *tackle* them and J knows that I mean business. I can choke people. Yeah, I've done it to J before.

J: And she tried to strangle me

Ohhh

J: She loves to strangle people! All the time!

C: J, I choke like a girl

H: That's actually mean.

J: I choke like a girl, okay?

So talk to me about the people in the castle, the royalty? What's a king's job in the castle?

J: Is it like, to rule?

To rule? So how does that happen?

H: Why'd you choke J? *(directed to C)*

J: Cuz she's mean.

C: It's my personality.

H: Ok *(softly)*

J: She just wanted to be mean.

C: This iPad is so annoying. ***(changes the subject)***

After first appealing to being weaker due to her gender, and thus lessening her responsibility for outcomes of violent behavior, she stated being mean is who she is, a part of her identity. Before I left, she tackled her brothers and put them in headlocks, performing the traditionally violent behavior usually associated with masculinity.

These findings show children as individual, active agents, differing among interests, personality, and gender identity and conformity. While they are not generalizable to all children, nor would necessarily even hold true for these children in a different context, they demonstrate the nuanced nature of sibling groups and relationship dynamics, depicted in the bottom circle of the conceptual diagram. Next, I will discuss the findings from the upper circle, listing media related to castles, analyzing briefly gender norms in the most prominent castle media incorporated in play, and describing how children interacted with media during play.

Gender Norms in Media

I use the term media to represent popular narratives children are exposed to which include games, cartoons, movies, and children's books. Due to merchandising and cross branding, there are many artifacts of childhood, such as toys, children's clothing, dishes, backpacks, and so forth that are linked to media narratives. As mentioned previously, media represents one thread of the external, social structural messages children receive about how to perform gender appropriately. A poststructuralist lens recognizes people adopt external ideologies as their own, rather than assuming they come purely from the self or social group, as a constructivist framework does, or purely from an external

structure, as structuralism does (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018). I thus address the gendered binaries found in popular children's media with the following sub-questions:

c) *What popular media (shows, games, literature) are referenced during play with different toy castles?*

d) *What gender roles are embedded in these particular toys and media narratives?*

When asked to list all the castle media they could, children created a lengthy list of media narratives, as shown in Table 4.3:

Table 4.3

Media Mentioned by Children

Media Title	**Author/Producer**	**Media Format**
Wonder Woman	Warner Brothers	Movie
Beauty and the Beast	Disney	Movie
Tangled	Disney	Movie
Shrek	DreamWorks Pictures	Movie
Lion King	Disney	Movie
Kung Foo Panda	DreamWorks Animation	Movie
Aladdin	Disney	Movie
Moana	Disney	Movie
Trolls	DreamWorks Animation	Movie
Penguins of Madagascar	DreamWorks Animation	Movie
LEGO Elves	LEGO	Web-show
LEGO Ninjago	LEGO	Television show, movie, games
Mario Brothers	Nintendo	Video game
LEGO Marvel Superheroes	LEGO, Warner Brothers	Video game
The Little Mermaid	Disney	Movie
Wicked	IMDbPro	Movie (2019)
Elena of Avalor	Disney	Animated television series
Sophia the First	Disney	Animated television series
Descendants Series	Disney	Television movies
Lots more Disney movies!	Disney	Movies
Folktales	Various	Children's literature
Castle non-fiction	Various	Children's non-fiction

I had not seen all media mentioned by children, nor did I check that each listed narrative actually had a castle, but rather trusted children as experts of their own cultural narratives. Rather than mentioning the media title, sometimes children would name the main princess character, such as Jasmine (*Aladdin*), Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*), and Ariel

(*The Little Mermaid*), emphasizing the close connection between castles and (especially Disney) princesses. As there were too many castle media narratives to analyze, I focused my analysis on the ones children incorporated into their castle play, or discussed at length during the interview, listed in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Media Featured in Children's Castle Play

Media Title	**Author/Producer**	**Media Format**
Sleeping Beauty	Perrault/Disney	Children's literature, movie
Frozen	Disney	Movie
Minecraft	Persson/Mojang	Digital game
Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters	Steptoe	Children's literature
Harry Potter Series	Rowling/Warner Brothers	Children's literature, movies
The Princess Knight	Funke & Meyer	Children's literature

It is important to note that the toy castles I brought to the research site had various connections to media. The wooden fortress had a general connection to the fairytale genre, while the LEGO-Disney *Sleeping Beauty Palace* had a direct connection to a specific fairytale. The foam blocks contained no embedded media reference, though children still integrated popular narratives into play with these blocks. While an entire paper could be written on the gender norms embedded in each of the media narratives the children incorporated into play, I will provide only a brief analysis of each of the featured media stories, using a feminist poststructural lens, similar to Lieberman's (1972) analysis of fairytales.

Sleeping Beauty

The story of *Sleeping Beauty*, which I introduced by choosing Disney-LEGO's *Sleeping Beauty Palace* toy to bring, is especially problematic from a feminist perspective. It is one of the fairytales analyzed in Lieberman's (1972) feminist analysis, though that analysis focuses on the original fairytale and not the Disney retelling. In the

Disney movie version, *Sleeping Beauty* casts the evil step-mother in a traditionally adversarial and competitive role to the innocent princess, as well as reinforces rape culture when Sleeping Beauty passively awaits a prince's kiss while unconscious. In classic fairytale form, the young woman represents passivity and innocence, female relationships are competitive and contentious, and the man's love (or sexual advances) must save the princess in the end. Eliza modified the story somewhat in her retelling after building the LEGO set, seen in Figure 4.3. Her story took the evil witch's perspective and included tricking the princess, using a potion to make herself appear younger, marrying the unknowing prince, and ending with diabolic laughter. Overall, the retelling reproduced the intended gender norms embedded in the referenced media.

Figure 4.3: LEGO-Disney Sleeping Beauty Palace

Frozen

The plot and messages in *Frozen* are quite complex for a children's Disney movie. Elsa, the oldest sister who becomes queen after her parents die, has an ice-based superpower, but after accidentally hurting her younger sister, has to keep herself hidden and her power under control. Her younger sister, Anna, is obsessed with finding a

husband and gets tricked by a handsome, power hungry man. Elsa ends up saving Anna and learning to control and use her powers for good, and the saving love at the end is sisterly love, rather than romantic love. In many ways, Disney is pushing against traditional gender norms from earlier movies by making women more active rather than passive and encouraging sisterly love rather than competition. However, in *Frozen* royalty and power are still equated to white, rich, beautiful women, and help still comes in the form of bumbling good guys and a silly snowman. Elsa, playing the older queen role, is still seen as more powerful and somewhat cold, while Anna is the innocent and boy-crazy younger princess. As mentioned before, this movie played a strong role in the second family's play, as Timmy, the youngest boy, loved dressing like Elsa, and CeCe, who had especially liked *Frozen* when she was younger, decided to make *Frozen* puppets for him, as shown in Figure 4.4. She used these for a singalong of the soundtrack afterwards.

Figure 4.4: Jamie and CeCe's Frozen Puppets

Minecraft

Minecraft is a "sandbox" game, meaning players are free to build and act without set story lines or quests, as if building in a sandbox. It can be played on either a computer or X-box. Unlike many of the role-playing games before it, it has no story line and players can generally choose between building and creating in the world, exploring and fighting monsters, and gathering and farming for resources. It's a very popular game among both boy and girl players, but the cross-marketed LEGO *Minecraft* toy sets are found in the boy's toy section, feature a male *Minecraft* LEGO character, and hold to the themes of sharp angled font and action, implying violence and danger—it is clearly marketed as a boy toy for boy play. It was incorporated into Jamie's art as he was flipping through the pictures of castle toys from my pilot study and decided he wanted to re-create a picture of the Nether Fortress, shown in Figure 4.5. He engaged me by asking me to draw the outline and then he colored and filled in the details, chatting with me about monsters and the scary Nether and the end game, much like online fan chats. The Nether Fortress is located in a particularly dangerous part of the world, where characters can jump through a portal and find themselves facing more powerful monsters and dark treacherous drops over lava, and holds true to the classic Fortress rather than Palace style castle, reinforcing the traditionally masculine norm of adventure and danger.

Figure 4.5: Jamie's Minecraft Nether Fortress

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters is a beautifully illustrated children's book by John Steptoe, which I used to read to my first graders as an example of multicultural princess stories. This book is a powerful example of the representation of black women as beautiful, rather than the Eurocentric racialized standards of beauty. However, a feminist analysis also reveals this story emphasizes many of the traditional hegemonic gender norms, such as the importance of beauty, kindness, and marriage for girls. The story itself is somewhat similar to a *Cinderella* princess story in that there is a kind and selfless sister competing for the prince's hand with her selfish and vain sister. In this story, the prince is a shapeshifter and tricks the princesses during the journey to the castle, testing them for their kindness and generosity. Predictably, the story has a happy ending with the prince choosing the kindness over greed and a happily ever after wedding. A feminist critique could argue that while it is important children see black women as beautiful, it is also important to see Black Princesses, which this story did not depict, as they were merely daughters. It could be argued an African Queen was implied after the happily-ever after marriage, but this was not directly referenced in the book. Furthermore, the story places a

woman's value in beauty first with kindness being secondary, and places the man in the powerful position of choosing a woman. While generosity is a positive trait that arguably all children should learn, the emphasis that women, but not necessarily men, should put other people's needs ahead of their own, shrouded in teaching girls to be "nice," is another reproduced gender norm, both in the book, shown in Figure 4.6, and in CeCe's retelling.

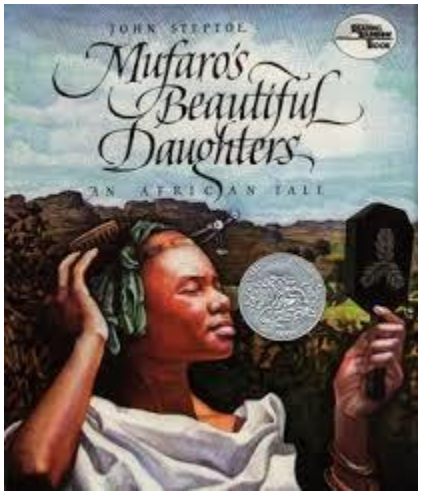

Figure 4.6: CeCe's Media Reference for Fortress Story

Harry Potter **Series**

The *Harry Potter* series is interesting in the context of this study for many reasons. The series began as books by J. K. Rowling, but the movies are also widely popular with young children, thus another example of cross marketed media. While children had been read the stories, they had seen the movies many more times and were probably more familiar with movie versions of the *Harry Potter* stories. Another interesting aspect is the way parents in both families regulated the children's exposure to the movies and books based on their age. This means the youngest, Timmy, had no direct exposure to the series yet, and none of the other children had seen the later movies five through eight. This is something I kept forgetting in my fan-chat with them, often

accidentally referencing some of the great female characters not introduced until later, and having to be careful about not revealing spoilers. This also meant the children had not experienced Hogwarts (Figure 4.7), as a true fortress yet, when it protects the students from the onslaught of the villains, Lord Voldemort and the Death Eaters, in the later books and movies. Rather, in the early movies, the Hogwarts castle sets the stage as a boarding school for select wizarding students. This positions Hogwarts as distinctly different from the castles in all the other media, in that it does not house royalty, thus the characters are free to act in ways not constrained by the roles royalty (such as being a princess) implies. Harry's closest friends are Hermione (a girl) and Ron (a boy), who help Harry in tasks that require action, bravery, intelligence, and wisdom with little reference to romantic relationships, at least until the later movies. In other words, Hermione doesn't have to act in the narrow role of a princess, as her top priority is not marriage, and the adults with power are professors, not the patriarchal monarchy. Of course, the main character is still a boy, Harry Potter, and the most powerful adults, Voldemort and Dumbledore, are both also male. Overall, though, these movies appeal to both boys and girls and do well representing women in a variety of roles throughout the series. However, perhaps because of the lack of royalty that the castle toys and dolls I brought implied, none of the castle play included retellings of these stories. Hogwarts was specifically discussed in interviews with both families, as Jack and Eliza asked we watch a *Harry Potter* movie together, and Jamie showed off his Harry Potter costume.

Figure 4.7: Hogwarts Castle

The Princess Knight

Similar to *Harry Potter*, this story was never directly retold in children's play with the castle toys, but when I asked CeCe about princesses who wanted to do more "boy" things, she ran upstairs, and brought back down *The Princess Knight* by Funke and Meyer, and insisted on reading it aloud to me during the interview (Figure 4.8). Like watching movies together, reading aloud is another form of social play, and the story served as a very appropriate answer to my question. This story could be classified as a counter-narrative in that the princess takes a more masculine role, wanting to learn to joust. This is prohibited for girls, so she dresses as a knight and practices jousting secretly, eventually besting her brothers in a jousting competition and revealing her true nature. Similar to Disney's movie *Mulan*, this princess story attempts to transform the traditional role by depicting princesses in brave, action-oriented, masculine roles. However, while examples of princess counter-narratives are found more regularly now than in the past, the masculine roles have not seen the same feminine counter-representations in any of the referenced media.

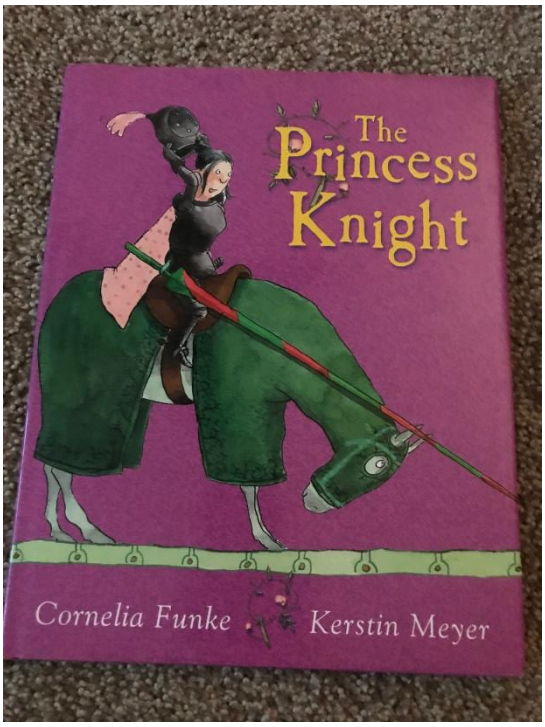

Figure 4.8: CeCe's Answer to Non-conforming Princesses

In conclusion, most of the castle media referenced portrayed traditional gender norms, with the exception of *The Princess Knight* and the *Harry Potter* series. Furthermore, with the exception of only Harry Potter, all of the other media references could clearly be labeled as "boy" or "girl" stories, even the Minecraft castle toys (a game popular with girls) being targeted towards boys. Thus, while girls may be seeing some expansion of gender roles in media, media narratives and accompanying cultural artifacts are still clearly labeled as binaries, for girl or for boy play—not both or either. It is notable that boys have not seen the same gender expansion into more feminine roles within their media stories. In the next section, I discuss the different ways children incorporated these media narratives into their play with castle toys.

Incorporation of Media in Play

An analysis of the ways children interacted with media narratives revealed that they do so in various ways: as plots for their own stories, as sub-culture identities, and for setting precedent when deciding if something is allowed in play.

Media in stories. Sometimes media narratives were retold in castle stories, such as CeCe's retelling of *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* with the wooden fortress, Eliza's *Sleeping Beauty* story when playing with the LEGO set, and Timmy's *Frozen* soundtrack sing along. The stories were somewhat modified, CeCe changing the daughters to princesses and Eliza focusing on the role of the evil queen rather than the hapless princess, but for the most part, these media narratives retained their identity and were easily recognizable. This means the characters and plot also stayed the same, thus reinforcing gender roles embedded in media narratives.

Media as subculture. Children's castle art sometimes featured media, such as in the puppets from *Frozen*, or Jamie's picture of the *Minecraft* Nether Fortress. Art projects, building with LEGOs, and watching movies, such as *Harry Potter*, were also times for socially chatting about media. For example, while drawing his picture, Jamie and I talked extensively about *Minecraft*, like a couple of gamer geeks in an online chat forum. Likewise, all of the kids (except Timmy, who was too young to see it), were also huge *Harry Potter* fans, and watching *Prisoner of Azkaban* with the twins included fan-based chatting, indicative of media centered sub-culture.

Media as precedent. When asked about castles and royalty, what they were and how they behave, children would often use media to site examples, much like lawyers setting precedent in a lawsuit. The media stories children heard told them what could be

imagined. For example, when asked about princess who wanted to fight, Eliza and Jack bring up *Wonder Woman*, a movie they recently saw, whose main character is an Amazon princess, and explain that 1) Wonder Woman had superpowers, which makes her more powerful than a typical princess and 2) she still had to undergo a test of her bravery, a test they claimed boys didn't have to take because they just *are* brave. This finding is echoed in Coyne, Linder, Rasmussen, Nelson, and Collier's (2014) article on superhero play, which argues children are exposed to a "super idealistic masculinity" (p. 416).

CeCe also used media to set precedent for this kind of princess behavior, but instead chose to read a children's book to me, *The Princess Knight*, about a princess who trains secretly at night to beat her brothers in a jousting tournament. The messages in these media examples include an expansion of women's roles into traditionally masculine areas, but only for exceptional women who must first prove themselves.

Timmy's obsession with being just like Elsa from Disney's *Frozen* also incorporated media as precedent strongly. For example, when playing with the soft foam blocks, Jamie and Hank build a fortress style castle with cannons all around, while Timmy, dressed in his fanciest Elsa costume, built Elsa's palace, a tall and slender feminine style castle. For a brief moment Timmy contemplated adding a cannon like his brothers' but decided against it, as seen in the conversation below:

Mom: Well, you know, it doesn't have to be just like Elsa's. It can be yours.

C: It could be Telsa! ***(portmanteau of Timmy and Elsa)***

That's cute!

Mom: Telsa, I like it.

T: We're not gonna have a cannon.

Mom: You're not gonna have a cannon?

T: No, cuz I'm gonna be the same as her.

H: The *real* Elsa doesn't have no cannon.

These examples illustrate differing levels of gender conformity, and show how children sometimes use media narratives to set precedent for determining if alternate roles, or ways of being, are allowed or not. Media as precedent to maintain gender norms is also seen in Jack and Eliza's caveats about *Wonder Woman* having to be superhuman to compete with men, but it can also be used as precedent for transforming gender norms, such as in CeCe's reference to *The Princess Knight*. Timmy's dedication to reproducing Elsa's palace *exactly* also shows how strongly media can influence play, thus reproducing gender roles, and other social norms, *exactly* as they are embedded in media.

Summary

In summary, children performed their gender identities in a variety of ways, and while most were gender conforming, CeCe and Timmy demonstrate some within-culture differences. Likewise, media referenced by the children also generally reflected traditional gender binaries of masculinity and femininity, which were used by children, usually to maintain but sometimes to resist, these binaries. The prevailing gender norms of masculinity as active, dominant, powerful, and adventurous, and femininity as passive, beautiful, weak, and domestically-oriented were found to be very similar to other studies on child gender and fairytales (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018; Lieberman, 1972; Paechter, 2010; Trawick- Smith, Wolff, Koschel, & Vallarelli, 2015). The implications of maintaining hegemonic masculine and feminine binaries will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

It is important to note that direct references to media in children's play, stories, and art were not always present, but many of the gender norms embedded in the media were also performed during children's castle play and art. These findings are described in the following chapter, moving towards the middle circle of the conceptual diagram (Figure 4.1).

CHAPTER FIVE: CHILDREN'S PLAY WITH CASTLE TOYS AND ART

This chapter will examine children's direct play with castle toys and art to address the final sub-question:

e) How are gender roles in children's stories and art created, using different castles as props (such as fortress or palace, pre-made or child built)?

While some of the gender norms in children's play were discussed in the chapter on media, I will discuss two broad findings here, supporting my interpretations with direct examples from children's castle stories, artwork, and conversations: how children actively segregate play by gender and how gender norms are maintained through the power dynamics of the castle characters. This is followed by a discussion answering the overarching research question.

Children Actively Segregate Play

Children actively segregated their play by gender in a variety of ways, including the social expectations that boys play boy characters and girls play girl characters, using color and other appearance-based norms such as clothing and hairstyle to communicate gender, building and drawing castles in the fortress-palace binaries, supporting different play styles, such as action-adventure for boys and storytelling or playing house for girls, and allowing boys to win competitions. Each of these findings is discussed in the following sections.

Boys Play Boy Characters, Girls Play Girl Characters

With the exception of Timmy playing Elsa, all the other children always played main characters that matched their gender. Eliza and Jack's reasoning for this was shared in the previous chapter, citing the need for voice representation of both boy and girl characters, but Jack then stated that boys play with boys and girls play with girls, dismissing the notion of representing both voices in a single story, thus reinforcing the segregated play groups based on gender binaries. When asked what would happen if a boy wanted to "play girlie stuff," CeCe answered it would depend on the individual children, but Jack and Eliza answered this question more definitively in the following way:

> ***Would they still be his friend after he wanted to play with girl stuff?***
>
> **J: No, I don't think so. I think they will actually say like, you're just like a girl. They would say you're a girl in a costume. I think that's what they would say.**
>
> ***So you think they would encourage him to go play with girls if he wanted to play a girl?***
>
> **J: Yeah.**
>
> **E: What if they were at his house? They would probably say let's get out of this rubbish house.**
>
> **J: No, I don't think they would say rubbish, I think they would say, I'm not going to play this game with him if he, I'm not gonna play this with him if he, if he, um, if he plays a girl.**
>
> ***Do you think girls would treat him the same way?***

E: No!!

J: I think girls are more nicer than boys because they, because like if he played with girls, they wouldn't care like if they had to play a boy or not.

E: Because, well, girls are the ones that like princess mostly. They'll be like, we like him a lot, because he likes, he's like us!

In a sense, the children were ignoring the biological sex and focusing more on the gender of their playmates, the latter of which was determined by what gender character a child most wants to play. Jack alluded to the "costume" nature of biological sex, suggesting boys who do not play boy characters, such as Timmy, are reclassified as girls and restricted to playing only with girls. While CeCe claimed to never have known about boys being mean to Timmy for dressing like Elsa, and shied away from making broad gendered generalizations, she did mention Timmy's friends are all girls, which suggests he may have been ostracized from boy playgroups in a passive rather than overt manner that Jack described. In this way, masculine norms are maintained and policed by peers in boy play groups, while they may be more room within girl playgroups for pushing gender boundaries, as girls are described as "nicer" than boys, which is another stereotypical gender binary. Other researchers have also found that masculine culture is more narrowly policed by peers with less tolerance for non-conformity than in feminine culture (Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Rosenberg & Sutton-Smith, 1960). Since the chosen character's gender is a strong indication of the child's own gender identity within the culture, how children interpret a character's assigned gender, for example when playing with the castle dolls, is discussed next.

Color, Clothes, and Hair Determine Gender

When determining the gender of the dolls, and thus which characters to play, children relied on characteristics such as color of clothing, type of clothing such as dresses or pants, and long versus short hair, the same gender markers researchers have also suggested are present in broader society, for example when Liben (2016) describes a study where women in uniform with their hair tucked and no make-up are difficult to distinguish from males. These are socially constructed gender signs were even used to gendered the horses based on color, the white horse with a pink and gold saddle for the pink princess, and the brown horses with dark colored saddles for the boy dolls. Both Eliza and Jack protested profusely when I put a boy character on the pink and white horse, until I switched it to a brown and dark blue horse, because as they emphasized, they *matched.* CeCe put a male character on a pink horse to signify the bad princess being stripped of her resources at the end of her retelling of *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters,* demonstrating she also clearly matched the pink horse with the pink princess. The following pictures demonstrate how children's puppets also conformed to the gender indicators including color, clothes, and hair.

Figure 5.1: Jack and Eliza's Royal Puppets

Jack and Eliza decorated the puppets in Figure 5.1 which corresponded to their gender and Jack specifically confirmed that Eliza had indeed made the princess with long hair.

Make-up, long hair, dresses, and pinks and purples genders the girl puppet, while short hair, pants, a tie, and bold colors denotes boys.

The girl-boy colors binary is especially interesting for a number of reasons. There is much research on the nature of boy-girl colors, with a general consensus that these are socially constructed, not biologically constructed (Karniol, 2011; Navarro, Martínez, Yubero, & Larrañaga, 2014; Paechter, 2010; Wong & Hines, 2015) and researchers have long established colors and dress as gendered markers (Liben, 2016; Maglaty, 2011). As found in my pilot study, toys aisles are still largely segregated by gender, with pastel pinks and purples used to indicate girl toys and dark and bold colors for boy toys. In addition to color being used when advertising toys, these same color schemes were used in children's castle artwork and how they decorated puppets. Children also adopted girl-boy colors in their discourse, such as when CeCe talks about pink being a "girlie" and "bad" color, or how the boys reacted to the pink and purple *Sleeping Beauty* palace LEGOs.

When I introduced the Disney-LEGO *Sleeping Beauty* palace, set with all female LEGO characters and many pink and purple pastel LEGOs, Jack left the room, brought back his own set of gray and black LEGOs, and built his own spaceship next to me and Eliza. When finished with his spaceship, he put it in the *Sleeping Beauty* palace box and told a story about wanting to trick his friends, illustrating the gendered binary nature of toys:

> **J: I'm gonna say this is a present for Anna. *(He holds up the box for the Sleeping Beauty Palace).* They would be like, noooo! And I'd be like, wait 'til you see what's inside.**

E: No, it's for Anna!

J: No, it's for Tom and John. You have to see what's inside. I made it for Tom and John.

So…what you're saying is that Tom and John would look at it and be like, that's a girls toy (not excited voice), and you surprise them?

J: What I'll say is, well, are you gonna open it? And they'll pull out the LEGO that I made for them! ***(laughing)*** **It's a trick!**

This discourse emphasizes the male-female binary by recognizing how children interpret the pink toy package to be for girls, only to be surprised by a boy toy, the gray and black spaceship, inside. This is reminiscent of the research others have done on the gendered marketing of LEGO sets (Black, Tomlinson, & Korobkova, 2016; Liben, 2016). In the second family, Hank also showed no interest in the LEGO palace, but Jamie actually built most of it, showing his only outward sign of gender-nonconformity. The children discuss this later in the interview:

What if a boy like wants to play with something that's pink? Are other boys okay with that?

J: Not really, but yeah, kind of. If it's like nerf guns, yes, probably. I have pink LEGOs.

C: Yeah, you do, but ***(mutters something)***

H: And also you do ***(directed to me)***

Yeah, I do (referencing the Sleeping Beauty castle, which H did not play with, though J did)

C: But you didn't *want* the pink LEGOs, like they came in the plastic sets, you didn't know...

J: Yeah, but you can still use them for stuff. They're still, they're still fun to play with.

Yeah? Nice.

C: They are fun to play with. I like the aquamarine the best.

Jack seemed to be saying that color is not the only indicator of gender, suggesting violent toys like a play gun would trump the gender color, and mentioned having pink LEGOs to support this argument. This is a finding in the literature finding toy type as a stronger gender marker than toy color (Karniol, 2011; Trawick-Smith, Wolff, Koschel, & Vallarelli, 2015). CeCe reminded him of his initial resistance to the pink LEGOs, accepted his changed attitude toward them, and also pushed against binary gender norms by choosing a color that could not clearly be defined as for boys or girls.

Despite these seemingly clear color binaries in their artwork and discourse, when asked directly about boy and girl colors, the children's answers were more complicated. Jack and Eliza's conversation, arguing the concept of boy-girl colors was both real and not real at the same time, emphasized the tension between natural, biological gender differences and cultural socially constructed influences:

J: Yeah, there's no boy and girl colors. Cause like, boys can like pink and purple. Girls can like blue, black, gray, red, gold, and silver. Therefore, gold is, I would, so mostly girls like it and so there's no such thing!

E: Eh, there is no such thing and also you can sort of tell if a girl likes it, now look at these two jars *(E is referring to their color coded behavior jars, which*

each have a handful of pom-poms, also themed by boy/girl colors), **now this one has a lot of dark colors, J's, and just, you can really tell it's a boy color, but it really no such thing. But a lot of boys only like *these* colors and a lot of girls like *these* colors.**

Ok, so on the one hand we say there's no such thing, but…

E: But there is sort of such thing because a lot of boys like one color and a lot of girls like another color.

J: Yeah! But most people *think* that there's such a thing as boy and girl colors, but there's really not. So it doesn't really matter if you call them colors or boy and girl colors, it doesn't matter.

You SAY it doesn't matter… (doubting tone)

J: It's clearly like both. Like there can be something in like boy and girl colors and there can be something that's not that, so.

Is it that boys like dark colors and girls like pink and purple, OR is it that girls like pink and purple and all other colors are boy colors?

J: No, um, silver, um, silver, yellow, and gold…E, did this fall out of mine? ***(holding up one of the pompoms)***

How did you know that fell out of yours? (I'm gently teasing here)

J: Because it's a turquoise blue and I have millions and millions of those

E: And I don't have any!

So, you kind of say they're not real and anybody can like any color, but like, I noticed that when I put the princess on the horse that wasn't pink, you guys were both like, No! That's not her horse!

J: Because, because, for instance, princes with castles, the royals with their horse looks like what they wear mostly. And that looked like…

E: And she was the only one with blond hair, her horse was the only one with blond hair, it was wearing pink, she was wearing pink, it was white, she was wearing white, and it had gold and she was wearing gold. So we could tell it was her horse

Because they matched?

J: Yeah, cuz they matched.

Despite the argument that anyone can like any color, the twins still fall back to gender binary matching with colors. When I asked the second family about boy-girl colors, CeCe flatly answered, "Mom doesn't let us say that." Notice she does not say they are not real, only that there is a house rule about not gendering colors, and CeCe let me know my questions about boy-girl colors were taboo in this family. I pressed for more information:

Ok, so why? Why would she not want you to say it?

C: Cause she says everyone can like anything

Nice. But when you go into a toy store or something, like we say everyone can like everything, but do you think…like why do they make things in, well first off, what are boy colors? (I am being awkward)

J: *(sounds uncomfortable)* I don't know. Like red? Maybe.

C: Red's a *girl* color

J: I like red.

H: I like red.

C: See what I mean?

That anyone can like any color?

H: That's a boy color, actually.

C: No it's not.

J: Cause like, I like the blood red mostly.

Like dark reds?

C: No, like bright, bright red

J: Yeah, like blood red, that's the one I like

C: No, blood red is… J, J, come here. This is blood red right? ***(She's using the color palette on her tablet)***

J: No, not that red.

C: ***This*** **is my kind of red.**

J: Neither of those are my kind of red.

C: This is what blood looks like.

J: No, it looks brighter

C: Trust me, J. ***(A hint of frustration is coming into her voice.)*** **Are you gonna trust the epidemiologist or not? Are you gonna trust the science-y person who knows what blood looks like, who one time got her foot covered in blood?**

Both Hank and Jamie seemed to imply that there may indeed be boy and girl colors, and argued with CeCe over whether red is a boy or girl color. CeCe's argument that she also likes red seems to fight against the gender binary, but her earlier comment about pink being bad seems to contradict this position. Furthermore, the discussion over the exact shade of red and CeCe's growing irritation at her brothers' disagreement may indicate a

tension between a lived reality (boy and girl colors) and an ideal reality (anyone can like anything). Despite this argument, CeCe, Jamie, and Hank all drew castles in colors (and fortress-palace binaries) aligned to the traditional notions of boy-girl colors, as seen in Figures 5.2 and 5.3.

Figure 5.2: Hank's Castle Drawing

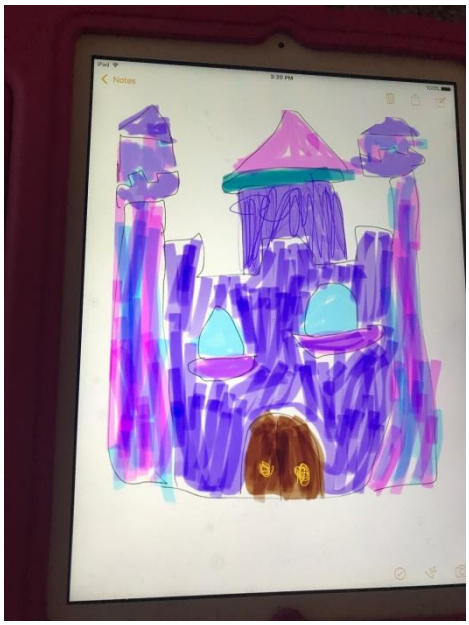

Figure 5.3: CeCe's Castle Drawing

Fortress for Boys, Palaces for Girls

In addition to color and gendered clothing and hair sending messages about doll or character gender, the castle itself also embedded gendered messages of masculinity

and femininity, as I had noticed in the fortress-palace motif. For example, children's drawing of castles, shown above in Figures 5.2 and 5.3, show color differences but also differences in the shape and purpose of the castle. The boys tended to draw and build castles in the fortress in the squat style for the purposes of physical defense, while the girls and Timmy built tall, skinny palaces, as seen below in Figures 5.4 through 5.7.

The finding that palaces are for girls and fortresses are for boys held true, even when children were building castles with gender neutral objects, such as creating castle art or building with the foam blocks. The pattern of fortresses for boys promoting active action-oriented play and palaces promoting domestic and storytelling play that I found embedded in castle toys for children was also prominent in their own creations, and largely segregated by gender. For example, Jack found castle templates online for an impromptu art project, shown in Figures 5.4 and 5.5 and decorated his castle with the physically protective masculine fortress, while Eliza decorated hers like a palace, complete with the princess waiting for her prince to save her:

Figure 5.4: Eliza's Castle Art

Figure 5.5: Jack's Castle Art

Eliza's palace, Figure 5.4, shows the princess in the tower window with the prince outside wooing her, while Jack's fortress, Figure 5.5, is built of stones and is on a mountain surrounded by a moat, emphasizing a militarily physical defense.

Likewise, when building with foam blocks and drawing pictures of castles, children's representations followed this same gendered pattern. Figure 5.6 shows the fortress surrounded by cannons that Jack and Hank built, compared to Timmy's feminine Elsa palace in Figure 5.7. Jack and Eliza's buildings also followed this same fortress and palace motif with Jack building a competition arena and Eliza building a palace.

Figure 5.6: Jamie and Hank's Fortress with Cannons

Figure 5.7: Timmy's Elsa Palace

In other words, regardless of the intent of the castle, toy makers encourage a certain type of play, and rather than change their play preference, these children either used the castle toy in an alternate way, or played with something else. Their representations held true to the fortress as a boy castle and palaces for girls theme throughout play.

Boys Play Action-Adventure, Girls Play House

Considering children tend to choose characters that match their gender, as do I when I more easily relate to a female role in a movie or book, and reflecting on how media narratives are segregated as boy and girl stories, it is perhaps not surprising there are observable differences between the types of play with castle toys, thus leading to highly segregated play, even in cross-gender sibling groups. For example, the castle toys are designed for action-adventure play, selling this on the covers as seen in the pilot study, while palaces are more similar to dollhouses, places of domestic safety and the realm of girls. This pattern of fortress action-adventure masculine play and palace dollhouse feminine play was performed in children's play through stories and art. Having

such binary play styles, either masculine *or* feminine play, meant cooperative cross-gender play was challenging. In the large family, CeCe, the eldest child and only girl often chose to play alone, but the twins attempted to play together. However, the twins play usually ended up being more parallel than cooperative play, or at times stopped altogether. The following transcription of Eliza and Jack, the twins, playing together with the wooden fortress illustrates how each focused on a different type of play making cooperative play difficult:

E: Fine! Let's just put it there *(placing movable tower)*. Let's start PLAYINGGGG!

J: Hey give me all my people *(shoves prince in blue into prison)*

E: No J! I'm gonna take the horses and put them outside.

J: I got these guys. I got the jester.

E: That's the bad guys *(hooded figures)* and this is the bad guys horse.

J: Ok. I'll get the bad guys horse. (*J now has prince, jester, and bad guy and horse*)

E: And thennnn, I'll sit and…

J: This is the robber. He's going to prison. The knight, he's going to the store.

E: That's the king! That's the prince.

J: Ok, who's the prince?

E: They're not gonna hop on their horses, they're going to be inside, safe.

J: Here's the prince but he's not going to fight.

E: Does it come with chairs and stuff? ***(positioning the characters around the castle)***

No, but if you have chairs or toys and stuff you can add them.

E: No, we don't. ***(Turns back to playing)***

J: Goodbyeeee! ***(prince falls into prison)***

E: No Jack! That's the prince! ***(Begins singing)*** **And they're gonna fall in looooove!**

(J takes prince out of prison and places him on a tower and then joins in singing**)**

J & E: ***(singing as princess and prince from towers)***

J: ***(singing)*** **He will just kiss when he fellll…**

E: I don't know how to do this without stuff!

J: This is so mean! I am going out of here! Ahaha! ***(shoving lots of characters in jail)***

E: No John, that's not how it actually acts. Let's make it how it really acts!

J: ***(picks up jester)*** **Dooo-dooo-dooo and the jesters down here doing a show. Lalallalaa**

(both singing lala)

J: Dun dun…I'm gonna do a cool trick, watching this!

E: No J! Don't do that!!

(Kids are playing with dolls placing them around the castle, flipping them in the air, and singing dun, duda dun dun, dun dun duuuu)

J: Fine. He's fighting!

E: We have to set everything up first!

Certain objects, such as the horses that Eliza immediately puts *outside* the castle and the prison, encourage masculine adventure play. Early on, Eliza made it clear the characters should stay *safe* inside the castle, but she expressed frustration, saying she did not know *how* to play with the masculine fortress when there was no dollhouse furniture to play with. Meanwhile, Jack was exploring the prison, wanting to go to the store on horseback, and making the characters flip in the air and fall from the towers, playing the action-adventure masculine play. Their story lines came together for a moment as they acted out a singing duet love scene from the castle towers, but play quickly diverged as Jack's character took a dive from the tower and Eliza tired of the castle, choosing instead to tell me the following illustrated princess story, maintaining her feminine identity and play:

> **E: There was a princess…And she has crazy hair when she wakes up in the morning! And it's very, very long. One day her mother said, you have to get your hair done. And the next day her hair was…really short! And she was very surprised. And she had makeup on! She was very surprised! She was prettier than ever. Her hair was short, beautiful makeup, and this beautiful smile she had on her face.**
>
> **She asked her mother, did you take me while I was sleeping? She said yes and she loves it, the most beautiful thing ever and it was curly on the bottom. She became the most *beautiful* princess ever and she had this gorgeous crown because it was the day of her wedding. She married this beau…handsome prince and they finally lived happily ever after!**

I'm still drawing her beautiful dress. And I made the thing that goes from her hair, from her crown I mean. And she's holding her bouquet. And she lives happily ever. The End.

Figure 5.8: Eliza's Princess before Makeover Art

Figure 5.9: Eliza's Princess after Makeover Art

Figures 5.8 and 5.9 accompany Eliza's story and the princess symbolizing girly-girl norms (Paechter, 2010) is maintained with a focus on hair and makeup, being beautiful,

passive, and powerless. The queen mother gives the princess a makeover without her consent, or even knowledge of it, representing the power difference in the child-adult relationship, as also described by Davies and Banks (1992). The goal of using beauty in order to find a husband and get married is achieved, and the story ends with the wedding, before marriage can be expressed, very similar to Lieberman's (1972) findings on matrimony in fairytale play.

By contrast, Hank and Jamie played action-adventure play with the wooden fortress and with the foam blocks for long stretches of time. Stuffing good guys and bad buys into "jail," as Hank referred to it, and battling and knocking the tower down over and over kept them happily occupied, thus demonstrating typical good-guy, bad-guy, us and them, masculine play the toy encouraged. In fact, CeCe commented on their play as follows:

C: The boys do little, like the boys like to pretend battles a lot, so this isn't very surprising to me, that they're doing that.

Yeah. (laughing) I was kind of noticing that.

C: And they always make themselves win too. That's another characteristic.

CeCe's additional point about boys winning is also found in the literature and will be discussed in more depth in a later section.

While Jamie and Hank played action scenes with the prison and trapdoor, CeCe had been collecting a few dolls and horses, and was silently telling herself the story of *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, an African folktale she learned in school. In addition to casting the actors as white rather than black (which passed as undiscussed appropriation), and using two good princesses instead of just one, she pointed out she modified the story

using the princess dolls, as they were just beautiful women—not royalty—in the original text. An interpretation using a feminist lens could be that CeCe chose this as a resistance story, rather in line with her non-conforming personality, in that it is not the traditional European setting or characters, though she has appropriated the story using white royalty dolls. Her retelling stays in line with the previously discussed embedded gender norms, emphasizing women's value still lies in beauty and putting other people's needs before their own. She showed resistance to playing with the wooden fortress as it had been intended, rather focusing on introverted story play with the dolls and her own imagination, moving them around a little bit at the front of the castle and using them to depict the ending, shown below, rather than engaging in the movable parts of the castle. In fact, during play she showed open disdain for the boys action play saying, "You can keep your battling over *there*." Figure 5.10 is a picture of how she situated the characters at the end of the story and shows what happens when the selfish, cocky, but beautiful blond and pink princess is made a servant, face down outside the castle wall, toiling in the earth. The other princesses are on horses, standing in the castle tower gazing down at the banished pink princess.

Figure 5.10: CeCe's Retelling of Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters

From a poststructuralist lens, the children seem to be adopting the messages from media narratives and marketing, replicating the binary gender norms as their own. The highly segregated nature of the media narratives and social expectations that boys play boy characters in action-adventure play, and girls play house and story based play with other girls, is communicated and reinforced by colors, castle types, and gendered media narratives, as also reflected in the broader research from Chapter 2. Even when toys, such as the foam blocks, contained no embedded gender binaries, the children continued to reproduce these in play. Furthermore, when playing with castle toys which supported gendered type of play, rather than change their gendered play style, children either re-appropriated the toy for their own play style, such as CeCe telling a story with the wooden fortress rather than engaging in the action play, or they played with something else entirely, such as when Jack built with non-pink LEGOs. This means play was usually gender segregated, even in cross-gender sibling groups. The following is one example of successful cross-gender play, but this was only possible through the replication of gender norms, in this case, that boys must be allowed to win, as CeCe's earlier comment suggested.

Boys Always Win

The highly segregated nature of different types of play meant cross-gender siblings rarely played together and when they did, the play usually ended in conflict and parental intervention. Jousting competitions proved a place for cross-gender play in both families, though in the case of Jack and Eliza, the play dissolved when Jack would not allow Eliza's princess to ever win. Jousting represented an arena of *pretend* violence, perhaps making it more likely for girls to engage, while also allowing boys the space to

act out action scenes. In the case of Jack and Eliza, the play seemed unsuccessful because they were competing against each other in the competition. However, in CeCe and Jamie's successful cross-gender play, CeCe played the princess the prince was trying to impress, and also the announcer and judge. Being clearly the oldest and the leader, Jamie went along with CeCe's directions as she narrated the action scenes and determined the winner, as seen in the following lengthy transcription of *Baby Prince's Jousting Tournament*:

C: *(laughs)* You have to fight more. Go fight the sun and darkness

J: I fight now? *(uses baby talk to stay in character)*

C: Yes!

J: Ok. Boom boom boom boom boom boom boom BOOM BOOM BOOM *(lunging repeatedly with sword)*

C: Yay! You woooon!

J: (*Squeals loudly*) I'm the blue team and I win!

C: The other blue team are going out too

J: Go Blue! There were other people on the blue team

C: Yeah, they're going right now

J: Boom boom boom

C: I thought you were a part of their team?

J: I AM!

C: Soooo?

J: I go now?

C: Go out there and show what you're made of, kid! *(laughing)*

J: Boommommmmooom ***(and on and on and on, repeatedly and wildly lunging with his sword in every direction. H is laughing at J's spectacle)***

C: Get them harder! Hard as you can!

(He does)

C: Baby! They all fell off their horses!

J: ***(squeal of excitement)***

C: The blue team guys!

J: ***(crying)***

(Audience laughter, as we catch up with what C meant. He knocked his teammates off their horses, not his opponents.)

J: I WIN! I win! I WIN?

C: Yeah, but you made the other blue team guys fall off their horses.

J: Did I win?

C: Well, you made the other blue team guys fall off their horses

J: Did I win? Did I win? But did I win?

C: Kind of.

J: ***(cries loudly)*** **Why not win?** ***(still in character with baby voice)***

C: Because you got your other blue team guys out, you're supposed to ride ***with*** **your team, not** ***against*** **your team. You go out of control.** ***(Despite delivering bad news and seeming to dominate, she stays in character, using the patient mom explaining voice I heard earlier when mom was explaining a snack rule to the kids.)***

J: But I win!

C: I said *kind of*.

J: No! I win all the way!

C: *(laughs gently)*. I'm sorry baby, but you almost won.

J: *cries*

C: Because you have to support your teammates

J: I DID!

C: No you didn't!

J: Yah I did!

C: *(laughing)* You were out of control! You knocked them all off their horses.

J: I win!

C: Okaaay.

J: Squeals. I win!

C: Dinner time's after you take your victory nap! You like that, right?

J: No! *(laughter)*

There was one moment above where CeCe was testing Jamie to see how he would react to not winning, encouraging cooperative team play over individual competition, but he kept asking if he won, stalling the play, until she finally gave in and the play ended happily. As mentioned earlier, CeCe explicitly told me "boys always make themselves win," which this play then supported. Furthermore, when Jack and Eliza were playing jousting, but in competition with each other, the play dissolved when Jack would not allow Eliza to win. Researchers have also pointed out the competitive, masculinized gender norms, often connected to sports competitions, while feminine characters compete with each other for the powerful male character (Lieberman, 1972). This brings us to the

next set of findings regarding how children talk about the gender roles of the people within the castle—boys being brave, active and powerful, while girls are beautiful, passive, and protected.

Gender Norms, Castle Characters, and Power

In this section I present the findings on how gender norms were reproduced or resisted when children talked about the power differences of the actors inside the castle. These findings, that boys are brave, active, and powerful, while girls are beautiful, passive, and protected, have already been discussed in previous sections, as these are the same gender norms embedded in media and threaded throughout the children's play. This section specifically references their thoughts on royalty, the role of kings, queens, princes, and princess, who is *not* considered royalty, and how power is structured in castle narratives.

Power Related to Ruling Status, Weapons, and Age

As discussed earlier, when beginning play, children first chose the dolls that matched their own gender identity, using significant signs such as color, clothing, and hair to determine the gender. The next decision the children made was to determine the character role and how they would act. For example, after picking out three girl dolls, CeCe decided if they will be princesses or queens, good or evil. This seems to be the extent of the character roles for royal girls, even in stories featuring them as main characters. The boys have more options, choosing between king, prince, guards/knights, bad guys, and a jester. In a very similar manner to how they determined gender, children used indicators of colors and clothing to determine the appropriate character role. White haired dolls were older royalty, usually king or queen, sometimes the grandparents, while

dolls with blond or brown hair represented youth. Furthermore, a crown denoted royal standing, such as a prince or king, while hooded figures were assumed to be male, sometimes good guys, like a knight or guard, and sometimes bad guys, but always with weapons.

The following Table 5.1 depicts the power hierarchy of the people inside and outside the castle. As researchers Tanner, Miller, and Montgomery's (In Press) also note in their study of castles and power dynamics of the characters inside and outside the walls, it is important to note that children did not always play the most powerful characters, but sometimes chose to play humorous characters, such as the Jester, or Knights because they used weapons.

Table 5.1

Power Hierarchy of Castle Characters

Masculine Roles (bravery)	**Feminine Roles (beauty)**
King	
	Good or Evil Queen
Good or Bad Guys (Weapons)	
Prince	Good or Evil Princess
Jester	
Servant	Servant

The king is generally seen as the most powerful character, a kind of father figure who rules the kingdom and "does paperwork," as Jack explains. The queen is also powerful, and sometimes helps the king, but "mostly takes care of the children," and is bossy, as Eliza states.

What's a king's job in a castle?

E: The king's job is the hardest job ever! He does all of the paper signing!

J: He does all the paperwork.

E: He has all of the, like what should be fixed. The queen just, the queen sometimes helps with it.

Yeah, so what's the queen's job?

E: The queen's job is to…um, it's the same as kings but she mostly um, takes care of the children.

What's the prince's job?

E: The prince's job is, a prince's job…He be's all…

J: He acts like a normal boy children.

The evil queen is another powerful role, and in Eliza's retelling of *Sleeping Beauty*, competes with a young and gullible princess for the prince's hand in marriage. The king and queen are the most powerful and own the castle and those in it, so power is denoted through ruling status and age. The king and queen closely resemble the roles of the parents as rulers of the kingdom.

The next powerful are the guards or knights, the ones with hoods and weapons. In fact, some of the participants argued the *only* reason the king and queen are more powerful is because of their status as the rulers, thus ruling over the guards and knights. In fact, hoods rather than crowns denoted the characters as non-royals, more like castle workers, though the weapons made them more powerful than the younger royalty. CeCe and Jamie pointed out that even if the king is more powerful, boys want to play guards, knights, or bad guys because they have weapons, essentially making them more fun for play, as also seen in the Tanner, Miller, and Montgomery study (In Press). I also found it interesting that weapons played such a powerful role as even though the boys did action

scenes, such as crashing and flipping in the air, there were no physical representations of weapons. The dolls did not come with toy weapons and the boys didn't add any, only action sounds, cries of anguish, and lots of movement. However, the idea of weapons was still obviously present.

After that comes the prince and princess, the last and youngest of the royalty, only more powerful than the servants who work in the castle but live "in huts" outside. While CeCe has a somewhat broader definition of the princess role based on her reference to counter-narratives, such as *The Princess Knight,* generally speaking both girls see the princess as being a "girlie-girl" role. Eliza in particular has very definite feelings on how a princess *must* act, as seen in the following excerpt:

> **E: A princess is aposed [supposed] to be kind, a princess is supposed to be royal, she's not supposed to burp or fart or anything. She be's fancy and draws.**

Being polite, fancy, neat, and beautiful are all strong themes in Eliza's princess interpretation, "a woman at leisure," as Stadin (2005, p. 61) states, echoed in the research on fairytales and symbols of royalty (Davies & Banks, 1992; Kostas, 2018; Lieberman, 1972) As a general rule, the princess is expected to play a very narrow role, not one that is representative of a typical girl, but a very specific kind of feminine *girly* girl. The prince on the other hand represents, as Jack puts it is to just be a normal boy, as seen in the earlier excerpt. His role as a prince is easy for young boys to identify with, open to any storyline or action, normalizing the role of royalty for young boys.

Jack's story, *The Royal Weddings* (and accompanying puppets shown earlier), emphasized these traditional gender roles in royalty well. Though I first thought it was a

gender non-conforming love story, reading it with a feminist lens, this story represents patriarchal power being passed generationally through ritual and tradition.

J: Once upon a time there was a prince looking for a bride!

E: Ewww!

J: And then he came up to a castle and there was a beauuuuuutiful princess living in the castle

E: Eww! You have a crush on the princess.

J: And then the royal family came

E: *(Singing)* Lalala

J: Stop! And then he went through the drawbridge

E: And saw the beauuuuuutiful princess *(mimicking J)*

J: And saw…And went into the place and found a beauuuutiful princess and asked her, Do you want to marry me? I would be delighted to marry you!

E: Ewwww!

J: And then they had a wedding! They had ice cream! Cake! And people were wearing beauuuuuutiful clothes. And 10 days later, they had

E: A baby!

J: A baby! 10 years, this is 10 years later, and then when he was 10 years old, he was going to MARRY! And then he went to schooool and

E: Went to MARRY

J: This is…his school's too loud. Two hours later and when he came home, he found out that his castle was burned down.

E: That's a bad story!

J: And then 10 years later, when he had a BRIDE, when he found who he wanted to marry, they married. Cake, ice cream, the same of what his parents had! And they lived happily ever after.

When interpreted through a feminist poststructural lens, Jack tells the story of power being passed down through a male heir, the prince normalized into the role of a typical boy, going to school, overcoming hardships, and eventually finding a beautiful bride to marry, and coming into power through ritual and tradition. The importance of finding a wife for the purposes of having a child to continue this patriarchal lineage is the underlying theme. Mentions of love or romance are met with criticism from his sister's comments throughout, and thus even though Jack makes it clear this is *his* story, the siblings work together to perpetuate the themes of marriage for purposes of maintaining power, rather than romantic love or finding an equal partner. Furthermore, the story stops at the wedding and married life is not played out, a finding consistent with Lieberman's (1972) feminist examination of fairytales.

In summary, the illustrated stories demonstrate children as active agents, influenced by media, when reproducing or resisting gender norms when socially playing with castles, and adopting these as their own, aligned with feminist poststructural interpretations. While children were all individuals with their own levels of gender conformity and identity roles in their family groups, by and large traditional gender norms were reproduced and only somewhat challenged by certain children. The castle symbol in particular, and the royal characters implied within, were strongly gendered both in media and in children's play, and reproduced stereotypical male and female roles. Play was gendered across multiple levels, including what characters children chose, what

toys they would or would not play with, what kind of play they engaged in; cross-gendered play was rarely successful. Male power was related to ownership and physical power, such as weapons and defensive walls, while female power was in being beautiful and marrying a powerful man. These traditional gender roles were heavily echoed in much of the research on fairytales, Disney, and gendered toys, as reviewed in Chapter 2 (Clark & Higonnet, 1999; Chen, 2015; Dinella, Fulcher, & Weisgram, 2014; Liben, 2016; Lieberman, 1972; Kostas, 2018; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2004; Wohlwend, 2009, 2017).

Discussion

In this section I will relate these findings to broader ideas and themes throughout, in order to answer the initial and overall guiding research question: *What can I learn about how gender norms are reproduced and resisted through socio-dramatic play with toy castles?*

Overarching Theme: Choice and Limits

Within my poststructural feminist framework as well as my positionality statement, a strong issue of power for me is the person's ability to make choices. An ability to choose presupposes the assumption that all have an equal opportunity to choose, or else it's not really a choice but a rigged game. Having choice is having power and harkening to Collins (1990), one important choice is self-definition. We should all have the power to choose who we are and our roles in the community. It is important to me that any work in social justice works to open, rather than limit, possible selves. My critical question is: Do ALL children have equal choices? What social repercussions is a

boy likely to face if he wants to play the princess? What choices do toys and popular media narratives limit and for whom?

Positioning my Participants: Members of the Dominant Culture

Just as I positioned myself clearly, it is important to position these children and families as well. In both cases, these are children of professional, white, upper middle-class, liberal, highly educated, heterosexual families. If trends in economic mobility persist, they will most likely follow in their parent's footsteps, having financial safety nets to help with education, pregnancy, and medical emergencies, things that can thrust even lower-middle class families into poverty, and make sure those in poverty never climb out. In other words, these children, as am I, are solidly members of the dominant society. When their parents tell them they can be and do anything, it is by and large the truth. When they play with toys and watch movies, they can easily relate to powerful characters. And they may well grow up to be powerful people, as they are positioned to be. This is important for numerous reasons. First, it greatly limits the perspective of my study. I cannot claim intersectionality, or to be privileging the voices of marginalized, silenced people. This kind of work is of utmost importance, and I hope future studies, such as the one's focused on castles and white supremacy by Tanner, Miller, and Montgomery (In Press) will do just this. However, what my study does show are the nuanced differences within privileged, white culture, and how these particular children interpret hegemonic, binary gender norms perpetuated by popular media and corporations, and reproduce and even sometimes resist these norms in their own construction of child culture. What needs to be acknowledged is that while I am focusing

on how these are limiting to powerful white boys and girls, they are even more so for people of color and those in LGBTQ communities.

Choice during play was limited in multiple ways and through multiple means. First, I will discuss how the physical features of the toys acted to limit play, especially with regards to character representation, and secondly, how the accompanying media narratives limited the roles (or behaviors and actions) of the characters within the castle.

Castle Toys: Dolls and Representation

The children chose characters that matched their gender, and if they did not, as in the case of Timmy, they were reassigned a cultural gender in order to maintain this gender matching. It could also be said they chose characters that matched their race, but that is problematic as all of the figures (expect for the evil LEGO witch, who was a light green) were white. While gender was a choice, a race other than white was not an option. Had my participants been black children, I would have felt strange bringing in only white figures, but the reality is that there were really no other options, apart from the black-washed Barbie doll princess. As a white researcher with white participants in a society where whiteness is normalized, it is easy to ignore race, like in the voice of my colleague who still feels the sting of not fitting into the skinny, white princess role. However, that does not mean race is not playing a role, it is just implicit and unexamined. My participants were able to easily relate to the powerful figures in the castle, in both toys and movies. In other words, they did not suffer from the crisis of representation.

This fits importantly in my theme of limits. For these particular children, representation was not an issue because they were cis-gendered, white children. There were plenty of dolls or representations they could relate to and choose from. There were

gendered limits to the *roles* these dolls could play, such as a princesses being guards, but they were not limited by characters. Let's unpack this a little bit more.

Limits to Choice in Character Appearance: An Issue of Representation

Just as the physical space and structure of the castle toys (as Fortresses or Palaces), send messages about gendered play, the accompanying castle dolls do as well. During the interview with Jack and Eliza, I noted that they had always played with characters of the same gender, and they seemed to fall into justification mode, as if I were criticizing their choice. In essence, what I was identifying was being cis-gendered, a feeling like your biological sex matches the identity of boy and girl. It is perfectly normal for girls who identify as girls to relate to girl characters. In fact, I do this myself. But it is this very notion, that it is easier for us to project ourselves into the fictional lives of characters if we can relate to them in some fashion. Nor am I saying one has to be the same gender or race in order to relate, it is just easier the more people have in common. For example, I read and love plenty of adventure stories with male characters, but I have a soft spot for the adventure books featuring female characters. I feel this way because I can relate more fully. Within the castle genre, the kids and I had plenty of wealthy, white, beautiful, powerful characters we could easily relate to. The message here, especially with a critical lens, is that all these characters were *valued*, though men and women were valued in *different ways*, which I will expound upon in a moment, but the lack of representation of any characters of color implied *they* had no value whatsoever. Again, while this study did not follow the tread of race and identity specifically, it is important to recognize where they intertwine and how whiteness was normalized and equated with royalty in these toys and narratives. Children outside of the dominant culture would find

it difficult to find characters that looked like them, to find characters they could relate to, or to envision themselves as powerful members of the ruling class.

In order to explore this issue in a deeper way, I'll use a gaming metaphor. When I sit down to create a character, either on paper for tabletop games or a digital avatar in a game, the first step is to create my character's avatar (what they look like, if you will). These choices usually have little to do with game mechanics (though early editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* had strength limits for female characters), but it's a step gamers really get into because it affects how other players see you and you're not limited to your real physical characteristics. Despite this, I always play a female character, because for me, being a female doesn't feel limiting, it is what I relate to the most. However, other than choosing a same sex character, I usually go with the weirdest appearance, such as a lizard person with a pink Mohawk, for example. There is a balance to wanting to relate to your character, but also to engage the fun of playing fantastic roles as well. So when I speak of the crisis of representation in these castle toys and movies, what I am saying is that if this were a game, I'd only have the option of choosing gender during my character creation, and perhaps age, as there were figures with white hair, the "grandparents" as the kids called them (but really, who wants to be old?!).

In other words, though the representation of the dolls was not necessarily limiting for these children, it could be more so for other children, and not just related race. Let's take Jack and Eliza's cousin, Ike, a boy who liked to play with girl things. During our interview, we discussed what might happen if Ike wanted to play a princess in a group of girls, versus if he was playing with a group of boys. While both children agreed the girls would be more okay with it, they expected he would be ostracized by *most* boys. Thus,

boys especially police each other and are limited by social pressures to appear cis-gendered, to match their biological sex to appropriate gender (Rosenberg & Sutton-Smith, 1960; Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016). In other words, gender conformity is the expectation and may be especially important to boys, as Jack and Eliza claimed. Children show gender conformity by choosing figures that match their gender. Not conforming to matching gender norms seems to result in tolerance at best, to outright banishment from the group. While I know plenty of gamers who choose to play cross-gendered characters (without labeling themselves as cross- or trans- gendered), even with many adults this still an edgy choice, and it seems we must work to unlearn these early gender matching rules in order to practice taking an alternative world view. Furthermore, most books, movies, and toys were easily identifiable as for either boys OR girls, but rarely both. More media and play opportunities that incorporate the roles of both genders and show gender non-conforming characters may push against these limiting norms and segregation.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to also reflect on children or families of LGBTQ communities and how they are represented. So far, the discussion has centered on gender identity, which is different from biological sex and sexual orientation (Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003), though some researchers argue that gender norms act as training for future heterosexual orientation (Kostas, 2018). In all the stories told by children and mentioned from media narratives, there is not one story featuring a princess who falls in love with another princess, or a prince who wants to marry a prince. This is another cultural blind spot, one easily overlooked by the dominant culture's assumption that everyone is heterosexual because they (or most people) are.

Sexual orientation does not often enter the conversations about young children as we consider them too young to be sexually aware, but issues of sexuality underlie all stories of marriage and having children, and implicit messages are sent about who should marry whom. Just as I mentioned before that since these children identify as gender conforming and white, the choices they make during play are not *as* limited by social norms or narratives, but *only because they identify as members of the dominant culture*. However, for children who were perhaps raised by a same sex couple, or consider themselves LGBTQ, they too may face social repercussions for playing outside accepted norms, and thus their choices are limited. While the kids theoretically supported a prince marrying another prince, stating that you can marry anyone you love, actually trying to act this out in play would be unacceptable, at least to typical boys, according to both Eliza and Jack. Nor are there popular media narratives featuring LGBTQ families, again normalizing heterosexuality and gender conformity.

Class and Monetary Status

Another interesting pattern was the issue of wealth and economics, a kind of Marxian lens for disentangling issues of power and privilege. The children described the people outside of the castle as living in huts and come into the castle only to work, a finding Tanner, Miller, and Montgomery's (In Press) study likened to colonialism and gentrification. Having recently been to Brazil and touring a Favela, a self-built working class community, I am reminded of how people come into the city during the day to work in the service industry for the bourgeois, and return to their homes filled with gang and police violence, largely ignored by the same bourgeois they serve, thus maintaining a racialized status quo. Considering the castle as housing the wealthy, this can also be seen

in urban American demographics, where once people in poverty were housed in inner cities, but now a more recent turn towards downtown areas housing the wealthy, elite while working class and poor people are being pushed to outer limits of cities. I envision the First Lady looking down upon the citizens, safely protected in her high tower of wealth and power. Because as a documentary on castles (Sideline Productions, 2015) pointed out, castles were used not only as defense from invading armies, but also as a place for royalty to retreat in times of rebellion.

Of course, these abstractions came from me rather than the children, but the idea of a working class living person outside of the castle and coming in to serve is one of positionality and inequality. Children's stories which assume this relationship between the wealthy and the poor begin to be accepted as the natural, normal way of life. So let's take this thought to one logical conclusion. A theme common to the history is that for the elite to stay in power, it is a smart idea to placate the masses. Unhappy commoners, whose power resides in pure numbers, will eventually revolt, usually violently overthrowing the ruler. Rulers, such as British colonizers, knew this and also knew that ideology, rather than force, was a more effective method for mass social control. Thus, the need to make power inequalities seem natural is normalized for young children, communicated through symbols and stories. This is how issues of representation and hegemonic norms become connected to the larger problems of access and equity, how those in power limit roles and teach people to accept their current place in society, how the status quo is maintained and revolution kept at bay.

Summary

The main idea is just as the physical toys limit the character's avatars or appearance, the accompanying popular narratives limit the character's roles by enforcing traditional gender norms, such as how the character acts and whom they marry. While children are able to distinguish how the role of a princess is different or similar to themselves (i.e. they do not adopt this role in real life just because they *pretend* to be the role in play), the traditional stereotypes of how men and women should act are strongly engrained in the castle narratives, as well as in other narratives and popular culture. This is perhaps only surprising if you consider modern society to be post-gendered, to have made great strides in the movement towards gender equality. While it is clear we have, we are simultaneously still raising a whole new generation of boys and girls on very archaic stereotypes of white, wealthy, masculine power and privilege. Chapter 6 will address the implications of perpetuating hegemonic gender norms, as well as provide recommendations to educators and parents on how schools and society can begin to disrupt and resist these norms, providing a social structure that encourages children to explore expanding possibilities, rather than limiting, their ways of being.

CHAPTER SIX: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"Mass produced images fill our daily lives and condition our most intimate perceptions and desires. At issue for parents, educators, and others is how culture, particularly media culture, has become a substantive, if not the primary, educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms and conventions that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions—what it means to claim an identity as a male, female, white, black, citizen, or non-citizen as well as to define the meaning of childhood, the national past, beauty, truth, and social agency" (Giroux, 1998, p. 254).

Implications

Giroux's (1998) passionate statement above speaks to the powerful implications of the media feeding children societal norms, which impact their identity across a variety of markers. As discussed in earlier, the media narratives, written and sold to children by large corporations for no other purpose than to make a profit (and with less and less regulation), are commodifying and selling children identities. This study has shown that many of the popular media narratives targeted towards young children continue to contain restrictive and harmful gender identity roles, for both boys and girls, which resonate into adulthood, affecting our future careers, sexuality, and relationships with each other. Perhaps most importantly, this study shows how muchchild culture is heavily gendered and children of different genders have a very difficult time playing together at all. This reflects back to the segregated nature of the media narratives, the ways in which books, movies, toys, clothes, and games are all marketed to boys *or* girls, creating two distinct child cultures, one masculine and one feminine.

The findings that children's toys and media are imbued with esoteric, hegemonic gender norms, which are then replicated in child culture through segregated play and gender roles, is only surprising precisely because of the modern context, as research of this has been conducted since the 1960s (Kostas, 2018). Research on feminism argues we are in the fourth wave (for those that adopt the wave metaphor) known as neoliberal feminism (Miller & Plencner, 2018; Rottenburg, 2017). However, findings from this study point to the patterns in castle media more in line with second wave feminism, those related to women's domestic responsibilities and wage labor (Evans & Chamberlain, 2014; Miller & Plencner, 2018; Rottenburg, 2017). In other words, the castle motif in particular takes feminism backwards in time. Rather than discuss a Queen as a woman who can "have it all," outperforming men in the corporate (kingdom) arena, while also balancing the caretaking work of family and home—as neoliberal feminism claims (Miller & Plencner, 2018; Rottenburg, 2017), a Queen is primarily delegated to ruling the castle, but not the kingdom. A princess' role is even more outdated, as an objectified, passive, beautiful *part* of the castle, seen as property to be acquired for bearing children, forever waiting for her prince.

While this particular study does not examine the long term effects of hegemonic gender norms, other researchers have suggested socially imposed gender constraints restrict and segregate people, causing economic, psychological, and physical damage, especially when compounded with race and class (Collins, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; Dinella, Fulcher, & Weisgram, 2014; Mayo, 2014). Evidence of this can be found in the current wage gap, the continued gender segregation of the workforce, and the working conditions of "pink collar" jobs, all of which negatively impact women by restricting

economic choices, and society by the loss of potential in fields of innovation, science, and politics (Collins, 2017; Coyle & Liben, 2016; Dinella Fulcher, & Weisgram, 2014; Liben, 2016). Objectification and unrealistic beauty standards contribute to eating disorders, a rise in plastic surgery, and even suicide. Violence, targeting specific groups such as women, people of color, and those in the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community becomes normalized by media and politics (Collins, 2017). The recent #MeToo movement reveals a consistent pattern of women being harassed and assaulted in the workplace. The systemic inequity facing women and other historically oppressed groups—in other words, the maintenance of the status quo—requires an ideological justification under the guise of biological differences. In regard to gender, the biological difference in sex, male and female, is used to socially construct gender norms in order to justify valuing masculinity over femininity. This construction of norms, how men and women should act and what roles they have to choose from, as well as what is considered masculine and feminine, is perpetuated in the meanings and representations embedded in our cultural symbols and narratives. These hegemonic norms, which limit individual and therefore societal possibilities, negatively impact not only women and other marginalized groups, but also those within the dominant, powerful group: economically advantaged, straight white men.

Masculinity has narrow and clear definitions of appropriate behavior for men common across many cultures, often referred to as machismo. Men are strong, capable of protecting women physically and financially, sexually viral, and assertive. Most importantly, they are NOT feminine. They are stoic, expected to talk and express feelings less than their feminine counterparts, who alternatively are labeled as being nurturing and

emotionally expressive. These social norms limit women not only to domestic and childcare responsibilities (i.e. pink color jobs) but also limit men, denying the need all humans have for the ability to nurture the self and others, display a healthy expression of emotions, and communicate effectively and affectively. The devaluing of traits considered feminine has real world consequences for both women and men.

Even as far back as the early 1960s, Rosenburg and Sutton-Smith (1960) found evidence not of a role conversion, a reversal of masculine or feminine roles, but rather women had seen an expansion in gender roles while men did not. In other words, it is more accepted for a woman to show masculine traits, but it is still important that men only show masculine traits (Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016). Thus, masculinity becomes valued over femininity for both women and men. One example is the social acceptable for a woman to wear pants, but a man wearing a skirt is labeled as "transgender," or, as many often mistake gender identity for sexual orientation, "gay." In fact, researchers argue much of the homophobic teasing that happens among boys has very little to do with their sexual orientation, but rather is code for acting like a girl in order to transmit social expectation of masculine norms (Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Researchers have argued these masculine norms may have a strong relation to violence, such as in the rise in school shootings by white boys (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003), or increased violence against women, people of color, and LGBTQ communities (Collins, 2017). While evidence of a changing culture can be seen in some recent media, such as the newly released Black Panther movie where Black women are portrayed in diverse and powerful roles, alternative roles for woman and men have yet to be an established norm in mainstream America. Gender non-conforming

individuals, such as men with long hair or painted nails, still continue to be viewed as unprofessional in the workforce, thus economically restricting self-expression.

In other words, traditional gender norms are hegemonic forms of social control with negative consequences for society. While the traditional roles of women in the home and raising children, playing a *domestic* role, and men being providers and protectors may seem outdated in modern America society, these norms are still embedded in our mainstream media stories and symbols in sometimes subtle or unexamined ways. These outdated gender norms are still mirrored in modern society, a reason many researchers claim the feminist wave metaphor assumes a false sense of temporal shift within the feminist movement, a post-feminist attitude that sees the previous wave's emphasis on voting rights and wage labor as solved. The old waves have passed and moved onto a new and more modernized brand of neoliberal feminism, when in fact we may not have come as far as we had assumed. While women have made headway in some economic and political areas, we still have a long way to go, as Liben (2016) suggests.

This study is important because it demonstrates how gender segregation teaches boys and girls they are expected to value different things within themselves, to be interested in different activities, and to behave in different ways. They play different characters from each other, and imagine themselves within limited perspectives. They play differently as well, and imagine themselves within limited activities and interests. They play in different stories, with different morals, and imagine themselves within limited ways of being and further research can be conducted on how these early patterns affect the way men and women treat each other and themselves later in life. The positive spin on this is that society is in fact shaped by a collection of individuals, that together we

can learn to critically examine structural messages sold by corporations, and they can be resisted and perhaps changed.

Recommendations

There is an interesting relationship between the toys and children. Playing with a toy, in other words imbuing an object with a subjective or *pretend* meaning, such as pretending a hair brush is a telephone, is one of the earliest examples of pretend play, or pretense. Children are notorious for turning any random item into a toy, banging on pots and pans, or building with discarded boxes, thus imbuing objects with their own subjective meaning during play. Toys are similar to props in a play, and actors use them to communicate the story to their audience, and to imagine a plethora of future scenarios. However, in modern capitalist times, toys are designed and marketed *for* children, thus the meanings in toys are determined by the corporations.

Briggs (2007) discusses this complicated relationship between the globalized media forces and the concrete ways children interact with these texts in play, attending to heavily to the context. For example, the author describes the multi-textual nature of toys, the focus on the everyday, *normal* occurrence of a mother reading a book to her daughter, while her daughter played along with her stuffed animal, pulling popular media across a wide range of both texts, the book and the toy, and situations, a mother and daughter co-constructing a relationship, the meanings embedded in the texts, the imaginings going on in the heads of the listeners, "a complex site of engagement" (p. 508). Thus, children's play with toys affords researchers and teachers insight into how these larger meanings across a variety of texts are concretely constructed contextually during engagement with each other (Briggs, 2007). Similar to the poststructuralist lens, this space of play also

becomes a space of resistance in classrooms, where children are directly taught to play and think in different and critical ways.

Corporations are deciding not only what the toy represents, but who should play with it and how it should be played with (Briggs, 2007). A baby doll, for example, symbolically represents an infant child and encourages nurturing play targeted towards girls, while action figures represent soldiers or fighters and encourage violent play targeted towards boys. Thus, toys become intertextual symbols with meanings mediated by structure, social interactions, and individual agency. The wooden fortress my participants played with is an example of a carefully constructed toy castle, with features such as a working drawbridge, trap door and dungeon gate, and a movable tower piece that all affect and direct the children to how to play with the castle, sending messages of physical defense and attack. Likewise, the absence of furniture for the castle also discouraged dollhouse play, as one girl participant bemoaned, though the multiple rooms and placements for the figures somewhat encouraged it. In essence, while this toy castle sent some mixed messages for different kinds of play, it primarily communicated a masculine interpretation of play and castles as fortresses. Even the shape of fortresses, large and squat, communicates a symbolic meaning of physical strength and defense, as opposed to the tall and slender shape of palaces, symbolic of feminine beauty and frailty. Noticing and questioning these embedded gender messages in toys and symbols, and then reconstructing these to be more inclusive, is the basis for the following recommendations for parents, children, and educators.

For Parents and Children

In order to resist hegemonic gender norms (as well as racial, economic, and other cultural norms) we must stop waiting to teach our children to be critical of their world. An assumption of childhood innocence, bolstered by outdated developmental research questioning children's ability to think complexly (Wood & Hedges, 2016), gives us pause to introduce a critical consciousness curriculum to young children. However, this is a naive view that underestimates child intelligence and culture (Trawick-Smith, Wolff, Koschel, & Vallarelli, 2015; Wood & Hedges, 2016). As these norms are already being introduced to children by media, toy companies, schools, and adult culture, the claim that they are too young to be critical consumers of cultural messages becomes a bit ridiculous, perhaps even dangerous. Anyone who has spent time with six year olds well knows the "boys have cooties" and "no girls allowed" mantras of childhood. To suggest children are unaware of the social stratification according to marketed and internalized gendered differences is to ignore the culture of childhood, which segregates largely based on gender roles and other cultural differences.

Popular media is not the only method of transmitting these norms, as schools, families, and other social institutions also send expectations and normed roles based on gender, race, and economic status. However, as this study shows, popular media is a strong influence on children's gender norms. Cross marketing and branding means corporations are creating multi-textual cultural narratives in the form of children's media which are emphasized through toys, lunchboxes, clothing, sleeping bags, dishes, and other artifacts of child culture which permeate their lives. Understanding how children socially construct culture through these media narratives has implications for elementary

teachers who wish to provide pedagogy relevant to students by connecting their popular media home lives with their school lives, as well as for teaching children to be critical of media messages and to re-narrate their own identity stories and roles. This can be done by teaching students how to critically examine symbols and narratives rather than consuming them passively, designing units of study where students and preservice teachers use lenses of feminism, Marxism, critical race theory, among others to examine and combat stereotypes and negative representations in media (Gainer, 2013; Gainer, Valdez-Gainer, & Kinard, 2009; Low, 2011; Morrell, et al., 2013; Vasquez, 2017; Winn, 2011).

The findings from this study, particularly those related to how these children integrated popular media into play in multiple ways, implies the representations found in media greatly impact the reproduction of, as well as the resistance to, hegemonic norms at an early age. There are many actors who can play a role in popular child media including media companies, media regulators and policy makers, parents, authors of children's literature, and children themselves. None of these actors are likely to make a lasting and significant impact without working together. If unregulated by policy makers or parents, and if left unexamined in classrooms and popular culture, media corporations will continue to function for profit and create movie length advertisements to sell their toys (Bakir & Palan, 2010; Briggs, 2007; Coyle, Fulcher, & Trübutschek, 2016; Giroux, 1998; Hartzheim, 2016; Hill, 2011; Kasser & Linn, 2016; Mjøs, 2010; Willett, 2015; Wohlwend, 2017, 2009). However, capitalism also responds to the demands of the public, so if both children and parents demand change in the form of buying powers and letter writing, companies are more likely to comply. The media companies play an

important gatekeeping role as to which children's literature stories are made into movies, thus popularizing and *selling* media in a way that is difficult for authors and parents to compete with. In other words, if Disney chooses to make a relatively unknown children's book into a movie (and to brand and sell related merchandise), the story becomes a popular culture narrative. However, corporations will only choose these stories if they feel they can make a profit off of them, meaning there must be a public demand for changing gender norms in media. Further research is needed on how children, parents, and educators can push back against the contemporary, Western capitalistic and patriarchal heteronormative culture and the structural arrangements that perpetuate gender binaries and other hegemonic norms.

Furthermore, one argument for the reason media, toys, and clothing are gendered to begin rests with the assertion that corporations can sell twice as many products. If clothes, toys, backpacks, sleeping bags, tableware, and so forth cannot be shared by both genders, it encourages consumers with children of multiple genders to buy at least two sets. In fact, the mom in the group of four siblings mentioned that after their youngest Timmy was born, they gave away the *Frozen* toys CeCe had outgrown, assuming he would not be interested in them. Timmy's interests surprised them, and they had to reacquire much of what they had given away. Parents and children need to be critical consumers, understanding how profits drive advertisements and media, in order to resist the status quo and demand inclusive and representative popular media, targeted to both or multiple genders, rather than one or neither. They can use their spending power to purchase toys and media narratives that support multiple representations of diverse characters acting in diverse roles, and can write letters and comments in public spaces,

such as the comments sections and product reviews on company websites, explicitly requesting changes to how companies represent and shape children's identities.

For Educators

Children spend much of their time in schools with mixed gender peers, making the classroom an important site for counter-hegemonic work. The first step is to create a safe space, a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment where students are taught to support and care for each other, to see differences as valuable and beautiful. This is a main tenant of culturally relevant pedagogy, where teachers build relationships with their students and the communities represented in their classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2009). However, as this study focuses on gender rather than illuminating voices of color, it would be misappropriation to call this study an example of culturally relevant or sustaining pedagogy, though this particular aspect of relationship building remains important. Specifically related to gender, teachers must understand that their students may not come from traditional, heterosexual families or perform in gender conforming ways. Yet, these children need to feel included, to see themselves and their families represented and respected in the curriculum. As Liben (2016) asks, "In cases of gender non-conforming students, should the school's goal be to change the individual child to fit the school ecology, or should the goal be to change the school ecology to accommodate the child?" (p. 23). My position is educators should be working towards the latter.

However, it is important to understand that a warm classroom environment and exposure to stories with non-conforming gender characters is not enough. These biases and gender binaries, and the emphasis on gender throughout all aspects of childhood, are not easy to disrupt. As Briggs (2007) discusses, toys and narratives act as texts that are

embedded with potential meanings, meanings that are not only embedded in the text itself, but are constructed during the practice and behaviors that go on while the text is read, played with, and discussed. These situated meanings contain hegemonic gender norms, messages about how boys and girls are expected to appear and behave. These norms are embedded as early as preschool and researchers have shown explicit teaching is the most effective way to disrupt hegemonic norms.

Liben's (2016) research on gender and child culture suggests simply reading non-traditional gender stories, such as a story about a female engineer, was not enough. The researchers found young children had difficulty assigning a combination of attributes (i.e. engineer + female) and had the tendency to misname the character's gender, unless explicitly asked to attend to both attributes, for example by engaging them in a double sorting activity. However, the teaching that made the most impact on children's reported responses, encouraging hypothetical responses where children recognized and discussed how they would respond to sexist behaviors, was after direct instruction when students were taught to explicitly name and discuss the sexist behaviors in stories (Liben, 2016).

Furthermore, we must make sure our good intentions to counter-hegemonic norms do not serve to reproduce stereotypes and biases further. Some toy companies, intending to sell girls toys that encourage science related activities, can still miss the mark and reinforce stereotypes. For example, chemistry sets that encourage girls to create perfume and nail polish not only continue to sexualize young girls, but also imply that boys and girls need different chemistry sets for different purposes, rather than presenting a variety of chemistry sets to children regardless of gender. Liben (2016) discusses a similar move by the producer of the engineering toy, *Goldiblocks*, designed specifically for girls as a

mix of engineering and storytelling. Liben (2016) finds this problematic because it reinforces the notion of "science as sexy" (p. 17) and adds to the continued gender segregation of play activities.

In addition to fostering the inclusive space for counter hegemonic work, teachers can employ Critical Media Pedagogy as a methodological tool for teaching critical literacy skills. As discussed in more depth in Chapter 2, Critical Media Pedagogy teaches students to critically examine media symbols and messages, learning to ask who is and is not represented, how they are and are not represented, who is and is not the author or gatekeeper, and other questions related to power and hegemony (Gainer, 2013; Gainer, Valdez-Gainer, & Kinard, 2009; Lewis, 1990; Low, 2011; Morrell, Duenas, Garcia, Lopez, 2013; Vasquez, 2017; Wood & Hedges, 2016). Students and teachers are also explicitly taught and encouraged to create their own counter-hegemonic media texts through critical literacy methods, thus becoming not only critical consumers, but critical producers as well. Teachers and students can practice these skills through units focused on questioning gender and other norms in popular media texts, highly relevant to their own interests and child culture.

Children and pre-service teachers can be taught to examine advertisements, media narratives such as movies, games, and literature, and toy packaging for messages of gender and to discuss how hegemonic norms limit future possibilities within the content of social studies and literacy methods courses. Preservice teachers can visit toy stores to analyze hegemonic symbols in child culture. Together, they can write and share their own stories, creating alternative representations and symbolic inversions, and influencing and mediate the potential meaning embedded in toys, stories, and relationships. As there are

still few media narratives which show boys in nurturing and non-gender conforming roles, teachers and students can be encouraged to not only seek out, but also to create, publish, and share alternative narratives. Perhaps some princes wear dresses, perhaps some princesses are engineers. Children can talk about why their pictures of girls have eyelashes, but boys don't, or girls in dresses and boys in pants, or why knowing a gender from the outset is even important to begin with. By having these discussions with children, teaching them directly to ask these questions of both the media representations and their own representations, children can recognize and counter-act hegemonic norms. Perhaps even more importantly, boys and girls need to work and play and create *together*, learning to respect and value each other, having experience needed for healthy cross-gendered interactions, with both gender conforming and non-conforming peers. They can learn how to recognize sexism, racism, homophobia, and so on, and be taught how to stand up for each other, how to be allies and co-creators of their own culture.

If we encourage teachers to foster spaces for critical literacy and media work, we must also both prepare and make space for the teachers. Universities can support research on symbols and culture and the use of critical curriculums, such as Critical Media Pedagogy. In literacy and social studies methods courses, teacher educators can guide preservice teachers in learning to recognize and read textual symbols in their own popular media, and how to re-story and invert these messages (Briggs, 2007), just as we hope they will one day do with their own elementary students. They can also expose preservice teachers to a wide variety of counter-narratives and research on how children discuss non-conforming gender characters, such as found in Davies & Banks' (1992) and Kostas' (2018) research. They can discuss inclusive classroom climates and how teachers can use

gender neutral terms, such as kiddos rather than boys or girls, discourage the use of gendered competitions, such as which group can clean up fastest, and require cross-gendered play and work. Thus, just as creating a gender inclusive classroom is multi-textual, preservice teachers will need exposure to research on critical curriculum studies, thoughtful discussions and practice with creating the appropriate inclusive environment, encouraging interactions among diverse groups of students, and methodological preparation with implementing critical media units of study.

However, this work requires the cooperation of parents, administrators, school boards, and policy makers to support teachers in the often uncomfortable and personal work of examining bias and prejudice. However, as Liben (2016) recognizes there are parents and educators who prefer the traditional gender norms, she also suggests that "far more radical revisions about gender concepts and use have been emerging in the very recent past" and "one such change is a shift away from the traditional gender binary" (p. 23). From over a decade as a first grade teacher in a public city school, I know firsthand that teachers are terrified of doing this kind of work for fear of backlash from parents and administrators. Those brave enough to attempt such sensitive and political work are often tied by mandated programs and curriculums, never finding the time to add in these studies to heavily scripted lesson plans. The specific strategies to overcome these political barriers can be the focus of further research, though studies such as this one may be used as precedent, convincing policy makers and education leaders of the need for this kind of work.

Teachers, teacher educators, parents, and media corporations must work together to create a society more inclusive and accepting of the variety of strengths found in all

children, to foster children's imaginings and ways of being, in order to work towards a truly equitable society. My vision is of classrooms where boys are taught to take care of babies and cook in the kitchen, where girls are taught to engineer and build model planes, where all children learn the importance of considering other people's needs, while also learning how to communicate their own needs effectively. I want children to see boys can be beautiful and nurturing, girls can be active and powerful, and where we all children learn how to become more fully human, regardless of biological sex or gender.

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APPENDIX A: OBSERVATION GUIDE

I developed the following guide, based on Simmons's (2014) recommendations, to use during audio-recorded observations when I am not actively participating in play with castles. The boxes underneath are for sketches tracking movement and positioning of children (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Materials and symbolic representation:

Types of dramatic roles:

Social aspects:

Storyline:

Media source(s):

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Early in the study, questions will focus on popular culture references such as movies, cartoons, games, and toys the children enjoy. I will ask participants to show me around their bedrooms and toys to get a feel for specific popular culture, which I will research on my own time.

The interviewing will happen with social, informal focus groups during play time or during family down times after play. As Graue and Walsh (1998) recommend when interviewing young children, I will use hypothetical "pretend" situation questions and third person questions. As interviews will happen in natural conversations with groups of children, the questions will be highly variable and emerge from observation. Furthermore, the children will be invited as research-participants to craft and conduct their own interviews, if they so choose.

The following are examples of possible interview questions:

- Storycrafting: Where children are invited to tell a story, the researcher records the story, and then reads it back to the child, allowing them to make any revisions (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014; Karlsson, 2013). An example might be say, I put the figures like this with the castle and then you all make up a story about what's happening.

- Third Person Questions: Here are two sets of castles/figures (boy and girl versions). What kind of children would play with this one? Would a boy/girl play with this? What would children say if they saw a boy playing with this castle and why? What about this castle?

- Positionality: Why did you put the _(figure)_ in the _(place)__? When you were playing earlier, who were the bad guys outside the castle? Pretend this doll is outside the castle, what happens? Who is in the kitchen? Who is not in the kitchen? Is there a kitchen?

- Media Reference: You mentioned __(name)__ when playing earlier…who is that? Made up or reference to show? Why did you pick that person/show? What do you like about it? What's your favorite castle story?

- Member Checking: I wrote a story about you all playing the other day. Can I read it to you and you can tell me if it sounds right and how I can make it better?

- Meaning/Theory: What do children think... are castles? Not a castle? What is a castle for? Are there different kinds of castles? When you think of a castle, what does it look like to you? Where is it?

- Drama: children may choose to conduct their own mock interviews as reporters of castle life, write and perform plays/movies, play dress up, or any other pretend play they may create.

- Any other questions children recommend

Semi-Formal Focus Group Interview with Family 1

- What is a castle? What is it for? What is NOT a castle?
- We talked about boy colors and girl colors.
    - What are boy/girl colors?
    - Are these really real? At one point, E, you said they weren't but they seemed very real in play, like when I put the princess on a not-pink horse.
    - When you decide to play or buy a toy, does the color matter to you? Would it matter to your friends? What about to your cousin I--?
    - If Ian wanted to play with a pink castle, what would your friends say, J?
    - If I said the toys were colored to tell boys and girls which toy is appropriate to play with, would you agree or disagree?
- We also noticed the difference in boy and girl castles were more than just color.
    - What other things are different between boy and girl castles?
    - Is it fair to call the girl castles "Palaces" and the boy castles "Fortresses"? Would you choose different words?
    - E, you mentioned before that boy castles look "evil." What do girl castles look like then?
    - What do these differences tell us about the differences between boys and girls? What is the message about how boys and girls should act?
- Talk to me about what it means to live inside the castle
    - Who lives in the castle? What are their roles?
    - Who does NOT live in the castle?
    - Sometimes you two argued about what was going to happen, who was going to win a competition and stuff. But one thing I never saw you argue about was what characters you were going to play. Is that true? What would happen if you were playing with your girl-friends E? Would you argue over who gets to be who? What if you were playing with your guy friends, J? Who would I-- play and how would your friends react?
    - I noticed there was a theme of marrying in lots of your stories. Who gets married and to whom? Can the Jester marry the princess? Can a princess marry another princess, or a prince marry a prince?
    - I also noticed while some stories about the boy characters (Prince, Jester) were about getting married, some were about other things (like bad guys going to prison, competition arena). But the princess stories were all about looking pretty and finding a prince to marry. The queen story was about stealing a prince from a princess and marrying him.

Do you agree with this? And why doesn't the princess do prince things too?
    - Is the Hogwarts castle the same as other castles? Why or why not? Was there royalty? How does this change the roles played in the castle? Hermione wasn't a princess so how does this change how she behaves?
- List all the stories (books, movies, shows, games) you can think that have castles.
    - What kind of castle does each have? Fortress, palace, or something different?
    - Can you think of any stories where the people in the castle act in surprising ways? Where they don't follow the normal roles?
- What was your favorite part of the castle study? What part did you like the least? Why?

Semi-Formal Focus Group Interview with Family 2

- What is a castle? What is it for? What is NOT a castle?
- We talked about boy colors and girl colors.
    - What are boy/girl colors?
    - Are these really real?
    - When you decide to play or buy a toy, does the color matter to you? Would it matter to your friends?
    - If a boy wanted to play with a pink castle, what would your friends say?
    - If I said the toys were colored to tell boys and girls which toy is appropriate to play with, would you agree or disagree?
- I noticed the difference in boy and girl castles were more than just color.
    - What other things are different between boy and girl castles?
    - Is it fair to call the girl castles "Palaces" and the boy castles "Fortresses"? Would you choose different words?
    - What do these differences tell us about the differences between boys and girls? What is the message about how boys and girls should act?
- Talk to me about what it means to live inside the castle
    - Who lives in the castle? What are their roles?
    - Who does NOT live in the castle?
    - C, your first story, was that Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters? Why did you pick that one? What does a castle in Africa look like? Why don't we see more black princesses or queens?
    - What would happen if you were playing with your girl-friends, E? Would you argue over who gets to be who? What if you were playing with your guy friends, J? How would your friends react to T playing Elsa?
    - Who gets married and to whom? Can the Jester marry the princess? Can a princess marry another princess, or a prince marry a prince?
    - The boys always seemed to be playing action stuff, and you didn't really want to play that, C. Is there boy play and girl play? Do boys

and girls play with each other? Would T be welcomed in a group of boys playing?
    - What is the role of a princess? Is it important to be pretty, act like a lady, find a husband? What about in the African Folktale? Are girls supposed to be nice? What about boys? What is the job of a prince? King? Queen?
    - What happens if a girl wants to play a girl character, but wants to do boy things like fight or protect the castle? Can a princess be guard or warrior?
    - Is the Hogwarts castle the same as other castles? Why or why not? Was there royalty? How does this change the roles played in the castle? Hermione wasn't a princess so how does this change how she behaves?
- List all the stories (books, movies, shows, games) you can think that have castles.
    - What kind of castle does each have? Fortress, palace, or something different?
    - Can you think of any stories where the people in the castle act in surprising ways? Where they don't follow the normal roles?
- What was your favorite part of the castle study? What part did you like the least? Why?

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLYER

ATTENTION PARENTS!

Do you have at least two children at home between the ages four and ten?
Do they enjoy telling and performing stories?
Are you looking for a fun enrichment activity, designed to teach writing through play and performance?

Be a part of my study and your child and their friends will craft and perform stories using castle toys as props! Children will be asked to reflect on gender norms in the media and encouraged to think critically about gender roles in their own stories.

They will also have the opportunity to act as my co-researchers, learning about the process of crafting questions, collecting different kinds of data, and practice using child-friendly techniques to analyze and share results.

If interested in more details, please contact Shannon Montgomery in the College of Education at University of North Carolina at Charlotte by phone (828) 545-4915 or email smontg25@uncc.edu.

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