

# Horses, Girls, and Agency: Gender in Play Pedagogy

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## Abstract

This is a study of the development of student agency from a gender perspective in a Finnish classroom. The data originates from an ethnographic research project in an elementary school classroom engaging in a play pedagogy project called a “playworld.” The article has two purposes. The first is to examine the potential of imagination and improvised fantasy play in the development of agency. The second is to investigate the role of gender as a social category in shaping the students’ possibilities for agency in the play pedagogical setting. The creative use of imagination is at the center of the playworld pedagogy. However, it has rarely been studied in relation to the potentially uneven or stereotypic consequences of cultural tools, symbols, and categories.

The analytical focus is on the gender-related categorization of a ‘horse girl’ and the role it played in the development of the agency of two seven-year-old girls as they participated in the playworld. I have used a multidisciplinary analytical framework to sensitize myself to the data. In the article I combine Vygotsky’s ideas of double stimulation, Sacks’ categorization analysis and, Holzkamp’s concept of action potency.

The results show that the playworld pedagogy that explicitly aimed at developing children’s agency and

collaboration was strongly gender categorized and thus was constraining for the girls in this study. On the other hand, the girls’ unplanned fantasy play, which took place on the sidelines of the classroom activity, contained important agentive elements. It gave the girls a *sense* of agency crucial to their *enactment* of agency in the wider playworld setting. It is argued that the girls were able to become agentive players in the activity through questioning the gendered categories openly in the classroom.

## 1 Introduction

Ethnographic studies have convincingly shown that gender is a central organizing category in classrooms. Gordon, Holland, Lahelma, and Tolonen (2005) argue how boys receive more attention from teachers and other students simply because they use more voice, space, time, and movement than girls. What is visible and audible attracts the attention of even the most critical researcher, while silence and stillness can go unobserved. The data discussed in this paper originates from an ethnographic research project in a Finnish age-integrated elementary school classroom with 4- to 8-year-old children engaging in a narrative playworld project. Drama and play-

based methods have been argued to offer a particularly engaging and meaningful learning setting for students (Hakkarainen, 2006b; Rainio, 2007), and in this study I critically examine this potential from a gender perspective.

One central aim of the playworld project was to encourage students to work together collaboratively. Towards this end, the teachers considered the playworld story to appeal to diverse students, particularly to the most restless boys of the class. My observations from the project imply that many students did develop active and recognized positions in the playworld (Rainio, 2008a; 2008b). In this article I focus on less visible forms of student agency in the playworld data.

I was involved in the project as a “developmental ethnographer” (cf. Engeström, 2000). In line with the cultural-historical research tradition, my role in the field included both critically observing and examining the activity and helping the practitioners (the teachers) to reflect on and develop their practice (see Wardekker, 2000; Hasu, 2005). On one hand, a close and participatory role was necessary in order to build trust with the practitioners and to collect a rich variety of qualitative data on the playworld activity. On the other hand, in order to analyze the constraints and challenges of the observed activity, it was necessary to keep a reflective distance from a practice that I actively support. Gender and the positions of the girls in the activity were two of the issues that I raised in my discussion with the teachers, and this article has been developed partly from these notions.

My focus is on Helen and Sara, two 7-year-old girls who took on the roles of horses in the project. Horses and riding were also an important part of their free time. Through a detailed analysis of the empirical data, I illustrate how the gender-related categorization of ‘horse girl’ shaped and limited the girls’ possibilities for action. On the other hand, I also show how the girls turned this category into a resource to develop their agency.

I will analyze the data through two theoretical lenses. The first is based on research on gender in everyday interaction, inspired by Harvey Sacks’ (2002) categorization analysis. The second theoretical lens through which I try to grasp the developmental side of agency is L. S. Vygotsky’s (1978; 1997) idea of double stimulation. As a heuristic tool for the analysis of agency development in the playworld data, I apply Klaus Holzkamp’s (1991; 1992) conceptualization of restrictive and generalized modes of action potency.

## 2 Setting and Data

The case study that this article is based on was conducted in a Finnish age-integrated (with children from four to eight years old) elementary school classroom. The data extracts are from a narrative playworld project based on Astrid Lindgren’s novel *The Brothers Lionheart*. Initially developed by Swedish play pedagogue Gunilla Lindqvist (1995), the playworld was one of the central narrative methods (Hakkarainen, 2006b) used by the group. A playworld can be described as a jointly created, fictional world in which both adults and children act in roles inside the frames of an improvised plot. The theoretical background of the playworld lies in the cultural-historical theories of play and its role in development (Vygotsky, 1978; El’konin, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

In the spring term of 2004, the classroom was turned into the world of the Brothers Lionheart. In January, the children chose their favorite characters from the story and were divided into small groups to work with the characters and to prepare costumes and props for them. In February a different scene from the book was built in the classroom each week, and the children were able

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<sup>1</sup> The class has emerged as a result of a longitudinal (1996-2003) pilot study lead by the University of Oulu in Finland. The aim of the project was to develop an integrated “narrative method” for learning and teaching in early childhood education and make the transition from preschool to school more flexible (Hakkarainen, 2006b).

to play in each of them. Finally, from March to the end of May, all four teachers and the 30 children participated in acting out a long journey together, taking on the roles of villagers from Cherry Valley on their way to rescue the neighboring Wild Rose Valley from the hands of the evil ruler Tengil.

The data presented here consists of video material from each phase of the project, as well as recorded and transcribed teacher meetings and student interviews. Video-recordings from the playworld events and from the teacher meetings made it possible to analyze the unfolding activity and its micro-interaction in detail. The student interviews, on the other hand, opened up a more personal look at the girls' own perspectives that was not available from the video data.

From this material I defined all the data on playing a horse character in the playworld and the data in which Helen and Sara are present or spoken about. First, I analyzed the different ways through which horses, horse roles, or girls playing the roles of horses were categorized and talked about (both in the teachers' and students' talk). These results are shown in section 4. Secondly, I depicted Helen and Sara's actions in relation to this categorization and to the way they reflected on their roles in the playworld. Finally I reconstructed the changes and critical turning points in their development of agency in the playworld. These results are introduced and analyzed in section 5. In the following section I will introduce the theoretical sources from which I drew the analytical concepts used in this article.

### 3 Presentation of Theory

#### 3.1 *Categorization, Gender, and Agency*

Learning the "rules" that people utilize in communicating and making sense of their everyday lives is an essential part of the socialization process. We learn to categorize

people and things and expect certain behavior and actions from members of these categories. Sacks (2002) analyzed children's stories to demonstrate how what he called "categorization devices" were used by even quite young children to make sense of and interpret their social reality. In this article I will use the general idea of categorization to interpret and discuss how cultural practices shape individuals' possibilities for agency. Stokoe (2003, 2006) has analyzed gendered categories in everyday use and maintains that they are often taken for granted. For example, stereotypes that contrast "a good little girl" and "a naughty little boy" present a typical childhood image of boys as adventuresome and girls as quietly playful (cf. Cook-Gumperz, 2001, p. 40).

Although categorization analysis offers a tool with which to analyze the social categories that shape our possibilities for action, it does leave a relatively static view of agency. It does not grasp the dilemmatic nature of human social life, between being an individual and being a member of various collectives – which is particularly visible in educational institutions:

"In educational theory and practice there is a tension between the belief that children must be 'socialized' into known and accepted ways of being, and the belief that fundamental to those known and acceptable ways of being is the idea of the individual who does and should stand outside of and above those forms, make choices, accept moral responsibility for their own actions and so on" (Davies, 1990, p. 344).

Studies on girls' sub-cultures have analyzed the tensions between girls' attempts to "control their own lives" and the gendered options (categories) that are available to them in the media and in other representations of everyday life (Cook-Gumperz, 2001, p. 36). Based on her research on young girls playing video games, Walkerdine (2006, p. 522) suggests that our contemporary society demands that girls manage contradictory positions of masculinity and

femininity – “co-operation and competition, caring and winning.”

Further, it is argued that subcultures serve as private places for girls where they can momentarily escape gender-related expectations in acceptable ways. In Finland, riding horses is a popular hobby for young girls. Ojanen (2005, 2006), who has studied girls’ horse riding, argues that the culture created around it enables girls to establish a space that they can themselves control and master. Girls not only ride horses, they spend their time collectively in stables, feeding, grooming, and taking care of horses.<sup>2</sup> They develop power hierarchies and social norms such as codes for how to dress and what to talk about. Simultaneously as these practices build on, sustain, and even confirm traditional gendered categories, they also offer the possibility to vary and modify them, and to use them in rehearsing agency in the group.

The process of modifying and redefining these conflicting categories is the core of agency. However, in classrooms alternative ways of seeing and being are rarely available. Further, students are not equally equipped with the social, personal, and discursive resources needed to recognize these different practices and to make a choice between them (Davies, 1990). To analyze these individual possibilities for agency and their developmental grounds, we need to move beyond the methods offered by categorization analysis. Lepper (2000) notes that Sacks was familiar with Vygotsky’s work and that these two theories converge in interesting ways. Both highlighted

the idea of language as a culturally mediated process of social development. However, whereas Sacks was interested in the assimilation and employment of implicit rules of language in social interaction, Vygotsky’s interest was in analyzing the role of signs, symbols, and cultural tools in the development of human beings’ capacity to transform and gain independence from their immediate material constraints (see, i.e., 1998a and 1998b). To combine these elements in the study of agency is a contemporary challenge of cultural-historical theory and practice.

### 3.2 Vygotsky’s Method of Double Stimulation

According to cultural-historical theory, the use of tools and symbols is the basis of human agency. However, their use requires a voluntary subjection to their power. The paradoxical interdependence between human freedom and self-control was at the center of Vygotsky’s (1997) theory of cultural development and formation of personality. He saw play as a central medium for practicing the ability to escape the immediate control of environmental stimuli with the help of imagination. Several post-Vygotskian researchers have also shown that play and narratives develop children’s ability to make generalizations and to develop an awareness of self and others (Hakkarainen 2006a; Marjanovich-Shane & Beljanski-Ristic, 2008; Lindqvist, 2003). However, this developmental potential has rarely been studied in relation to cultural categories such as gender, although critical sociological studies have shown that our ability to generalize also means an ability to categorize and stereotype.

In this article I apply Vygotsky’s idea of *double stimulation* to study how the girls developed their agency in relation to the categorized practices in the playworld activity. By double stimulation, Vygotsky meant a problem-solving situation (which was often experimental) in which the subject selects an originally “neutral” object and uses it as a psychological instrument to

<sup>2</sup> The terms ‘stable girl’ and ‘horse girl’ are commonly to describe girls who ride horses. Also, the expressions “be mad about horses” and “horse-crazed” are typical when girls’ horse-related subcultures in Finland are described. Although the popularity of ‘stable girl’ culture seems to be mainly a North European phenomenon, little girls’ fondness for horses is more widespread. For example, Seiter notes in her analysis of *My Little Pony*, a popular toy from the 90s, that the company got the idea for the product by asking little girls, “What do you see when you go to bed and close your eyes?”, and the answer was often ‘Horses’” (Seiter, 1995, p. 153).

achieve a solution (Portes, Smith, Zady, & Del Castillo, 1997, p. 110). That is, in a difficult situation (which represents the original stimulus) that cannot be solved through existing means, a second stimulus –anything from a word or a clock to an imagined friend– takes on the function of a sign and changes the operation's structure so that it acquires an essentially different character (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 74). Engeström (2007, p. 373) points out, however, that the word "neutral object" is misleading. Instead of being neutral, every object has inherent affordances materially and historically inscribed in it. At the same time, these objects are *ambiguous* enough to be turned into sufficient tools in the situation. Through facing dilemmatic situations and having to solve them through the means of cultural objects, human beings are able to change their surroundings and develop their agency.

The double stimulation method turned the focus from the study of the outcomes or end products of development to the *process* of development itself, to the mediated use of tools and signs. However, the method has not been widely used in studying developmental and social processes as they unfold in real-life settings (see, however, Hakkarainen, 2006b; Lecusay & Ferholt, 2008; Engeström, 2006; 2007).

Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991) point out that in experimental problem-solving situations the subjects always incorporate something unexpected into the situation that they may then use as a psychological tool to solve the situation. It is this unexpected element that is interesting from the point of view of the development of agency in the playworld setting. Engeström notes that in this process people have to not only create something new and novel, but also to "break away" from old habits or available ways of acting. Engeström defines breaking away as "resolving or escaping a contradictory situation by means of constructing mediating artifacts that enable the subjects to master their own actions in a qualitatively new way" (Engeström, 2006, p. 29). I use the idea of double stimulation as breaking

away to analyze how Helen and Sara used different and unexpected elements from the playworld, such as the category of gender, as mediating artifacts to escape from constraining situations and to develop personally significant and agentic positions in the playworld activity.

To recognize the agency in the girls' various actions, I found Holzkamp's (1991; 1992) conceptualizations of restrictive and generalized modes of action potency to be helpful heuristic tools. Before moving to the data analysis, I will introduce this third component of my analytical framework.

### 3.3 Action Potence as a Heuristic Tool to Analyze Agency

German critical psychology is based on Marx's theory of societal development and class struggle. Holzkamp and other representatives of critical psychology criticized the "bourgeois" psychology of their time and developed what they called "subject science," a psychological theory and practice based on a historical analysis of societal conditions and the possibilities for individuals to change them. A thorough discussion of critical psychology's mission, task, and theoretical contribution is beyond the scope of this article, and I will limit the discussion to Holzkamp's use of the term "action potency." His formulation of the two modes of action potency offer fruitful tools with which to grasp the dilemma between being an individual and being a member of various collectives.

For Holzkamp, the dimensions and extent of individual actions are societally determined, but "in such a way that individuals can *consciously orient themselves* towards the situation as a 'possibility', that is, they always have the *alternative* of acting otherwise or not at all" (Holzkamp, 1992, p. 198, italics in the original). It is this double possibility that Holzkamp uses his concept of action potency to explore. People can either seek personal satisfaction within the limits of given or allowed conditions, or they can make

a move toward extending their own control of the condition through the expansion of the existing framework of action (see Maiers, 1991, p. 44-45). Although Holzkamp did not explicitly refer to Vygotsky in his writings, his view of generalized action potency resembles Vygotsky's (1998a) understanding of development as a generalization of experience and emotion. However, Holzkamp claims that in a "bourgeois" society individuals often stay in a *restrictive* mode of action potency that is non-developmental. This I interpret in Holzkamp's theory also as a non-agentive way of acting. He defines it as follows:

"For individuals who are excluded by bourgeois social relations from conscious cooperative control over the social process and therefore also over their own relevant life conditions, only the internalization and privatization of emotions, and thus their detachment from action, remains available as an alternative to the collective struggle. For the isolated individual this is a form of shutting out reality, in which the risk of altercation with the authorities, which is unbearable for isolated individuals, is, by denying the necessity and possibility for action, not even admitted to consciousness" (Holzkamp, 1991, p. 61-62).

Although the existing level of an individual's action potency is threatened, Holzkamp seems to assume that the extension of action possibilities (from restrictive to generalized) is *always* available to the individual, and if not, then the individual is alienated and detached from societal relations. His theory does not take into account that discourses and agentic positions are not equally accessible by all members of our society, even though they might be perfectly well acknowledged and even collectively resisted. I will discuss this point in relation to my data analysis of Helen and Sara's actions in the following sections.

## 4 Data Analysis (Part I): Categorizing Horses and Girls

In this section I will analyze the categories and attributes associated with playing a horse and being a 'horse girl.' The findings from the data analysis show that there were at least three different sources from which Helen and Sara were able to develop their role actions in the playworld. First, there were the original horse characters in Astrid Lindgren's book. Secondly, there were the teachers' interpretations and expectations of the girls' role choices and interests. Finally, the pedagogical organization of the classroom constrained the way the girls were able to put their interests into action. In what follows, I will deal with each of these sources and limitations.

### 4.1 *Grim and Fyalar* – Characters in the Story

In the original story (which was read aloud several times in the group) there are two significant horse roles, Grim and Fyalar. The protagonist Rusky tells us that he loves horses (Lindgren, 2004, p. 32). He needs them, and finds security and comfort when being with them. They are "unusually beautiful" (p. 32), but also strong and wise animals who understand their human friends without words:

"And then, as usual, I longed for Fyalar. I had to get to him immediately. It was the only thing that helped me a bit, when I was sad and anxious. How many times had I stood in his stall with him, when I couldn't manage to be alone? How many times had it comforted me to look into his wise eyes and to feel his warmth and his soft nose? Without Fyalar I couldn't have lived through this time when Jonathan was gone" (p. 68).

These descriptions are reminiscent of how Finnish 'stable girls' talk about their relationship to horses (Ojanen, 2005; Tolonen, 1992). Grim and Fyalar play an important role in the story, and

they have a close relationship to the protagonists, Rusky and Jonathan. One of the central purposes of pretend play for preschool age children is to investigate and build relationships with each other (Cook-Gumperz, 2001; Hakkarainen, 2006a). Creating relationships was central also in the playworld. It played a role in how the girls described their role choices to the teacher:

EXCERPT 1. Jan 9, 2004: Transcribed teacher discussion

T1: (Sara) argued she would then talk to Grim (Helen's role) to her heart's content, planning all sorts of tricks. And she said it with a twinkle in her eye. [...] They could also decide on whom to obey. That she would be Rusky's horse, obeying Rusky, perhaps Jonathan from time to time. Perhaps obey other good ones too, but none of the bad ones, she wasn't going to be obeying them at all. And that she could get away from the bad ones since a horse can gallop fast.<sup>3</sup>

These formulations clearly implied agency in the horse roles. The girls characterized the horses in the playworld as enigmatic characters who "decided themselves who they obey," who "planned all sorts of tricks," and who shared their "hearts' contents" with each other. Also, they would "gallop fast" in case of trouble. These descriptions contain no clear gendered (feminine/masculine) characterizations. Taking an animal identity in play may offer children an ambiguity that goes beyond such categories as gender or dichotomies such as boys-girls, men-women. This identity can be seen as an alternative to the typical, even stereotypic play scenarios available in children's environments (Cook-

Gumperz, 2001, p. 38). The original roles of Fyalar and Grim in the story, as well as the girls' own interest in horses and riding, can be understood as an *original stimulus* for the girls' activity in the playworld, to use the Vygotskian terms.

## 4.2 The Category of a 'Horse Girl'

Despite the detailed depiction of horse characters both in Astrid Lindgren's story and in the girls' own descriptions, the teachers' primary explanation for the girls' role choice was that the girls rode horses in their free time. In Finland riding horses and being "mad about horses" are generally considered something that only girls do. In this way, although the girls themselves did not describe their roles as feminine or gendered, their roles became such through the teachers' use of this category:

EXCERPT 2. Jan 9, 2004: Transcribed teacher discussion

1. T2: That sounds pretty typical of Sara, knowing her. That the horses should have their own language when she, herself, rides horses.
2. T1: No, I asked her.
3. T2: Oh, oh.
4. T1: You see, I told her that it's not enough that you like horses and like riding them.  
[...]
5. T1: So, I think that the arguments she stated did support the taking of the role. And didn't end up being just: "Hey, a picture of a horse! Yippee, wonderful!"
6. T2: Right. And, hey, that's essentially the nature of a horse, isn't it?

Although the teachers accepted the girls' descriptions of their roles as plausible (partly through their riding, see lines 1 and 6 in excerpt 2), being a horse girl was still not considered a proper reason for choosing and developing a role in the playworld (line 4). According to the teachers, role-taking needed to stem not only from the students' personal interests, but from the story

<sup>3</sup> In the data excerpts all the names of the children have been changed. T1, T2, and T3 refer to the teachers, AR refers to the researcher, # symbolizes an interruption of the previous speaker, and --- is used to mark the places where the speech is inaudible. The author's elucidation of the non-verbal communication is in parentheses. The extracts presented here were all originally in Finnish and have been translated into English. Special thanks to Jamie Donovan for the translations.

as a source in a pedagogically valuable way. The data shows the teachers' contradictory interpretations of the 'horse girl' category:

EXCERPT 3. Jan 9, 2004: Transcribed teacher discussion

1. T3: No, but really, this (other) group needs an adult, more than the horses.
2. T2: Yeah, it's the horses that know what they're doing.
3. T3: Well, they just keep on galloping in circles. It's not like they do anything else. (laughs)
- [...]
4. T1: Yeah.
5. T3: # Talk to each other in code and
6. T1: Braid each other's bows.
7. T2: True.

It is apparent here that the teachers felt that "the horses know what they are doing" and that the girls needed less guidance in developing their roles than the other students might (lines 1 and 2 above). On the other hand, the teachers expected the "horses" to be "just galloping, neighing, and braiding each other's bows" (lines 3, 6). This was not considered a pedagogically valued way of acting and created a rather stereotypic view of the horse girls' "category-bound activities" (Sacks, 2002) and interests. The teachers had also set a developmental task for Helen and Sara to acquire more socially active roles in the playworld:

EXCERPT 4. Jan 9, 2004: Teacher discussion

1. T1: The thing (Helen and Sara) have is perhaps... let's say that their problems stem from the fact that they're constantly together. But it's not like they mean anyone any harm, but they simply can't seem to be with anyone else but amongst themselves. The other --- (inaudible) of the other, and the other one is the odd one out.
2. T3: Yeah.
3. T1: And when a third edges in, it's suddenly a threat to their relationship.
4. T2: Yeah. And they're terribly uneasy about it.

The kind of "border work" (keeping the boundaries of groups well defined and rejecting other potential members) seen in this excerpt is a common feature of girls' social interaction, as has been shown in research on the topic (Thorne, 1993; Cook-Gumperz, 2001). Further, it has been argued that the subcultures that girls create serve as private places where they can create subject positions of their own without the burden of gender-related expectations. My data supports these notions. As I will illustrate next, playing the role of a horse in the playworld was a very dilemmatic position. Helen and Sara's private play can be interpreted as an escape from this position. However, their struggle went unnoticed by the adults in the classroom, and instead their "inwardness" was considered a problem in relation to the class's activities and objectives.

#### *4.3 Boundaries of the Small Group Work: Helen as a Horse Soldier*

At the beginning of the playworld project, the class was working in small groups (21, 22 and 28 Jan, 2004). T2 was working with a group that consisted of Grim and Fyalar (played by Helen, Sara, Ella, and Iina) and their "owners" Rusky (played by both Alisa and Sam) and Jonathan (played by Andy). Helen and Sara conducted their own separate horse play under the table (=horse stable) and seemed to be in a private space, "hiding from view." They clearly had their own play going on:

EXCERPT 5. Jan 21, 2004: Videotaped playworld session

1. AR: Oh, this is your stable? I'll film you a little. (The girls are sitting in their stable and look at me.)
2. AR: Who is who?
3. Sara: I'm Fyalar.
4. Helen: I'm Grim.
5. AR: Oh. What is it that you do?
6. Sara: We sleep, look around, and gallop.

T2 tried to involve the girls in a collective activity, either in story writing or in involving others in the play with the horses. She drew from Astrid Lindgren's story to remind the group what wise animals the horses were and how needed they were in Cherry Valley. Two central ideas in the playworld are to create a common play activity and to learn to work reciprocally with each other. Thus, for the teachers, creating closed and private play activities was not "in line" with the general idea of the playworld as a cooperative and shared activity. On the other hand, further data from the small group work showed that expanding their roles and acquiring more active positions in the playworld were not easy tasks for the girls either, as these tasks were not given any support from us adults.

In the next excerpt Helen, Ella, Alisa, and Iina were making horse costumes. Their teacher (T2) was on sick leave, so the girls were working by themselves. Also, Helen's best friend, Sara, was absent from school. Alisa sighed to me that she was tired of crocheting. The other girls seemed somewhat bored as well but kept working silently on their own. The following episode took place:

EXCERPT 6. Feb 4, 2004: Videotaped playworld session

1. Helen: (sitting at the table and preparing the mane for her horse role; she speaks to Ella) A horse is ridiculous without ears! Your horse doesn't have ears.
2. (Ella does not comment.)
3. Helen: (Rises from the chair, takes the mane, and starts galloping on her knees shouting): The horse soldier, koppoti koppoti, the horse soldier! (To my knowledge, this role has not appeared earlier and seems to be "improvised" in situ.)
4. Andy: (Comes and notices Helen. He shouts): Sam come to see Helen! (Andy turns back to Helen): Helen, do it again, do it again please! You know, the way you did.

5. (Sam and Mikael come to follow as Helen gallops as a horse soldier.)
6. (Andy is delighted and jumps up and down.)
7. (The teacher calls the boys, and Sam and Mikael go to her.)
8. (Helen gallops to another room.)
9. Andy: (Goes to the teacher, T3) Tina, Tina, Helen is acting as a horse soldier!
10. (The teacher is working with somebody and does not pay attention to Andy's words.)
11. (Andy leaves the room.)
12. Helen: (Turns to the table and says to Iina and Ella) Now I got to make this look like a horse soldier. I AM a horse soldier. I looked good, didn't I? ...I looked like a horse soldier (she also looks at the camera when saying this).
13. (Girls listen but do not comment.)
14. (Helen starts to work with the ears for the horse.)

In the above episode Helen expanded her role as a horse with the help of a "mediating artifact," the costume she was preparing. Andy's role (lines 4, 6, 9) was important in the episode above. He was an "interactive other" (cf. Davies, 1990), who by acknowledging Helen's fictional role, took up her position as legitimate. This recognition was evidently important to Helen. She returned to the table, stressing that "[n]ow *I got to make this look like a horse soldier... I AM a horse soldier*" (line 12).

Twenty minutes later a group of boys were playing loudly in the corridor close to the girls' table. Their "battle" was a continuation of a scene from the story that they had just dramatized together with their teacher (T3). Sam (as Rusky) and Andy (as Jonathan) were also involved in this play, but the horses were not asked to be part of it. Earlier, the teachers had formed this small group of boys to let the less loud and less wild boys of the class (who, however, had chosen these soldier characters) to safely experience alternative positions and ways of being through playing the

“bad guys” in the group. The same kind of need had not been suggested for any of the girls; instead, it was considered that the girls “know what they are doing” (see, i.e., data excerpt 3, line 2).

However, Helen tried to get involved in the battle play in the corridor through her new horse soldier role. The role of the horse was now complemented with the role of a soldier. She neighed and galloped to Andy. She grabbed a horn (an important artifact in the boys’ play) from a boy acting the role of Tengil and offered it to Andy. In this way she reciprocally noticed Andy in the way that Andy had noticed her earlier. Unfortunately, Andy was no longer interested in Helen’s actions. He took the horn but did not otherwise pay any attention to her. Soon a boy in the group named Emil noticed Helen’s presence and shouted, “Helen, this isn’t your game.” This made Helen leave the play activity immediately.

With the help of her new and improvised role of a “horse soldier,” Helen tried to escape the unsatisfying small group situation. In this role she tried to combine the two worlds, that of horses and that of soldiers, as the world of soldiers seemed to be more valued than the world of horses in the playworld. However, these worlds were not neutral but very gendered, and she was excluded by Emil, who reminded her that this was not the group that *she* belonged to. Helen not only lacked the interactive others to support her (cf. Davies, 1990), but the teachers’ pedagogical organization of the classroom work also blocked her participation.

To conclude, the play pedagogy had not been built to give the support that the girls (Helen and Sara’s) needed to expand their ways of acting and being. The way in which they could articulate and realize their interests and goals “legitimately” and “as expected” (as this was defined in the class by the teachers and containing gender categorizations) did not count as interesting or proper in the playworld pedagogy. There was a clear conflict between the girls’ personal interests in the playworld and their access to it through the

realization of these interests. This reflects Walkerdine’s (1985; 2006) notion of the potential conflict of schooling for young girls, between contradictory assumptions of active and visible learners and passive and invisible females. The girls in my data needed to work out this conflict for themselves. There were two lines of action that the girls then took. I will describe these in the next section.

## 5 Data Analysis (Part II): Extending Agency

### 5.1 “I’m not a horse, I’m a dog!”

The next time in the playworld Helen abandoned her horse (and horse soldier) character. She told other students and her teachers several times not to call her a horse, as she was *a dog* (March 3, 18). In the video data Helen, Sara, and Ronja appeared several times as a “trio” in which Helen was a dog, Sara was a horse, and Ronja was their “owner” (March 3, 4, 17, and 18). Their group played their roles alongside and inspired by the fictional adventure that the class was taking. However, the girls were still quite invisible compared to many other students. They mainly interacted with each other.

On the other hand, the group’s new roles of dog, horse, and their owner seemed to form a meaningful experience of togetherness (cf. Hännikäinen, 2007) in the playworld. In her school diary Helen wrote about herself as a part of the larger playworld setting:

EXCERPT 7. March 3, 2004: Helen’s school diary  
In the middle of the morning circle some Rosevalleyans came. A dove was shot. Here began the Rosevalley play. I was a dog and warmed up at the make-believe fire, I ate fish. Ronja was a dog owner. I also ate vegetables. Some Tengilmen arrived at the Rosevalley. In the night we all gathered at the campfire, chatting and grilling fish.

Sara too had her own way of making the activity and the playworld more personally meaningful through her horse roles. At the end of the spring she wrote down all her different horse roles in the playworld: “*Happi, Volur, Tomppa, Zadi, and Foal.*” She also told me of her play at home:

EXCERPT 8. May 21, 2004: Interview with Sara

1. AR: Have you played this at home or otherwise?
2. Sara: # yeah
3. AR: Oh, is that so? What have you been playing?
4. Sara: Well being a foal, which I was in this. But I have played that perhaps if someone --- (The talking is interrupted as someone is at the door.)
5. AR: So what were you playing?
6. Sara: --- (inaudible)
7. AR: So, you’ve been Foal all the time in this play?
8. Sara: Yeah.
9. AR: Do you think the role has somehow changed during this spring? Or Foal. Has something happened to Foal?
10. Sara: Well, no.
11. AR: Is it exactly the same Foal as in the beginning? (a pause) That it’s not braver or more timid or...?
12. Sara: Well, maybe it’s a bit braver. With Helen and Ronja, well, Helen was the dog and we went behind Ronja with the dog every time, but now I’ve been fighting in front of Ronja and Helen.

For Sara, acting the role of Foal was a personal experience of agency, as she described how the foal grew braver (lines 9-12). This richness and depth of the girls’ imagined worlds was something that was not observable in the video data, even though those worlds were taking place alongside the visible playworld activity. The ability to imagine and envision is an important dimension of agency:

Play is also the medium of mastery, indeed of creation, of ourselves as human actors. Without the capacity to formulate other social scenes in imagination there can be little force to a sense of self, little agency...Through play our fancied selves become material. (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 236)

Helen and Sara created a rich world in their imagination. However, this world did not become a part of the other students’ interaction and play. For a sense of agency to become material, it has to be grounded in the possibility for personally significant agentive action with regard to a broader collective activity (cf. Hofmann, 2008). Smith (1987, p. 32) has claimed that the traditional way that women participate in social life is in the role of an audience: “They support, facilitate, encourage but their action does not become part of the play.” This brings us to Holzkamp’s definition of the two modes of action potency. The girls had no choice but to turn inward, which - in Holzkampian terms - could be interpreted as restrictive. However, also the way that *the adults* (the teachers and I as a researcher in the field) interpreted or failed to interpret the girls’ role choices and actions in the playworld can be interpreted from a Holzkampian framework. This interpretation itself was restrictive in the sense that it did not see the girls’ actions in a wider societal frame where social categories such as gender are intertwined with pedagogical objectives and decisions.

However, Holzkamp’s claim that “restrictive action potency” alienates or distracts the individual from his or her societal relations, is insufficient here. First, the girls were not detached from the activity of the class but enjoyed it and brought it into their private play. Their play was “restrictive” only in the sense that it was unrecognized by others, but at the same time it was a source of agency. The ability to imagine different realities can be an individual’s conscious and active choice even though those realities are not “generalizable” (Holzkamp,

1991) to practical action or societal circumstances. As I will next illustrate, the girls were quite conscious of their capacity for agency, although they felt that it was not taken seriously. Verbalizing this to their teachers finally had an impact on the emerging plot of the playworld activity, too.

## 5.2 “Girls get to break things!”

EXCERPT 9. May 13, 2004: Videotaped playworld session

1. T1: Hey! I really do think that... I THINK THAT. We have two valiant bodyguards here who have done such a great job that I'm sure they have the courage to go. (Many of the children look disappointed and gather around the teacher begging: “I want to go, I want!” T1 looks around and ponders a while, then says) Bodyguards, how many men do you need with you?
2. Eve (to Anton who is a bodyguard): Take Rusky!
3. Anton: Rusky, Hubert...
4. T1: Ok, so how many of you will go?
5. Mari: Boys always pick boys.
6. Ronja: Only boys are going! Why is it always JP?
7. T1: We will remain and wait. Shall we go there, to the other side...  
(The girls' faces look disappointed, and they go to talk to another teacher, T2.)
8. Helen: Why is it that Hubert and the rest always get to ---
9. T2: ## Maybe they have more strength?
10. Helen: No they don't!
11. T2: Might they have some brains?
12. Mari: Only boys get to go, when boys take only boys with them.
13. T2: Listen up... what should we do about Ingvar then?
14. Eve(?): Why didn't they take horses with them?
15. T2: We must have a word with Hubert and Julius about this so they won't forget us women. Ain't that right? There's strength in us too.

16. Helen: Horses --- horses and --- (Inaudible)
17. T2: We might have to have a serious discussion with those men, isn't that so?

In the teachers' talk above (lines 1, 15, and 17), the dichotomy between men and women is apparent. It is interesting that the girls in the above example (see lines 5, 6, 10, 14) were very conscious of these dichotomized categories and their social position in the activity. They used the categories to complain about the unequal situation in the playworld: “Boys always pick boys” (line 5).

The categorization itself now took the function of a “second stimulus” (Vygotsky) for the girls' expansion of their agency. Through pointing out the gendered category, the girls generalized their personal experiences and emotions in the social situation as a question of unequal treatment in the playworld. Their actions were now directed outward and had an effect on the flow of events (compare Holzkamp's generalized action potency). The teachers and I started to plan a playworld episode in which the girls' characters would play a more central role. On one playworld morning, all the girls of the class and their teacher were outside together when they unexpectedly “happened upon” the dangerous dragon Katla, who was roaring at them (the dragon was two meters long and made of paper, and the sound came from a recorder the teachers had put near it). The girls were frightened at first, but then they collectively attacked the dragon. The girls were obviously surprised at this sudden and destructive force wielded by them as a group (which is not typically allowed at school). For the playworld this was an important act since the dragon was the main obstacle preventing the group from making their way to Wild Rose Valley. Helen was quite aware of the more general meaning of the episode and the teachers' plan behind it (see line 2):

EXCERPT 10. May 19, 2004: Videotaped playworld session

1. Mikko (arrives and notices what the girls are doing): You're breaking our work!
2. Helen (turns towards Mikko): Yeah! That's the intention! Girls get to break things! Hahaa! (Helen turns back to Katla to break it.)<sup>4</sup>
3. Mikko: Those are breaking. Anton, they are breaking our work.

She also brought this topic up in my interview with her later. She had a strong opinion on the situation. First, she started with particular episodes in which Hubert (a role of a boy) "always gets to go" (line 1) and then explained this with the help of the category boys-girls, generalizing her own personal disappointment with the help of the category (line 5).

EXCERPT 11. May 21, 2004: Interview with Helen

1. Helen (starts a new topic as there is a small pause after our last topic): Except that it's boring when the boys always get to, Hubert always got to break the spider webs and do all sorts of things. Like go first and take Mathias to Katla's cave with Julius when Ingvar gave the order. And they got a lot of things, always, the boys. And the only thing that the girls got to do this year was Katla, which they were allowed to break and kill.
2. AR: Yeah.. So why do you think that is?
3. Helen: I don't know.
4. AR: Mmm... Yes. They had the kind of roles which become important as the story progresses. That's quite often the way with these stories...
5. Helen: # Even though the girls are as brave as the boys!

<sup>4</sup> It is evident that this was a personally significant event for Helen. The only "personal" issues she mentions from the playworld in her school diary are playing the role of a dog (March 3, see excerpt 7) and the Katla episode. On May 19, 2004 she wrote: "Today was a nice day. (...) In Lionheart the girls got to kill Katla, because the boys are always in the lead. The boys were really surprised."

The above can be interpreted as a form of generalized action potency, in which the girls questioned what was taken for granted and used the categories that bound them as a tool to assess their "relation to the world and the possibilities that the latter offers, and then finally to extend these possibilities" (Tolman, 1994, p. 123). As Engeström (2007, p. 374) maintains, double stimulation engenders processes that lead to "novel solutions, actions, concepts and skills." Helen and Sara were left on their own to find a path to active agency. The private, inward turning play activity was what gave the girls not only joy but also the courage and self-awareness necessary to extend their action possibilities by articulating to others how constrained the playworld was for them.

The development of the girls' agency in the playworld must thus be understood as a *movement* between the two different modes of action potency - from turning inward and developing alternative realities in one's imagination (the so-called "restrictive" action potency) to actually materially impacting and changing the existing situation (the "generalized" action potency). Neither is more valuable than the other, but both are needed in the realization of human agency.

## 6 Conclusions and Discussion

Recent educational research emphasizes the importance of student agency in making school experiences meaningful (i.e., Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Rainio, 2007; Hofmann, 2008). The problem for research, however, is that the concept of agency easily directs our attention to what is active and visible. The challenge is how to grasp agency in what is seemingly passive or hidden on the sidelines of the classroom activity. Since our culture still symbolizes activity as male and passivity as female (Seiter, 1995; Walkerdine, 1985), the question of agency often turns into a question of gender.

In this article I developed a multidisciplinary empirical approach to study the relationship

between gender and agency in a play pedagogical setting. I analyzed two 7-year-old girls' participation in a playworld and the development of their fictional characters in it. I had three theoretical sources which helped me to "sensitize" (Blumer, 1954) to the data. Each of these sources offered different ways to interpret the girls' agency. Vygotsky's theoretical framework enabled me to examine to what Holland et al. (1998, p. 281) accurately describe as the "creation of new worlds that may yet be scarcely realized" through "the modest ability of humans to manage their own behavior through signs directed at themselves." Sacks' categorization analysis helped me to articulate the role of gender in the data, and Holzkamp's concept of action potency offered a useful description of the forms and realizations of agency and their relation to social categories. Next I will summarize the main empirical findings.

First, my findings support Walkerdine's (2006) notion of the contemporary need for little girls to balance between feminine and masculine elements of culture. Although *The Brothers Lionheart* as a book represented a large variety of characters, the playworld that was based on it emphasized its active part, the battle against evil, as a central element. The small group work was organized in a way that maintained traditional gender positions: girls prepared costumes, whereas boys acted out a battle because that was what boys were thought to need. The girls were trusted to "know what they do" and were not considered in need of any particular support from the adults.

Helen and Sara's struggle in the playworld was a reflection of their difficult stance in the activity. The girls tried to find a balance between their personal interests (interpreted as feminine) and social recognition (by searching for an active position in a characteristically masculine adventure). This contradictory element meant that the girls in my data had to "break out" from their private world of playing horses in such a way that made sense to them personally and maintained

their interests in it. Helen tried to add a typically masculine element to a role that was interpreted as feminine. When the horse soldier role gained only little support from the adults and other central actors and lead to further exclusion, she abandoned this "loaded" character altogether and developed a more neutral role of a dog. Simultaneously, the three girls developed their own private play inside the *Brothers Lionheart* playworld.

I claim that it was necessary for the girls to experience a *sense* of their agency through this imagined micro world that they had created. As my data shows, this sense of agency gave the girls flexibility and freedom – to be together just as they wished, to bring their own interests and desires to their play, to decide independently what to do in their imagined roles, and to take from the story only the elements that they found meaningful. It enabled the girls to have their own fictional world within the fictional world of *The Brothers Lionheart* in which the whole class was involved. This reminds me of Seiter's (1995) analysis of the success behind girls' animated TV series such as (the largely criticized) "My Little Pony" in offering fictional worlds in which females dominate.

However, this micro world also isolated the girls due to the fact that it was not acknowledged and supported by others. The girls' private world and the reality surrounding it (the categorized practices of gender) clashed. By acknowledging it as an issue, the girls were able to turn the confining category into a psychological instrument – a second stimulus – that helped them to change the direction of the activity and their own place in it. They had to generalize (cf. Holzkamp, 1991) their personal emotions to a collective action in order to manifest agency in the activity. Further, their concern had to be responded to by "interactive others" (Davies, 1990), in this case, the teachers and the other students. The girls broke away from their closed world but did not abandon it. In this way the activity retained its meaning for the girls.

If my analysis was only limited to the constraining force that social categories have over individuals, the result would have been a rather non-agentive view of the studied individuals. Instead, my interviews with Helen and Sara revealed that they had a strong sense of their agency. They, however, lacked a way to express it in the strongly categorized activity in which their actions were interpreted by their selection of characters and their 'horse girl' image.

Holzkamp's categorization of restrictive and generalized action potency is a useful analytical tool for understanding the process of the development of agency. At the same time it is problematic and too narrow in its understanding of the restrictive mode of action potency. As my analysis showed, turning inward and restricting oneself from constraining surroundings can be a meaningful and necessary act. Restrictive and generalized forms of action potency are not opposite categories and individuals need mediating links to move between them. In this article I have suggested that one such link is imagination and the creation of possible, alternative worlds, which Holland and her colleagues (1998) call *figured worlds* (see Rainio, 2008b).

Although the playworld also helps to create alternative worlds for acting and being in the classroom (see Rainio, 2008b; Hofmann & Rainio, 2007), it is not free from ongoing discursive and material practices. Therefore we cannot dismiss the category of gender as it shapes the positions available to students. My analysis of Helen and Sara showed that children are capable of understanding and shaping the activity that they are a part of already very early in their lives. Educational activities that are based on collective imagining, improvisation and creation (such as a playworld) make this fact even more clear. However, these activities need to be developed so that they help adults to see their own categorized practices at work and learn to be more sensitive to children's subtle steps toward agency, instead of

bypassing them for the sake of previously set objectives of a pedagogical activity.

To conclude, the power of imagination should not be underestimated as a cultural resource that helps people to "escape, or at least reduce, the buffeting of whatever stimuli they encounter as they go through their days" (cf. Holland et al., 1998, p. 280). Helen and Sara's main resource in the playworld activity was their imagination. Unfortunately, due to the teachers' focus on the *active* and *effective* side of the playworld, and due to the fact that cooperation was its central aim, the teachers were not able to see that power and potency. As my analysis showed, the adults failed to support in the playworld activity the richness of the children's own and private figured worlds that existed and developed alongside the dominant and visible play activity. To create more space for these worlds and to use them to develop the playworld are central challenges of playworld pedagogy, which is explicitly aimed at learning from joint imagination and play.

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