

Linköping University Postprint

Beyond stereotypes? Talking about gender in school booktalk

Katarina Eriksson Barajas

N.B.: When citing this work, cite the original article.

Original publication:

Katarina Eriksson Barajas, Beyond stereotypes? Talking about gender in school booktalk, 2008, *Ethnography and Education*, (3), 2, 129-144.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457820802062367>.

Copyright © [Taylor & Francis Group](#), an informa business

Postprint available free at:

Linköping University E-Press: <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-12297>

Beyond stereotypes? Talking about gender in school booktalk

Katarina Eriksson Barajas

The Swedish educational system states that work in schools should depict and mediate equality. One way of achieving this is through fiction, which according to the syllabus provides students with knowledge about the living conditions of women and men during different epochs and places. The present paper examines gender in a Swedish school, analysing ‘book club’ discussions, using a discursive approach. The data consist of video-recorded teacher-led booktalk sessions, involving small groups of pupils in grades 4_7. It was found that the teachers and/or the pupils invoked gender issues in all book club sessions. The fictive events were, at times, discussed in gender-stereotyped ways. Yet, the teachers and pupils also transcended gender stereotypes in several cases. In many of those cases, there was a generational pattern, in that the participants tended to apply less stereotyped thinking when talking about fictive characters of their own age.

Keywords: booktalk; children’s literature; discursive psychology; gender; reader response

Introduction

The gender bias in children’s literature became an issue among feminists in the 1960s. In her pioneer work, the Swedish sociologist Rita Liljeström claimed that gender stereotypical youth literature worked in concealed suggestive ways on the reader, and she pointed out the need to make this visible through, for example, content analysis (Liljeström 1972, 54, Dixon, 1977). In the wake of such critical analyses, a belief arose – in Sweden as well as internationally – that presenting non-stereotypical alternatives in fiction could counteract sexism.

The official documents of the Swedish educational system promote gender equality as a central fundamental value (Utbildningsdepartementet [Ministry of Education and Science] 1998, 5). It is stated that work in schools should depict and mediate equality. One way of achieving this is through fiction, which according to the syllabus, provides students with knowledge about the living conditions of women and men during different epochs and in different countries (Skolverket [National Agency for Education] 1996, 77).

Valerie Walkerdine (1990, 88-89) acknowledges that feminist criticism of gender bias in children’s literature has contributed in valuable ways when it comes to putting fictional content on the agenda. (Walkerdine uses the notion ‘text’ in a broad sense, including books, films, and images, *i.e.* as systems of signification.) However, Walkerdine claims that feminist approaches have often disregarded the text itself as productive of meaning. She sees an underlying idea that stereotyped literature depicts reality in a biased and distorted way. Conversely, access to non-stereotyped views and images would provoke changes in thinking and acting. According to Walkerdine, two issues in particular are problematic with this approach. Firstly, the idea that children’s understanding of themselves and of their possible actions will change if they are faced with a broader variety of experiences. Secondly, that this unproblematic transformation will occur by adapting non-stereotyped activities. In Walkerdine’s view, the problem with these two ideas is that a passive learner is a prerequisite; a rational learner who would change as a result of being presented with the proper

information, about how things *really* are. Walkerdine argues for another way of theorising about literature and the process of appropriation.

Textual images are themselves a constituent part of reality. Texts (as cultural practices) cannot be expected to change an extra-textual reality. Texts create places for identification and subject-positions in the text itself. Walkerdine proposes an engagement with the production of selves as subjects, in relation to cultural practices. In her view, the subject-positions made available by the texts are related to social and psychological battles concerning identity. At the same time, the subject-positions are the tools the reader uses to get into the text.

In her ground-breaking empirical research, Bronwyn Davies (1989b; 2003; Davies and Banks 1992) discussed gender with children, after reading feminist and non-stereotyped tales aloud to them. She met recurrently with eight four and five-year-old children and undertook participant observation at four different pre-schools in Australia (Davies 1989b). The same issue was explored in a follow-up study four years later, in which Davies and Chas Banks (1992; Davies 1993) drew on data from interaction with four of the previously interviewed children and four of the pre-school children. The findings of these studies showed that the children were already attuned to the dominant discourses of gender, which meant that the non-sexist texts were at times read as stereotyped texts. The introduction of non-sexist content, curricula, and ideals alone are thus not enough to liberate children from the current gender order (Davies and Banks 1992). Davies and Banks argue that non-sexist texts in literature classes need to be accompanied by discussions around concepts like dominant discourse and discourses of resistance if they are to be read as non-sexist. In other words: children should be given access to some post-structuralist notions, in order to resist dominant discourses on gender.

Alexis Wing has conducted a related study involving classroom observations of a teacher, who read and discussed a feminist story with ten to eleven year olds. Wing (1997, 503) concluded: 'it seems that [gender-stereotyping] awareness can be raised with a book as a catalyst, discussion and a teacher's intervention.' However, Wing does not consider the event that a discussion around a text that challenges gender-stereotypes might turn out promoting the very same stereotypes.

Regardless of whether or not the tendency in a text promotes gender stereotypes or attempts to break these down, the discussion about it can fall out stereotyped or counteracting stereotypes. In a study of teachers' discussions of foreign language texts, Sunderland *et al.* (2000, 252) noted a whole range of variation from the endorsing of stereotyped texts, through undermining progressive texts, to the transgression of stereotyped biases.

In Mexico, Evelyn Arizpe (2001) arranged a study of critical reading with twenty girls and boys in grade 8. She let them read a youth novel about a *conquistadora* (a female conquistador) and studied their responses to it. Arizpe's data consists both of the students' reading diaries and of interviews (group interviews as well as interviews with two students at a time). In the students' responses, Arizpe found contradictions between the students' admiration for the female *conquistadora* and their anxiety about losing gender qualities that they saw as constitutive of their male/female identity. Arizpe points out the importance of the cultural contexts for the reader's response process. In line with Davies, Arizpe (2001, 36)

stresses that students might ‘be taught to read critically’ for achieving changes in gender patterns.

Davies and Banks’ (1992), Wing’s (1997) and Arizpe’s (2001) studies were all arranged by the researchers themselves, from the selection of books to the discussion and interviewing. This is the case for most studies of children’s literature response – often conducted by skilled teacher-researchers on their own teaching (*cf.* Short 1986) or by researcher in collaboration with the teacher (*cf.* Evans 2002). Some exceptions are Hickman (1981), Orellana (1995) and Molloy (2002). However, their broader approach does not focus the conversational interaction that reveal the normalised occurring patterns of gender and that mediates the idea to introduce a text as a ‘cure’ or solution to gender bias.

As a continuation of researcher-initiated studies, the present study concerns a type of setting that has not been studied from a conversational perspective, namely construction of gender in everyday, ‘naturally occurring’ discussions of literature in a school setting. Both Kitzinger (2000, 170) and Speer (2005, 193-98) have pointed out a lack of naturalistic studies where gender issues ‘just “happen” to be present’. The present study hereby also contributes to the field of discursive psychology by providing analysis of gender in a natural setting where such matters ‘come up and are managed’ (*cf.* Potter 2005, 744).

Gender equality has a relatively strong tradition in Sweden and gender issues are part of the Swedish syllabus. How is gender equality reflected in booktalk in a school setting? How do teachers – in the light of the equality goal – treat pupils’ orientation to gender in literature?

In sum, the topic of the present article is how gender is treated in discussions with children on books in everyday school life.

Data and method

The empirical data examined in the present paper are part of a larger ethnographic study of response to and use of esthetical expressions in a school setting.¹ The part of the study concerning literature, was undertaken at a municipal elementary school with about 200 pupils, located in a medium-sized Swedish town (*i.e.*, about 125 000 inhabitants), where the staff has worked with reading support at all levels for ten years. During one school year, I received permission from teachers, pupils and parents to video-record the book clubs (3 sessions/group) for eight different groups from four classes (grades 4–7, *e.g.* pupils aged ten to fourteen); that is, a total of twenty-four book club sessions. Twenty female and twenty male pupils participated along with four female and one male teacher.² It should be noted, though, that the booktalk practices – in all twenty-four conversations – are the primarily analytic units of the present study.

As an obligatory part of the regular curriculum, the school ran *book clubs* (Swe. ‘läsecirklar’) inspired by Chambers’ (1993/1999) ‘booktalk’ approach. The teacher-librarian introduced the book club activities in the classes by presenting seven to eight book titles in each class. The teacher-librarian chose books that were popular in the ages concerned. The books also represented different degrees of difficulty, and a proposed book was often the first in a series. The pupils chose four books and arranged them according to their preferences, which formed the basis for how the groups were arranged. Each club gathered for about thirty minutes, three times in a fortnight.

In order to investigate the book club practices, all the twenty-four book club sessions were recorded in their entirety.³ At the actual filming, I tried to place the camera unobtrusively yet at a spot from which it would cover all participants.

Theoretically and methodologically the present study is primarily inspired by discursive psychology (*cf.* Potter and Wetherell 1994; 1995). Potter describes the form of the research questions of discourse work as how something is done (Potter, 2003). Thus, discourse work does not specify how the studied phenomenon should be done. Hence, the naturalistic approach to data collection and an analysis of details in talk. To undertake a discourse analysis, the present study have followed the recommendations of Potter and Wetherell (1995), making *in extenso* transcriptions of the entire data set, which amounts to about 450 A4 pages. Thereafter gender-relevant examples have been chosen and transcribed in more detail. These transcriptions cover overlaps, emphasis, loudness, pauses, and prolongation of sounds and latching.⁴

Among discourse analysts, there has recently been a discussion about gender analytical issues and participants' orientations (Kitzinger 2000; Schegloff 1998; Stokoe and Smithson 2001; Wetherell 1998). The part of the discussion that is most relevant to the present study is what counts as an orientation towards gender. In line with the reasoning of more or less conversational analytically (CA) oriented research (see for example, Stokoe and Smithson 2001, 225), the present study chose to define 'oriented towards' restricted as *explicit reference to gender* (*e.g.* 'her', 'him', 'girl', 'guy', and so on). This includes situations where the participant *could have chosen not to orient towards gender* by, for example, using another expression (*e.g.* 'person', 'friend', 'individual', 'character', and so on).

The discursive approach is important for understanding the ongoing gendered patterns through which subjects make meaning of texts.

After completing the first rough transcriptions, the entire material was searched for sequences dealing with gender. The selection criterion was *any sequence where the participants oriented towards gender*. In this process it became clear that gender was an issue that was oriented towards in various ways, both by the teachers and by the pupils, in all book club sessions. The next step in the process was to choose sequences where gender was *elaborated* or *discussed* by the participants. Below, six examples of how gender was constructed in relation to child on the one hand and to adult characters on the other hand will be presented.

Fictive characters as ideals

In the participants' discussions about the characters in the books they read, a difference between the discussion about children or young characters and discussions about adult characters was found. When young characters, for instance, in the same age as the pupils themselves, were focussed on, the discussion often concerned potential identification with these characters. The next three examples treat such discussions of same-aged characters.

Looking up to a fictive character

In example 1, *Isnatt* [Eng. Ice Night] (Sørllé 1989), a dramatic story about two siblings, Tina and Kjell, and their friend Leif, who had to spend a cold winter night on a desert island, was discussed.

EXCERPT 1: Group 7A:2. Participants: Eva, Anja, Åsa (girls), and MARY (teacher).

1. MARY: How do you see her ((Tina)) now that you have continued reading? She- you had opinions about her last time do you remember what you said about her then?
2. Eva: [She] seemed-
3. Åsa: [Nope]
4. Eva: Well or ah I dunno-
5. Åsa: (xx)
6. Åsa: She seemed- she stands kind of like halfway between
7. Eva: She's both like that kind and cour- or not cour- I don't really know
8. Åsa: She's kind of she wants- it was when- she doesn't really know if she should be courageous or if she should be [like that (xx)]
9. Eva: [She seems to be] self-confident!
10. Anja: Uh, it was good
11. (. . .)
12. MARY: Is there something in particular you are thinking about when you say she's self-confident?
13. Anja: Yes she is a little kind of courageous (.) you might say
14. Åsa: She often knows what she should d[o]
15. Anja: [Ye:ah]
16. Eva: But we really don't get to know much about her! But like you still feel that 'owell'-
17. → Anja: She seems to be quite calm in her ways (.) and not (.) like not well starting to scream as soon as there's a spider or something
18. → MARY: Is she kind of a girl you look up to a little bit?
19. Eva: I think she seems cool!
20. ?: hehe Um yes ((Giggling.))
21. MARY: Yes!
22. Anja: Starts to scream (x)
23. MARY: And still she is not somehow tough in some way
24. Several: No:
25. ?: But kind of
26. MARY: >Exactly what you just said I believe< calm (.) cool (.) but not tough, huh
27. Åsa: No

As can be seen above, the teacher sets the agenda for the discussion: one example is how she takes up Eva's claim that the protagonist is self-confident (turn 12), ignoring the previous attempts to describe the heroine's conflicting feelings concerning being courageous or not.

Being a self-confident girl is co-constructed as being 'a little kind of courageous' (turn 13), and someone who 'often knows what she should do' (turn 14) and being 'quite calm' (turn 17). In her attempt to describe the heroine Tina, Anja orients to gender, invoking the stereotype of a hysterical woman screaming because of a spider (turn 17). A hysterical female, a pretty ridiculous and dependent person, is thus contrasted to the heroine, a calm girl, who is not frightened by things that are not dangerous.⁵

One phenomenon that can be seen when using discourse variation as an analytical lever (Potter 1997: 150ff; 1998: 136f; Potter and Wetherell 1994) is the shift in Åsa's description of

Tina. Åsa starts saying that the heroine does not really know how to be, ‘she’s kind of she wants it was when she doesn’t really know if she should be courageous or if she should be like that’ (turn 8). In contrast, Eva states that Tina is self-confident (turn 9), and is supported by both Anja and the teacher. Åsa’s recycled categorisation of Tina, ‘she often knows what she should do’ (turn 14), can almost be seen as a reversal of her initial statement. In the shift from ‘not knowing really how to be’ (turn 8) to ‘often knowing what to do’ (turn 14), the heroine appears as a more self-confident character.

After the pupils’ co-constructed description of the heroine, the teacher, orients to gender asking if she is a girl to ‘look up to’ (turn 18). The heroine is thus explicitly compared to real schoolgirls. Here the teacher turns the discussion away from the description of the heroine, to a relational question where the protagonist is typified as a particular ‘kind of a girl’ to look up to. The teacher move invites a moral judgement connected to the everyday lives of the students. In turn 23, the teacher injects a moral judgement about what kind of girl deserves to be looked up to: ‘she is not somehow tough’. The teacher thus produces a generalisation about morality and femininity.

Ultimately, the teacher sums up ‘Exactly what you just said I believe calm cool but not tough’ (turn 26). Yet, it can be noted that the teacher construes a ‘girl to look up to’ (turn 18) as someone who is not ‘somewhat tough in someway’ (turn 23). Thereby, she is, in fact, bypassing attempts at discussing the girl as a complete and subtle character with complex and at times contradictory qualities, reading her to a more one-dimensional person and a more traditional ‘admirable girl’.

Is he a sweet guy?

The following example is drawn from a discussion about the book *Smuggelkatten* [The Smuggled Cat] (Ekholm 1990). The main character is a girl, called Anna. On her return from a vacation with her father to Greece, Anna tried to smuggle a ‘foundling cat’ into Sweden. In the end, the cat, Drama, had to be put in quarantine. Anna is a bit of an outsider in school and at the stables. She shares her interest in animals with a boy, Per, something of an outsider in the peer group.

EXCERPT 2: Group 4B:2. Participants: Julia, Sara, Mia, Ida (girls), Dan (boy), and SUE (teacher).

1. → SUE: Did you think that (.) that this Per then seemed to be a sweet guy?
2. Mia: Yes
3. Sara: Ye:s
4. SUE: °Uh huh huh° Mia what did you think?
5. → Mia: Well yes he was like just like Anna for he too liked little animals better than big animals
6. SUE: Uh huh so in him she had like a real pal
7. ?: Uh
8. SUE: Yes

In the first turn of the sequence, the teacher asks what the pupils thought about a minor character, Per. Her question pre-categorises Per as 'sweet' (Swe. 'mysig', which literally means 'cosy' in English).

The teacher's choice of label for Per does not follow the stereotypical gender pattern of a strong silent, action-oriented male who keeps his feelings to himself. (Nor does Mia's positioning of Per and Anna as related characters when it comes to caring interests.) Maybe this is due to Per's age; he is not yet a fully-grown male. Although Per is a minor character, he is the most important male character in the book. However, it can be noted that the only boy in the group, Dan, does not comment on whether or not Per is 'sweet'.

The teacher also highlights the fact that Per is male, in her use of the word 'guy'. She could just as well have posed her question as an open question without the suggestive label 'sweet' and/or without marking Per's maleness. *E.g.*, 'Tell me what you think of Per?' However, the pupils do not explicitly orient towards the gender issue. At least Mia does not discuss the two characters in terms of *difference*. Thus, making gender relevant does not automatically involve *separating* things like interests. Instead, Mia foregrounds the similarity between Anna and Per; he is 'just like Anna' (turn 5). She thus does not follow up the teacher's invitation to talk about Per as a 'sweet guy'. If anything, he is positioned as a 'sweet person'. When Mia foregrounds sameness (turn 5), the teacher in turn, rephrases her question, using the gender-neutral expression 'pal' (Swe. 'kompis', turn 6), thereby reorienting towards *gender-neutrality*.

To be like Anna or to be like the cat?

In contrast, in the next excerpt three of the four female pupils seem to identify with the main character, Anna, when asked about if they would like to be like her. Yet, neither Dan nor Ida demonstrates any particular interest in her.

EXCERPT 3: Group 4B:2. Participants: Julia, Sara, Mia, Ida (girls), Dan (boy) and SUE (teacher).

1. SUE: Would any of you like to be Anna? be like Anna?
2. ((Sara and Mia raise their hands. Julia raises her hand too.))
3. → SUE: Yes all the girls
4. Mia: She has such a kind dad
5. Sara: I'd also like to be like Anna ((Chuckling.))
6. SUE: You'd like that yes ((Turns towards Dan.)) who would like to be? Would you like to be like [Per the bird]-watcher?
7. → Dan: [The cat!]
8. ((Sara and Mia laugh.))
9. SUE: Live a spoiled life you mean? I can see that uh: so you like that kind of food (.) liverpaté and sardines and whatever the cat?
10. Dan: Nope only tuna
11. SUE: You like tuna
12. Sara: Hehe
13. SUE: Then you could be a kitty-cat in that way uh hu
14. Dan: And prawns
15. SUE: Yes that's not bad that's not bad

The teacher initiates an act of displaying identification with the main character Anna, when asking whether anyone would like to be like her (turn 1). Three of the four girls in the group raise their hands. The teacher's interpretation of their response ('yes all the girls') is, apparently, orientated towards gender in its underlying assumption that Sara, Mia and Julia would want to be or be like Anna since they themselves are girls (turn 3). When saying that *all* the girls wanted to be like Anna the teacher does not address the fact that Ida did not raise her hand; she does not ask Ida whom in the book she would like to be.

The teacher then immediately turns to Dan, the only boy in the group, asking who he would like to be, and if he would like to be Per, the birdwatcher (turn 6). Dan responds that he would rather be the cat (turn 7). Until the very moment when the teacher and Dan overlap each other speaking, the main character Anna has been in focus. I would like to argue that the teacher introduces a gender issue with her utterance in turn 3 – that all the *girls* would want to be like Anna – despite the fact that one girl, Ida, does not respond. This interpretation is sustained by the teacher's way of turning toward, the only *boy*, Dan, to find out who he would want to be like (turn 6). Yet, he apparently has not found any important male character to choose. Therefore, he identifies more with the (male) cat who is an important character than with the girl, even though she is the main character.

In a study of six- and eight-year-old children's readings of a fairy tale on TV, Ingegerd Rydin (1996, 174-75) has shown that a majority of her interviewees identified with a same-sex character, so did the children in Davies' (1989a, 230) fairy tale study. Similarly, Howard and Allen (1989, 296) claim that because more stories are told by a male narrator than by a female, boys are not trained in gender-transgressive identification while reading. Both these findings are consistent with Dan's choice to identify with a (male) animal rather than with a girl.

In all the above examples, the teachers indirectly teach the pupils to see same-age, same-sex characters as potential ideals. Though the teachers limit the discussions to be about character of same sex and age as the pupils, they still open up for playing with identities: you could be someone other than you are. On a speculative note, the fictive characters may perhaps expand the pupils' repertoires of possible actions and ways of being, and in the extension, be seen as presenting possible subject-positions.

Gender stereotypes and ideal parents

When the adult characters were discussed more in-depth in the book club sessions, they were usually discussed in their capacity as mothers or fathers, that is as gendered adults, not as someone who the pupils would want 'to be like' or 'to look up to' as in the case of same-aged characters. When parallels were drawn to the pupils' own lives, it was thus primarily the *child-parent relation* that was invoked, not the parents' thoughts or feelings. This is illustrated in the following three examples.

Mummy and her 'little guy'

The next two examples constitute continuations of excerpt 3. After finishing the explorative characterisation of Per ('a sweet guy?'), the teacher immediately directed the discussion to other persons around the main character.

EXCERPT 4: Group 4B:2. Participants: Julia, Sara, Mia, Ida, Dan and SUE (teacher).

1. SUE: What about mum and dad then? were they friends of hers that she could talk to and all or what was it like? (4) Pooh there should be more of you than Sara and Mia who can answer [xx]]
2. Sara: [hehe]
3. SUE: Well you claim you have read the book!
4. Dan: Yes
5. SUE: Ye:s! (3) Sara then
6. → Sara: Her mum cared like so much about her **little guy** and she said that Anna was t- Anna was big now and would take care of herself and her dad was mostly away like
7. SUE: What little guy were you talking about then?
8. Sara: No:e it-=
9. SUE: =Ida who was that little guy?
10. Ida: ((Shrugs her shoulders and rolls her eyes.))
11. Sara: It wasn't a little guy but it was-
12. Mia?: P- p-
13. SUE: It was a grow- yes
14. Mia: It was her partner ((Swe. 'sambo', i.e., gender neutral co-habitant)) then
15. SUE: Yes indeed you know u:h
16. Mia: [She only cared about if- a:h a:h]
17. SUE: [Mum and dad were well- were well divorced] and all that
18. → Mia: She only cared about him all the time
19. SUE: Uh huh yes
20. → Dan: Like a little baby
21. SUE: Yes she thought well that it wa- was thought like- Anna she thought like this that mums and dads they liked w- like well always their children best
22. Sara: Ye:s
23. SUE: 'Cause that's like what she believed anyhow
24. Sara: Ye:s

The teacher apparently wants to initiate a discussion about the relations between the main character, Anna, and her parents, asking if they were her friends whom she could talk to (turn 1). Sara answers negatively, talking about how Anna's mother primarily cares about her 'little guy' referring to the mother's partner in a contemptuous tone of voice (turn 6). One interpretation of Sara's belittling categorisation of the heroine's mother's new partner is that she positions him as a child, thereby ridiculing him. Also, Anna's mother is deprived of any other function than being a Mother. Sara also explains that the father is mostly away. One could say that, from Sara's point of view, both parents fail to fulfil their parental duties towards Anna. Sara presents Anna's opinion as it is expressed in the book where Anna criticises her mother for caring more about her partner than about her daughter (Ekholm 1990, 7-8, 37-38).

The mother is thus criticised for prioritising adult life as a woman together with her new love over her life as a mother. Anna's father on the other hand, prioritises business trips and consequently living alone over letting Anna live with him. In the story, Anna says she would prefer living with her father – especially after her mother's boyfriend moved in with them.

Sara, the reader, similarly displays strong negative feelings toward the main character's mother, stronger than toward the main character's father. Sara is not the only pupil to pick up on Anna's critique of her mother: Mia similarly says that the mother only cared about her partner 'all the time' (turn 18), and Dan aligns with their critique of Anna's mother, saying that she fussed over her boyfriend like a baby (turn 20).

Simultaneously, the critique of the mother character in the text delivered by Sara, Mia and Dan challenges heterosexual politics where women attend to men, as if they were 'little babies'. The pupils' criticism of heterosexual gender relations is delivered through envy of the consideration the stepfather gets from the mother; however, it's still important to recognize the pupils' critique of gender stereotypes.

This text can be read as promoting gender stereotypes, in the sense that the mother is expected to sacrifice her own adult life in favour of the children, while, in principle, a father 'gets away' with a smaller proportion of parent-related responsibilities. In their joint condemnation of the mother (and not the father) the pupils' discussion can be described in terms of a gender-stereotyped reading of a text that promotes gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are also sustained by the teacher in her way of bringing forward and 'allowing' statements that can be understood as relatively stereotypical. Another example is her foregrounding on Anna's opinion – in relation to her mother's new partner – that parents should always love their children best (turn 21). In this context, we should recall the objective of the curriculum – that the study of literature should open the pupils' minds toward the different living conditions of men and women and gender equity. What is the teacher's reaction to the group's partly gender-stereotyped reading?

The teacher's attempts to dispute stereotypical categorisations of good/bad parents can be seen in the discussion that followed soon after.

EXCERPT 5: Group 4B:2. Participants: Julia, Sara, Mia, Ida (girls), Dan (boy) and SUE (teacher).

1. SUE: Yes that sounds exciting but now it's time for us to and we-
think a bit about our book well yes it seems to us that the
dad was very nice
2. ?: Ye:s
3. ?: Uh:
4. SUE: And her mum was?
5. Dan: Not so nice
6. → SUE: Yes but she didn't really say that but she just didn't have
too much time for her right now
7. Dan?: Uh:
8. SUE: [This one-]
9. Sara: [No but] it seemed like as if she was very- didn't have time
like this then- didn't care so much-
10. SUE: No=
11. Sara: =Wasn't so nice
12. SUE: And that came out even early in the book when Anna thought
that the best things about going to Greece besides Drama-
13. Mia: tee hee
14. SUE: -What that was that? Uh
15. Mia: She was got away from mum and that she didn't have to-
16. SUE: Ye:s=
17. Sara: =[That guy!]=
18. Mia: =[Like to be with]-
19. SUE: Ye:s

20. Mia: -That she was with that guy
 21. SUE: And that she could be with instead?
 22. Mia: Yes
 23. Sara: [Her da]d
 24. SUE: [Dad!]
 25. Mia: Her dad who was really nice
 26. → SUE: °Well° but he- why at the same time she thought he was a bit of a pain
 27. Mia and Sara: Yes

On two occasions, the teacher apparently orients towards the pupils' intolerant perspective on the mother, trying to balance it by disputing their reading of the text (turns 6 and 26). In the first instance, Dan first suggested that the mother was 'not so nice' and the teacher's response to this is an attempt to mitigate his reaction (turn 6). She does this by drawing attention to the fact that Anna actually did not indicate a direct dislike of her mother but was primarily discontent about being neglected by her. The teacher's next attempt at modulating the pupils' quite harsh categorisations is expressed after Mia's description of the heroine's father as 'really nice', when she reminds her that the heroine liked her father, but that she also thought that he was a bit of a pain (turn 26). In this example, the teacher thus recurrently challenges the pupils' gender-stereotyped discussion about a gender-stereotyped book.

Not a typical mum

An ideal mother is also invoked in another book club discussion that concerned a different book, *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* [Eng. Help! The Boa is Loose] (Zak 1987). Freedom is the overall theme of this book. The lifestyle of twenty-four-year old Gustav, called Guttav, and his mother, how is baptised a rather dull Swedish name, Birgit, but wants to be addressed by the more exotic name Isidora, can be described as free and unconventional.

EXCERPT 6: Group 4A:2. Participants: Mats, Tony, Bert (boys), Inga (girl) and MARY (teacher).

1. MARY: ((Looks at Inga.)) So you had taken Isidora as one of the main characters? (.) What do you think she was like?
 2. Inga: No:, not especially strict about things how they looked and all that [(xx) dancing (xx)]-
 3. Mats: [Well she dances] at least
 4. MARY: ((Points from Mats to Inga.)) ° (x) has to wait°
 5. Inga: °(xx) danced°
 6. MARY: She liked to dance and she was not especially strict about things ((Enumerates the characteristics on her fingers.))
 7. Inga: Nope
 8. MARY: ((Looks towards Mats.)) What else were you thinking of?
 9. Mats: I guess I was thinking about the dancing (.) she- what's it called, Hampus went like and hid on the shoe shelf when Isi- Isidora put on- put the music on
 10. MARY: ((Nods.))
 11. Tony: (xx)
 12. Mats: (xx)
 13. MARY: Have the two of you thought about Isidora at all? ((Points at Bert and Tony.))
 14. → Bert: (xx) (.) She's like- what's it called- well she's not so mature (xx)-
 15. → MARY: Is she a typical mum?

16. Several: No:e:
 17. Bert: °No no mum°
 18. MARY: What's a typical mum like then?
 19. Inga: She is supposed to [nag]
 20. Bert: [Nag]ging
 21. MARY: Well! (.) And Isidora didn't?
 22. Several: No:o:
 23. Inga: (xx) then you didn't have to do certain things at home like
 cleaning your room an stuff
 24. MARY: Guttav didn't have to do that
 25. Inga: N-o
 26. MARY: How do we find out that she wasn't so strict? Was it
 through- uh- this dog we got to know it or did we get to
 know it because of something else?
 27. Inga: That she wasn't like (.) about clothes either and all, she
 wasn't directly- about the clothes- and all that either
 (xx)
 28. ((Eight turns withdrawn from excerpt.))
 29. MARY: And that's how we get to know a bit about her maybe being
 quite sloppy
 30. Tony(?): °Uh°
 31. MARY: Yes well I too have fluff balls at home sometimes (.) do
 you?
 32. Several: Yes
 33. Mats(?): Probably we all have
 34. Tony: Hehe I have ones as big as this ((Shows with his hands?))
 35. MARY: Hehe yes! (.) Well yes but mums nag but this mum didn't

When the teacher sums up the pupils' descriptions of the mother Isidora, she enumerates two main features: that she dances and that she doesn't particularly care about household matters (turn 6).

In the ongoing discussion, Bert expresses an indirect critique of the adult Isidora, who has parental responsibility for her grown-up son, by judging her as not really being mature (turn 14). The teacher's follow-up question 'is she a typical mum?' indirectly establishes that there *is* something like a 'typical mum'. Secondly, the question leads the group discussion into a judgmental direction, orienting towards her feminine, and more precisely, motherly qualities (turn 15). As a response to this, several of the pupils claim that Isidora is not a typical mum. In order to judge, one has to compare her to some type of ideal. Which link of the comparison should be discussed here? Since the teacher has already posed the question about what Isidora is like, she leads the discussion to the other link of the comparison. Therefore, the discussion concerns the characteristics of a (stereo)typical mum (turn 18). The discussion of a text that, in at least one sense, can be read as radical thus partly turns into a stereotyped discussion.

The pupils do not express any dislike of the atypical mum. Nor do they express any appreciation of her either. In one comment, the teacher defines Isidora as quite sloppy (turn 29). However, in her following turn (turn 31) she initiates a joint confession about housework sloppiness (turn 32). Hereafter, Mats suggests that fluff balls are probably very common in peoples' homes (turn 33). To sum up, Isidora's behaviour is neither condemned, nor admired in the booktalk session.

In sum, Isidora, the dancer and sloppy housekeeper, is discussed as a female parent: a mother, and she is compared to a prototypical mother who nags her family about keeping the house clean. Thus, Isidora can be seen as a non-stereotyped female character. Yet, the booktalk discussion about 'typical mums' can also be seen to partly reproduce or, at least, foreground existing stereotypes.

Conclusions

In a classical formulation, Stanley Fish (1980/1998) has asked us: is there a text in this class? In the present booktalk data, the discussion and the texts read were inextricably intertwined. Obviously, there were many readings, many texts rather than one unitary reading of each book. Yet, these 'texts' were also partly the joint products of the discussions and the texts as such.

Departing from the participants' orientation, gender was found to be relevant in the booktalk interaction in that the teachers as well as the pupils explicitly referred to gender in the sessions (Stokoe and Smithson 2001, 220). When gender was made relevant, as the teachers and pupils talked about 'guy', 'girls', 'mum' etc, they also discussed the appropriate conduct of such gendered categories.

The major findings of the present study can be summarised in two points:

- (i) *Gender is co-constructed through the engagement with texts during the most mundane of conversations*

The characters of the same age as the pupils were by the teachers pointed out to be potential persons of identification. The teachers displayed a presumption that girls should identify with female characters and boys with male characters. Some, but not all girls did, and one boy related to a (male) animal rather than to a female heroine. On another occasion, the pupils resisted the teacher's orientation towards (stereotypical) gender differences, refocusing on sameness thereby making the teacher re-orient towards gender neutrality. Since the discussions around the texts did not necessarily follow the partly non-stereotyped gender patterns of those in the texts, the present study proves Walkerdine right: it is not sufficient just to present non-stereotype fictive alternatives to make a change in thinking of real world children.

- (ii) *Both pupils and teachers contest gender stereotypes and expectations in particular ways.*

In many of those cases, there was a generational pattern, though, in that both groups tended to apply less stereotyped thinking when talking about their own age group.

The present study also explored an example of a teacher who challenged the pupils' gender-stereotyped discussion of a gender-stereotyped text.

When discussing the living condition of adult characters, these discussions generally concerned adults as parents, that is, from a child's perspective. The adult characters were discussed as potential parents of the pupils themselves (e.g., as nice/not nice parents), not as characters that the pupils could identify with. There was also a tendency for the children to be more tolerant of non-stereotyped behaviour in their discussions of younger characters than in their discussions of adults.

The reader responses in the booktalk sessions thus involved both gender patterns and generational patterns.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Karin Aronsson and Jessica Ringrose for valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. Thanks are also due to two anonymous reviewers.

References

- Arizpe, E. 2001. Responding to a 'Conquistadora': readers talk about gender in Mexican secondary schools. *Gender and Education* 13: 25-37.
- Chambers, A. 1993/1999. *Tell me: Children, reading and talk*. Stroud, England: Thimble Press.
- Davies, B. 1989a. The discursive production of the male/female dualism in school settings. *Oxford Review of Education* 15: 229-41.
- . 1989b. *Frogs and snails and feminist tales: Preschool children and gender*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- . 1993. *Shards of glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities. Language & social processes*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press.
- . 2003. *Frogs and snails and feminist tales. Preschool children and gender*. Revised Edition ed. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Davies, B. and Banks, C. 1992. The gender trap: A feminist poststructuralist analysis of primary school children's talk about gender. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 24: 1-25.
- Dixon, B. (1977). *Catching them young*. London: Pluto Press.
- Edwards, D. 1997. *Discourse and cognition*. London: Sage.
- Ekholm, L. 1990. *Smuggelkatten*. Stockholm: Opal.
- Evans, K.S. 2002. Fifth-grade students' perceptions of how they experience literature discussion groups. *Reading Research Quarterly* 37: 46-69.
- Fish, S. 1980/1998. *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hickman, J. 1981. A new perspective on response to literature: Research in an elementary school setting. *Research in the Teaching of English* 15: 343-54.
- Howard, J.A. and Allen, C. 1989. Making meaning: Revealing attributions through analyses of readers' responses. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 52: 280-98.
- Kitzinger, C. 2000. Doing feminist conversation analysis. *Feminism & Psychology* 10: 163-93.
- Liljeström, R. 1972. Det dolda mönstret i ungdomsböcker [The concealed pattern in books for young people]. In *Könsdiskriminering förr och nu: litteratursociologiska och historiska studier*, 46-54. Stockholm: Prisma.
- Molloy, G. 2002. *Läraren-Litteraturen-Eleven. En studie om läsning av skönlitteratur på högstadiet [The Teacher-The Literature-The Student. A study of reading of fiction in secondary school]*. Stockholm: The Stockholm Institute of Education.
- Orellana, M.F. 1995. Literacy as a gendered social practice: Tasks, texts, talk, and take-up. *Reading Research Quarterly* 30: 674-708.
- Potter, J. 1997. Discourse analysis as a way of analysing naturally occurring talk. In *Qualitative research. Theory, Method and Practice*, 144-60. London: Sage.
- . 1998. Qualitative and discourse analysis. In *Comprehensive clinical psychology: Research and methods*, 117-44. Oxford, England: Pergamon.
- . 2003. Discourse analysis and discursive psychology. In *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design*, 73-94. Washington: American Psychological Association.
- . 2005. Making psychology relevant. *Discourse & Society* 16: 739-47.
- Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. 1994. Analyzing discourse. In *Analyzing qualitative data*, 47-66. London: Routledge.
- . 1995. Discourse analysis. In *Rethinking methods in psychology*, 80-92. London: Sage.
- Rydin, I. 1996. *Making sense of TV-narratives: Children's readings of a fairy tale* Vol. 142 of *Linköping Studies in Arts and Science No.* Linköping, Sweden: Linköping University.

- Schegloff, E.A. 1998. Reply to Wetherell. *Discourse & Society* 9: 413-16.
- Short, K.G. 1986. *Literacy as a collaborative experience (Intertextuality, reading, writing)*: Indianapolis: Indiana University.
- Skolverket [National Agency for Education]. 1996. *Grundskolan: kursplaner, betygskriterier [Compulsory school: Syllabus, assessment criteria]*. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Speer, S.A. 2005. *Gender Talk. Feminism, Discourse and Conversation Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Stokoe, E.H. and Smithson, J. 2001. Making gender relevant: Conversation analysis and gender categories in interaction. *Discourse & Society* 12: 217-44.
- Sunderland, J., Cowley, M., Abdul Rahim, F., Leontzakou, C. and Shattuck, J. 2000. From bias “in the text” to “teacher talk around the text” An exploration of teacher discourse and gendered foreign language textbook texts. *Linguistics and Education* 11: 251-86.
- Sørllø, S. 1989. *Isnatt*. Stockholm: Ordfront.
- Utbildningsdepartementet [Ministry of Education and Science]. 1998. *Läroplan för det obligatoriska skolväsendet, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet. Lpo 94 anpassad till att också omfatta förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet [Curriculum for the compulsory school, the pre-school class and the after school centre. Lpo 94]* Offentliga publikationer. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Walkerline, V. 1990. *Schoolgirl fictions*. London: Verso.
- Wetherell, M. 1998. Positioning and interpretative repertoires: Conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue. *Discourse & Society* 9: 387-412.
- Wing, A. 1997. How can children be taught to read differently? *Bills New Frock* and the ‘hidden curriculum’. *Gender and Education* 9: 491-504.
- Zak, M. 1987. *Hjälp! Boan är lös!* Bromma, Sweden: Opal.

Notes

1. The project was generously funded by *The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation*, Bank of Sweden Donation (Dnr 1999-0341: 01-02).
2. All names of participants and places have been left out or changed to ensure anonymity.
3. Due to technical mistakes the recordings lack sound in three cases (5A1:3, 5B2:3 and 6A1:3). In all, 21 book sessions were transcribed.
4. Transcription symbols are mainly based on conversation analysis and discursive psychology (Edwards, D. 1997. *Discourse and cognition*. London: Sage.: []; Square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping speech; underlining, emphasis, with the extent of underlining within individual words locating the emphasis; **bold**, pronunciation differs from surrounding speech, e.g. irony, theatrical; CAPITALS, mark speech that is obviously louder than surrounding speech; °..°, quieter speech; (n), a pause, with n indicating the time in seconds; (.), micro pause; ((Text)), transcriber’s comments; :, Prolongation of preceding vowel; > <, speeded-up talk; < >, slower talk; =, immediate “latching” of successive talk; –, utterance interrupted or ebbed away; (. . .), talk has been omitted from a data excerpt; (text), uncertain interpretation; (x) (xx), Inaudible word or words; hehe, laughter.
5. There are no dangerous spiders in Scandinavia.