

Following Pebbles by Moonlight Elementary Students Shed Light on Power, Peace, and Violence in Response to the Classic Tale *Hansel and Gretel*

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Abstract

This paper, drawing from a multi-site qualitative study in New York City elementary classrooms, considers student ideas about power, peace and violence in response to shared reading and discussion of the classic folk tale, Hansel and Gretel. From a critical literacy perspective, the construction of agency and subjectivity within this context in relation to such ideas via engagement with literature and in literacy practice is explored.

Key Words: Peace and violence, critical literacy, elementary education, reading response, children and folktales, read aloud, peace education.

Introduction

But when Hansel and Gretel saw that the birds had eaten all of the breadcrumbs they had dropped, they knew that they were lost. Wandering through the dark thick forest in search of home, tired and weary and hungry, at last they came upon a clearing, and a lovely cottage made of nothing but candy...

For many children, being read or told folk tales continues to be a treasured pastime. Each one of us, in our own way, can recall being tucked away amid the blankets and pillows, enamored with the magical and mystical encounter between good and evil, the ‘once upon a time’ beginning and the satisfaction when good

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prevailed, even if somewhat violently. If memory serves, too, the versions upon which we were raised were not the more whitewashed ones of today—birds pecked out Cinderella’s evil step sisters’ eyes, the three little pigs cooked up the wolf and ate him, and yes, Gretel pushed the old woman of the candy cottage into the oven and burnt her to a crisp. Of course, what child, what child in you or me, wouldn’t love the delightful image of finding ourselves before a house made of delicious sweets? Or the heroism of a young sibling who triumphs over the wicked witch? Or the rewards of jewels and treasures after a harrowing escape? When captivated by the story, the reality of the violence disturbs none.

Thus, it was no great surprise that the story of *Hansel and Gretel* (Lesser, 1984) came to mind as a textual tool through which to learn from and with children about power, peace, and violence, and the potential relationship of such to our educational life and pedagogical living. In this paper, we share young children’s understanding of this story. During a focus group session, we read aloud the pages of this beautifully illustrated book, crowded in by the eager faces of the young children we had become familiar with over the course of three months. We hoped for them to be agents in the deconstructive and reconstructive practices of engaging literacy as both subjective experience and political phenomenon (Moje & Lewis, 2007). Critical literacy frameworks (Jones, 2012) grounded us towards the aim of purposefully cultivating conditions that make possible the construction of subjects who feel enabled to discuss the embodiment of peace and violence through the characters presented in the timely classic *Hansel and Gretel*.

This paper draws from a larger multi-site research study in four elementary schools across New York City, in which we designed a series of classroom observations, focus group experiences and individual semi-structured interviews with young elementary-aged children and their teachers. In hopes of shedding light on children’s understandings of peace and violence, and additionally what such understandings might mean for cultivating classrooms for peace and nonviolence, we connected with teachers dedicated to such endeavors. Through such, we worked with approximately twenty children between the ages of 7-11, who in school hallways and after-school classrooms would share with us their musings on peace and violence. In total, four focus group interviews were conducted in which children drew images and concept maps of peace, created peaceful characters and their nemesis, then developed and plotted stories. The second of these focus groups involved a reading and analysis of the coveted fairy tale, *Hansel and Gretel*.

This paper first briefly discusses folktales as a unique genre of children’s literature, particularly in relation to *Hansel and Gretel*, and engages critical literacy and notions of the subject as one way to account for lived experience in textual practices. In following, our discussion turns toward the children’s responses to *Hansel and Gretel*, particularly how they attend to character development and analysis and their concerns over power, peace and violence. In this paper, we present their possible explanations of the story, the oft-times complex and contradictory appearances of

moral dilemma and decision, as well as the villainous to the peculiar, and in doing so, seek to elicit a larger conversation on the pedagogical possibility available when addressing issues of violence in the classroom and with children.

Once Upon A Time

Hansel and Gretel is a story involving hunger, poverty, betrayal and death. Amid demonstrations of power and violence, it is also a narrative of victorious and peaceful conclusion—embracing the typical “happily ever after” fairy tale ending. It tells of two children, Hansel and Gretel, who are left deep in the forest by their parents, after their mother persuades their father that such abandonment is necessary if they are not all to starve from poverty. Once in the forest, the children happen upon a candy house of a witch who eats children. As they hungrily partake of its sweets, they are greeted and invited in by the witch, only to be enslaved by her. The witch forces Gretel to labor, and keeps Hansel in a cage, fattening him up in order to cook him later for her dinner. Scheming to prepare and eat Gretel first, the old woman asks the girl to see if the oven is hot enough for Hansel. Outwitting the witch, Gretel shoves her into the oven instead, and frees Hansel. Gathering up all of the witch’s treasures for themselves, the children are at last found by their father who has been looking for them. They learn also of their mother’s death, yet the tale ends with a scene of happy wealth and reunion.

When first abandoned by their parents, Hansel and Gretel make their way home by the light of the moon, which shone on the pebble path Hansel had created. Our work here has been similar, seeking to follow pebbles by moonlight, the trails of thought and meaning illuminated in and through our dialogues with children. No full light of the sun exists, nor clearly marked paths herein, yet as we seek a way toward some present home of understanding, a new trail can be gleaned—if even marked by eaten breadcrumbs, conflicting parents, unanswered questions and ambiguous returns.

Particularly since the landmark article by Larrick (1965) entitled, “The All-White World of Children’s Books,” there has been concerted effort to expose children to a diversity of stories from a diversity of cultural traditions (Yokota, 1993). Issuing from intuitions over the profound relationship between literature and identity, cultural variants of more mainstream tales came to once dominate discussions in the field of multiculturalism and children’s literature (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). Yet, the abiding appeal and influence of folk stories, particularly fairy tales, remain generally unquestioned (Zipes 2006, 2008). Perhaps due to the inspiration of Walt Disney, Pixar, and the global film and entertainment industry, a good deal of folk literature has become immortalized by and for many generations on the “big screen,”—e.g., *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, etc.—thus rendering them exempt from a concern that this literature, and the failure to critically engage students with it, may serve to normalize, validate and propagate a landscape of structural and cultural violence that has become a specter of American life.

Scholarship on fairy tales and folktales, a genre of literature to which most if not all American children become familiar, has been aimed at better understanding this enduring interest and influence. Some such literature has focused on the important social function served by these narratives, in relation to cultural evolution or the “culture industry”, even the ways in which these stories illuminate the fissures between truth and falsehood in present society (e.g., Zipes, 2002, 2006, 2008). Up until more recent times, a larger and more longstanding body of work, largely rooted in psychoanalysis, has drawn attention to the symbolic, even archetypal, dimensions of such tales—articulating patterns of the human psyche, primitive expressions of a collective unconscious. Herein, the process of individuation, for example, may be elucidated, offering guidance for self-transformation and -growth. Aspects of a folk or fairy tale may represent aspects of a child’s experienced personality, internal processes (i.e., the id, ego or superego), or significant others in his or her life (e.g., Bettelheim, 1976; Fromm, 1951).

From such interpretive approaches, the violence prevalent in many of these stories may have a certain therapeutic value, in that it assists the unconscious in mediating between bodily and social desires, much like as in dreams—in fulfilling fantasies not to be pursued in the actual course of living (Haase, 2000). Some research, though, directed specifically at violent scenarios in such literature (e.g., Collins-Standley, 1996), and response to or reception of them, has challenged such a view, drawing attention to the ways in which these stories compel the suspension of judgment, and seduce one into authorizing violence, into receiving as normative a world, for instance, wherein males are dominant and females are inferior, accommodating and in need of men to rescue or rule them (e.g., Katz, 1977; Wood, 2001). Along this line, contemporary work, thus, has further sought to critically analyze and address the complex and disconcerting messages the tales may convey, particularly about race and gender (e.g., Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Bourke, 2011; Davies & Saltmarsh, 2007; Hurley, 2005; Tatar, 2003; Temple, 2005). Additionally, as more attention has been brought to the violence endemic in many of these folk stories, new versions have been created with less objectionable scenes, and characters of various ethnicities have also begun to appear. Storylines, however, are in many ways largely still preserved and restored, and investigations into peace and violence through the use of such literature, particularly in local contexts, remain sparse and underdeveloped.

Literature, Literacy & the Literate Subject

Literature, literacy, and literate subjectivities are and have been central features of curriculum and pedagogy in elementary classrooms and much has been made by scholars in the way of education and schooling as a reflection and perpetuation of society’s values and purposes (i.e., Apple, 2004, 2006; Asher, 2009; Freire, 1970/1995). This focus on social context comes as a push away from understandings of literacy as an individual cognitive process and has incited a conceptual turn

toward more critical and sociocultural explanations that focus attention on the social embeddedness of literacy practices and discourses. While literacy can be understood as technical skills and acquisition, proponents of critical literacy, a term we employ for the purpose of this paper, argue that not only do texts play an important role in the construction of human subjects, given their particular histories and discursive circumstances, but also that texts have the potential to enact identities insofar as they can be used as tools for self-formation and consciousness, even for liberation against social marginalization and injustice (Freire, 1970/1995).

Most certainly not neutral nor purely technical, critical literacy is intimately tied to notions of self, identity, and subject formation, tied to the particular world-view or condition within which an individual is constituted, formed, or interpolated, ever changing yet rooted. In her important work on gender and literacy, Davies (2006) explains how Butler's theory of subjectification illuminates literacy practices in ways that account for the postmodern concern for interiority and the psychic life of the subject. The individual subject, here, is made possible through the paradoxical act of submission to a condition that exists before, during, and will exist after the life of the subject. These forces, cultural models, attitudes, beliefs and values, precede and exceed the subject; it is the individual whose formation depends upon the mastery of and submission to these specific conditions. Therefore, we each as individuals enter into and through, and are dependent upon, a condition of possibility that presents us with the peculiarities of our existence, the external and social forces that press upon our very being, those that we bring "to the table" when engaging with text.

The literate subject—in this case, the young elementary-aged child—will bring forth through his or her engagement with the text a subjecthood made possible through engagement with the discursive practices and cultural models of her or his condition. Therefore, the meanings brought to a reading of Hansel and Gretel, for instance, are not randomly conjured but rather pulled from the 'available fabric' that forms the base from which an individual person speaks. Yet at the same time, this does not mean subjecthood should be understood as deterministic and reductive, nor are readers passive to any norms that dictate and define their future by pre-conceived social, political, or economic terms. On the contrary, subjects, including the young children in this study, carry the potential to subvert and eclipse the social forces of their condition. Instead of simply absorbing the lessons presented to them, in part through folktales and storytelling, they carry the potential to exercise a kind of agency, a radically conditioned agency (Davies, 2006), through which they critically examine the conditions of their existence with the agency to resist and disrupt the powers that act upon them.

In sum, the agentic subject exists paradoxically due to this fundamental dependency on the social condition that at the same time produces and sustains the ability to resist and be otherwise. Such ambiguity and contradiction lay at the heart of critical literacy frameworks that seek to understand this relationship between the subject and its condition as constructed through literature and literacy practices.

While literacy practices have come to symbolize for many a tool for liberation and social equity, it is also important to recognize that these discourses may in fact work to normalize and naturalize the very unjust practices that critical literacy proponents attempt to overturn. A necessary step in opening the possibility for agency amongst teachers and students is a careful examination of the meanings that are made when attempting to make sense of the social world, in this case the meanings drawn around peace and violence.

Context and Methodology

We began just such work at four elementary classrooms taught by New York City schoolteachers who each in their own way, by their own account, intentionally sought to take up the pedagogical pursuit of peace with their students. Over the course of three intense months, we visited classrooms on a weekly basis, collected student artifacts, conducted a series of four focus group interviews, and individually interviewed approximately twenty children ranging from 7 to 11 years of age. During these focus group sessions, we invited these children to share and draw their ideas and experiences of peace and its opposite, create their own peace and opposite-of-peace characters, tell stories about these characters, and take and talk about photos of peace or its opposite as lived in their daily lives. Here we focus on one of the 40-minute focus group meetings in which children responded to a shared reading of *Hansel and Gretel*. This focus group was conducted in four classrooms—two first-grade, one-third grade and one-fourth grade; respectively, in a charter school in East Harlem, a public school in the Upper West Side, one on the Lower East Side and the other, in the South Bronx.

These schools—and these classrooms—share similar demographics as well: primarily low-income students of color (mostly black and Hispanic, qualifying for free lunch) in overcrowded conditions and somewhat stressed as a result of school test score deficiencies. This ‘statistical’ portrait, however fails to illuminate the cultural riches and commitments of these communities, or the gifts and interests of the children in these classrooms. The first grade co-teachers in East Harlem, specifically, oriented their classroom community and curriculum around cultivating peacemakers. The other first grade co-teachers honed in on language and dialogue as a form of conflict resolution and agreement making. The third grade teacher pursued peace largely via rules and principles for an orderly life in school together. The fourth grade co-teachers engaged students in inquiry projects around violence in their neighborhood and what they might do to address it. Student participation was largely based on student interest and parental consent, as well as sensitivity to diverse representation (i.e., considerations of gender, ethnicity, background, perspective) and capacity for participation (i.e., willingness to speak and engage). Additionally, as we introduced the text of *Hansel and Gretel* to our participants in each class, we realized that these students also shared a lack of knowledge or

exposure to this specific fairy tale, particularly the traditional version—a few albeit mentioning an upcoming movie of that name about a witch-hunting duo, and one a remake, called *Hansel and Pretzel*—the influence of popular culture and media demonstrated generally more in their conversations than that of books.

Semi-structured protocols were developed prior to engaging the children, but as in qualitative research, lines of inquiry arose in the moment of curiosity or confusion and the children's interests and explanations became important leads to follow. Therefore, while we entered with an interest in understanding how children explained complex moral dilemmas and where peaceful and violent behaviors were rooted—poverty as the cause of child abandonment, the play of gender in violence, or places of peace found within the storyline—the children excitedly burst into personal anecdotes and flowered the tale with tangents of their own. We listened carefully to the course of their discussions, struggling at times with reeling the children back, deciding in the moment on what questions to forego and through which to probe deeper.

At the end of each focus group, we, as researchers, held lengthy debriefs about these complications, reflecting over the quality and content of our data, developing ways to enrich the conversation next time. These reflective researcher conversations were also audiotaped and transcribed, with all focus group sessions. Individually, we conducted an interpretive analysis across all data sets, which aimed at elucidating themes of peace and violence as well as distinctions that may have occurred due to gender, classroom context, or age. In other papers, we used cross-case analysis to purposefully differentiate among the four classrooms, but here, we were more interested in how the characters and events of *Hansel and Gretel* were understood by elementary-aged children more generally, and specifically in relation to power, peace and violence. Despite certain limits to such an approach and analysis, we found that our conversations with the children veered in this way, and were committed to listening to and learning from them, and the direction emerging via such dialogue. We welcomed this line of inquiry as the structure for the paper and present the data in this way with parenthetical descriptors at the end of each child's name. All names have been changed to assure anonymity.

Developing Character: Storied Persons

Gretel

Looking across the data, the children exhibited keen interest in the peculiarities of each character, who also brought them into the story, and more deeply, into conversation after we read it. Each had a good deal to say about these characters, particularly that of the sister Gretel and the bravery she exhibited when saving her brother. Framed as a heroine, children had less to say about her having pushed the witch and cooked her in the oven, a scene otherwise gruesome, and instead construed the moment as one of individual power and agency, affirmed by the children

to be a favorite. (The other favorite was when the children came upon and ate from the candy house, wherein they both, albeit somewhat thoughtlessly, demonstrate a capacity to attend to their own needs as well.) “The peaceful is killing the witch,” remarks Kenisha (7 June 2011, Lower East Side), a third-grader, associating peace with Gretel’s prowess and justifying her behavior; “...she did the right thing because she didn’t want her brother to die.” In seeking an explanation that defends Gretel’s actions, first-grader Bill (2 June 2011, East Harlem) credits Gretel with certain emotions and intentions, going even further to suggest heartfelt remorse in the aftermath of her retribution. Bill continues: “Gretel, she felt bad for killing the witch.” His classmate Parnes adds, “Gretel would have never done that if the witch wouldn’t be so mean. We all know that” (2 June 2011, East Harlem).

Some students also insert themselves into the story as Gretel, and more empowered than Gretel actually is in the telling, Kenisha (7 June 2011, Lower East Side) claims, “Nope, I’ll say (to the witch, about serving her): ‘No, unless you let my brother go!’” However, while Kenisha holds Gretel in high regard as the redemptive protagonist of the story, she also expresses surprise that Gretel, as “always a nicer little girl,” was the one to kill the witch. She adds, “Boys dominate girls, that’s the story.” While she admits that girls “cat fight” sometimes, her peer, Aimee (7 June 2011, Lower East Side), counters: “Girls only do good stuff.” And Wayne, another second-grade classmate concurs, bringing boys into the discussion, and adding: “Boys are like evil people! I’m not evil, I’m just saying” (7 June 2011, Lower East Side). Whether archetypally or stereotypically in stories or in actual life, it is insinuated that violence, perhaps, is more affiliated with men and masculine power, even so far as saying that acts of violence can be more naturally understood as germane to their nature. Gretel, as the female character, is most highlighted as a person of peace and the character with whom the children most identify, even though it could be said she engages in an act of violence, and the most overt one of the story. Masculinity and femininity are constructed in traditional oppositional and hierarchical terms, reflective of the discursive patterns and cultural norms present within the condition of the children’s subjecthood. Reductive in their understanding, the children reinforce essentialist claims that ignore within-group or across-group differences and rather submit to the gendered subjectivities that ascribe violence to boys even when such theories are countered by the actions of Gretel (as well as of the witch, and even the abandoning mother).

Especially in the fourth grade class, the talk of violence and the deeds of Gretel generate much excitement and even laughter. The fourth-grader Jason, in affirming Gretel for her fearlessness, remarks, “I want to be the little girl, punching the grandma like that” (26 May 2011, South Bronx). Some of the younger children, too, comment on it being ‘funny’—the witch being burned up, and Hansel and Gretel eating up the house so that they might not have anywhere to live (1 June 2011, Upper West Side; 7 June 2011, East Harlem). Herein, students are mostly satisfied and not terribly disturbed by the killing or by the death of

the witch. Gretel is a character that is good and peaceful because justice, either as retaliation or self-defense, is realized through her. “Just because they are bad people,” says third-grade Aimee (7 June 2011, Lower East Side), “it is a little bit okay to kill them.” While the word ‘justice’ is never actually uttered by the students, an abiding theme of fairness and justice pervades their discussion of Hansel and Gretel. This sense of justice that is somehow satisfied in the old woman’s death is one that resonates with Lawrence Kohlberg’s (Kohlberg and Lickona, 1976) pre-conventional and conventional stages of moral development. In this theory, the goodness or badness of moral action is determined not by the meaning of that action but by its physical consequences. Therefore, the actions of Gretel are judged by the efficacy of her heroism, not by the violent means through which she arrives at such liberation. These cultural models for goodness and badness are gauged in accordance with how well they instrumentally satisfy one’s own needs, needs that are met through notions of fairness, reciprocity, and a social order oriented around reward and punishment, ‘an eye for an eye’ and the consequences that correspond to particular actions.

The Witch

The old lady, or witch, not only acts violently, imprisoning Hansel and setting Gretel into forced labor, but relishes in the violence, actively fattening up the boy and deceiving the girl in order to cook and eat them. To all the students in the study, she is clearly ‘bad’ (Aimee, 7 June 11, Lower East Side), representing the opposite of peace and a power at odds with peace. Thus, for many, a favorite part of the story included not only Gretel pushing the witch in the oven but also the actual fact of the old woman getting cooked and killed (John, 26 May 2011, South Bronx) herself. Nearly unanimously, too, there is the confirmation that she deserves to, and must, die in the story because: “the grandma was mean and wanted to cook the kids...” (Bill, 2 June 2011, East Harlem), or as third-grader Kaya (7 June 2011, Lower East Side) puts it: “because she is mean. She’s nasty. She’s violent and she’s vain.” Perhaps students most easily adopt this view because the actions of the old woman are physical and direct, as different from the cumulative traumas endured from abandonment or poverty as concerning the parents and children in the story. The old lady who is in the story identified as a witch, essentially a stranger, is also presented with no relationship to the children or parents in the story—though, oddly, some of the students do call her ‘the grandma’ when speaking of her.

There is also no hint given in the text itself of any possible reasons or extenuating circumstances that may compel the witch’s ill will and evil purpose toward Hansel and Gretel, although a most interesting discussion arises among the third graders (7 June 2011, Lower East Side) about the witch’s story, in which they suggest that the real culpability for the witch’s evil may lie with the witch’s own mother. Along these lines, three students discussed:

Kenisha: I think the witch was a little baby girl that was so nice, but she saw her mom say, "I don't like my children", and she told the baby to be an evil baby and she went up to be an old witch.

Kaya: ...the mom told her to be bad and then when she grew up and she started to be bad and boil people and do what her mother said, but her mom was dead so she probably thought that "I should do the right thing so that my mom can be happy."

Aimee: ...and now she feels so bad that she turned even more wicked, and since she was so bad when she was small, now she killed [the children].

Here, the children freely create a storyline in explanation of the witch's character, placing the witch within a context that helps them make meaning of the unfolding plot. They bring theories of motivation and human behavior to what they observe, as well as the capacity to theorize on their own, invoking their knowledge of cultural norms as they make sense of the world and the actors within it (Wellman, 1990). Through a kind of collaborative co-authorship, they conclude that the maternal figure in the life of the witch is culpable of her propensity for violence. The potential for Hansel and Gretel to become 'bad' is there too, they hesitantly consider, given the meanness of their own mother—but Kenisha, at last, finds a way to redeem them from such a fate, thinking perhaps not, because their mother "went coo-koo; they ran away and went into the woods."

A secondary explanation for the witch's depravity, one of which the fourth graders spoke of more frequently than the younger children, was economic hardship. Jason (26 May 2011, South Bronx), at the first sight of the old woman and not yet knowing of her treasure, declares: "I can't be trusting poor peoples. They be looking like that." Though nothing in the story explicitly points to the witch's poverty, nor is a causal link between economics and violence hinted in the story (unless perhaps the purposeful abandonment of the children by their parents due to poverty is deemed violent), some children seem to consider that poverty and hunger might serve as a disruption to peace, even compelling one to act violently. The issue and question of trust appears quite profoundly for the children particularly its role in establishing genuinely peaceful relations—the children here trusted the witch, who, it turned out, was not at all trustworthy.

The children in this study also exhibit a strong faith in and affirmation of justice, wherein one receives one's just desert for one's actions, and a belief that revenge and violence is justified and even peaceful when taken against an individual who has committed an act considered bad or evil. However limited or primitive its conception, children advanced and commented on particular plot lines which shed light on the necessity for consequences and included some line of reckoning: John's (26 May 2011, South Bronx) plan to kill the parents off early; Aimee's (7 June 2011, Lower East Side) idea for the children to stab the witch with a knife instead of burning her up; and Latoya's (2 June 2011, East Harlem) suggestion that: "They could have just smacked her and went away. So you get payback!"

Some of the children deemed it only right that the children take the witch's treasures after they have killed her. Kenisha (7 June 2011, Lower East Side) explained, "Because she needs to repay them. She be like, 'Give me them! Give me them! Get some water! I'll make you boil fat!'" Even though some were saddened by the death of the mother, these specific children alluded to reprisal fulfilled therein as well. Bill (2 June 2011, East Harlem), in a reading of the parents, predicted early on: "When they were mean to their kids, they died. That is what I think." In conversation emerging from talk about the story, some children even spoke of relatives in jail. Of her relative, Kenisha (7 June 2011, Lower East Side) concluded: "He needed a consequence." Here, Kenisha draws from her own life story to make sense of the characters present in the book.

The Mother

While the mother is not spared judgment, the students, especially the younger ones, demonstrate more ambivalence or conflict in making such verdicts. Described as "being bad," (Grace, 2 June 2011, East Harlem) and as having "bad ideas" (Parnes, 2 June 2011, East Harlem), this description of the mother delineates her somewhat from the witch who was simply described as bad. In some cases, the children rationalize the mother's actions, introducing feelings on her part to mitigate the severity of her intentions and postulating alternate story lines. In commenting on the character of the mother, the children first express shock and a great deal of surprise in hearing that the mother wants to abandon her children. The first graders, almost collectively and immediately ask "Why?" (1 June 2011, Upper West Side; 2 June 2011, East Harlem). Among the fourth graders, Jason (26 May 2011, South Bronx) interjects, "Unh! I want to go like this—'Mom, why you left me for?'" and John retorts, "How dare you!" John, who often turns his focus to violence, even relishing and finding excitement in violence, comments: "I would have just killed the parents right there. I would have stabbed them in the head and took their money." There are also responses of anger and thoughts of retaliation, such as Kenisha's cries (7 June 2011, Lower East Side), "If that was my mom, I'd be like, 'I don't love you anymore—Good Bye!'"

The mother, as a principal figure responsible for the creation of peace, is also one protected by the children through reluctance to name her as fully and indubitably bad. For example, in condemning the mother's behavior, considerations are also brought into play concerning the family's plight of hunger and poverty. To this end, Jason (26 May 2011, South Bronx) thinks, "They are that poor. I guess because they didn't have no food, no shelter, like that. . . . If they had had *dough*." His classmate Jim elaborates upon such, "they don't want their kids to die, so they are like, 'You know what, if we leave our kids, maybe they will have somebody to take care of them.'" With resolve first-grader Bill (2 June 2011, East Harlem) similarly reasons, "The mom wanted to escape from the kids. . . . Yes, she had a reason. So her and her

husband could have the food for themselves. She should be sharing the food with her kids.” Third-grader Kaya (7 June 2011, Lower East Side) comments, “Because she wanted to get rid of the children.... Because she’s mean and she didn’t find no food, she moved the children away from them and then buy some food and eat it by themselves.” The third graders (7 June 2011) talked a good deal among themselves about the problem of having no money, how expensive it is to live with more and more people under one household, and the threat of starvation leading to death.

As for the story’s end, questions and concerns arise, relatedly, about how the mom actually died and whether or not she had to die in the story. In a conversation among the first graders, Parnes (2 June 2011, East Harlem) says, “I didn’t like when the mother died.... Because something might happen to those kids.” Bill (2 June 2011) also shares, “I think when his mother died, that would make me sad if my mother died.” Immediately, the mother figure is absolved of her action in the face of death, the children relating personally, and deeply, to the possibility of losing a mother, their mother. Brittany (7 June 2011, Lower East Side), a third grader, wonders, “But why would she want to get rid of the children? You never know if they might be still alone, then you might miss them. Then you want to go find them.” Kenisha responds to Brittany, “She wants to find them. She misses them.” Interestingly, the third graders decide the mother could live and become good and nice again, the only character in the story that the younger children refuse to admit might be morally and incorrigibly corrupt.

In classic mythology, the image of the mother is commonly portrayed as a goddess, a daughter, as earth and so on, and despite stereotypical representations, which vary across time, contexts, and cultures, the archetypal image of the mother is oftentimes associated with notions of care, love, and protection (Gibson, 1988). However, in *Hansel and Gretel* the story unfolds from a mother who exhibits very few if any of these characteristics and in effect catapults the tale of abandonment, tragedy, loss, and in the end, return. Such portrayals of the non-mother, an ominous mother figure who exhibits little care for her children, is interestingly deconstructed by Laura Gibson in her work on *Alice’s Adventures In Wonderland*. She describes the scene when Alice first encounters the Duchess who is sitting on a three-legged stool in a dark smoke-filled kitchen nursing a baby who is howling and distraught from the utter chaos around her. Violently shaking and tossing the baby, the Duchess comes to signify the very epitome of the non-maternal, at one point throwing the child towards Alice before running off to play croquet with the Queen. However, the malevolence of the Duchess is undercut when the baby turns into a pig, a relief to the idea that a woman could ever abandon her baby, and moreover, is pardoned when it is realized that the Duchess is powerless and terrified of the Queen, a Queen who we learn never actually beheads anyone since her husband quietly pardons them all without her knowledge.

Although in *Hansel and Gretel* we surprisingly discover the mother’s demise at the end of the story, a fate different from the ‘mothers’ portrayed in *Alice’s Adven-*

tures In Wonderland, the children seem unsettled with the potentially traumatizing version of an uncaring mother, and instead, express disbelief in her heartlessness. The children's compulsion to create alternative plotlines that nullify or redeem the terrifying and violent actions of the mother figure is similar to the way in which Lewis Carroll brilliantly captures the terrible mother in both the Duchess and the Queen, then ruptures their disturbing quality by rendering the baby a pig (there was no mother) and revealing the Queen's lack of power (the result of her insidiousness never comes to fruition).

The Father

The father, as a figure of peace, or not, complicates this scene further too. While the third graders do not say much about the dad in the story, who in many ways is a bit peripheral and somewhat absent as a whole, the first graders clearly saw the father as a peacemaker dominated and under the control of the mother. First-graders, Reggie (2 June 2011, East Harlem) highlights how much the dad cares, while Parnes (2 June 2011) says of him: "The father was kind of sweet to the kids." Comparing the father's behavior to that of the mother, another first-grader Grace (2 June 2011) adds: "because the mom was being bad to the kids and dad was being good. The dad disagreed because he liked the kids..." Bill (2 June 2011) agrees, "because the dad was very peaceful to the kids," and Parnes (2 June 2011) thinks that "he was ignoring the bad ideas from the mother." About the father's part in the abandonment scheme, one third-grader (Aimee, 7 June 2011, Lower East Side), explains that "he knows that if he doesn't agree, the wife will keep saying: '*please, please, please, please, please!*'" John (26 May 2011, South Bronx), a fourth grader, similarly moves toward placing blame on the mother for the father's actions: "...mom will probably get a shotgun, trying to leave their children....what the father is going to do?" For all the children in the study, it is not simply action that determines one's propensity towards peace or violence, but also intentions and feelings.

Jason and John, though, also argued over the father, and in the end John seemed to persuade Jason from his original position of judgment against the dad to one in which he was without blame, a character allied with peace.

Jason: He is not a good person! He left them!

John: Remember in the book he said, regret, he said he regret leaving them, but the mom was upset that they came back.

Jason: The dad had no choice because the mom would have killed him... probably would have did something... Because how he left the kids, I would have said like this to my wife—

John: Jason! Jason! He had no choice. She got pregnant with the kids.... The dad is good. The dad is good.

Jason: The dad had no choice, but to let the kids go, but he knew what the son was trying to do: walk his way back home. I think the mom died because he killed her.

For John and Jason, the father exercises his own will only under the authority of a nagging wife who with ill intentions persuades him to abandon his own children. Perhaps because the two students are boys, they identify with a father figure, wishing to redeem, justify, or excuse his behavior. The father, then, is represented as weak or ineffectual, rather than being 'bad' or culpable. The ways in which masculinity and femininity are accomplished are intimately linked to how agency and power are produced. The boys, one of whom is estranged from his father who at the time of this study was incarcerated on a sexual assault charge, spoke often of his father's innocence and the antagonistic women who caused injury to his family structure. Here, the ongoing maintenance of self through literacy practices reflects in part the gendered frames that make an aggressive wife and an immobilized husband recognizable to the children.

Gendered subjectivities, where the boys defend the father, become subject positions made available through their particular historical and discursive conditions. The boys deploy the story of *Hansel and Gretel* to change reality, to refuse accusations against the father, perhaps their own fathers, and in doing so exercise their agency to rewrite the narrative, convincing each other of the reasonings and justifications behind the action. The intention becomes the focus; the conversations are taken up in this way. For all the children, significations of peace or violence, including moral designations of 'good' or 'bad' are rooted in relationship with others and the most powerful of these are unsurprisingly those that remind the children of their own mothers and fathers.

For the children, human agency is constrained and directed in powerful ways by history, experience, memory, and context. It was believed, generally by all the children, that certain events can inevitably lead to one's actions and involvements in future bad or future good. They expressed acknowledgment of and accommodation for cause and effect, wherein violence is cyclical and subject to a kind of 'domino effect'. "If they [the parents] had dough, like dough, dough. Like money, they could have gotten some food for his wife and the kids," Jason (26 May 2011, South Bronx) relates. "If they never left them [Hansel and Gretel], they [the children] wouldn't have found that grandma." Michelle, a first grader, described it this way: "I think the mom and dad put them in the woods, and then they found the house" (1 June 2011, Upper West Side). The first graders agreed, then, that if the children hadn't nibbled on the candy house, they would not have been 'snatched up' by the old woman either.

Conclusion

It is now generally accepted by those in the field of critical literacy that the social positioning of persons (or groups) through text, if not in relation to concepts

of peace, is a primary means by which subjects are produced (McDaniel, 2006). Even as the meanings, modes, mediums, and messages have undergone a great deal of change, particularly in a world that is less book- and print-based and increasingly mediated via the digital, what we read and are compelled to read in school continue to be the stories we hope to tell the next generation about what and who matters, where we have been and where we are going (Pinar, 2012). For manifold reasons, if not educating for peace and nonviolence, what we read affects us, changes us, and impacts who we become in ways both intended and not (Rorty, 1997)—this perhaps particularly and most powerfully true for children, as well.

In this paper, we have explored with children the potential lure and pervasiveness of violence in the fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*. We are reminded of how gendered identities and primary relationships play significant roles in the literate subjecthood of the young and that literacy practices are embedded within the particulars of familial roles and responsibilities, an impulse to protect the mother, defend the father, and stand up valiantly for a sibling in danger. We are also reminded that children are not only produced by the social forces that dictate for them the meanings of peace and violence, but that they also expound upon and add to such cultural models in order to surface intention and meaning. Therefore, while conditions ask them to submit and re-inscribe gendered scripts of peaceful and non-peaceful characteristics and behaviors, children simultaneously enact a sense of agency in re-writing the story and transforming the narrative into one that for their particular circumstance answers to their needs and desires.

Within the burgeoning field of critical literacy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993),—also rooted in Freire’s work (1970/1995) and affirming kinship with the works of critical multiculturalism (May & Sleeter, 2010), critical peace education (Hantzopoulos, 2011) and anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000), among others—concern has been raised about how scholarship that aims for equity and social justice continues to elide the complexity of violence as both a theoretical and pedagogical undertaking. More recently, a call has been made for localized studies into classroom practices and research that elucidates the possibilities of teaching for peace, especially given the multiplicity of expectations and meanings individuals bring to their understandings of peace (Bajaj, 2008). One fruitful lead is to follow studies such as the one conducted by Elizabeth Yeoman (1999) who uses case study research to understand how children draw from intertextual knowledge to produce disruptive stories that challenge conventional storylines, in this case about gender. She argues that within the domain of critical literacy, the role of the teacher is of crucial importance for exposing children to even the possibility of alternative discourses that produce new meanings and modes of resistance.

The summons is for greater contextualized, situated perspectives (Gur-Ze’Ev, 2001; 2011) that make use of storytelling to illumine the cultural scripts to which children become familiar. Such values and ways of knowing, by way of ordinary daily activity, come to light in a more focused way as children engage with literature.

This study has revealed the necessity of engaging children in such discussions and of listening to them about such concerns. Children read with, through and against the characters and plots in the stories they encounter. They work and rework, in and out of schools, the settings and situations of their own lives, as they are involved in the plotline and character shifts in texts. This suggests the pedagogical capacity to gather possible treasures for curriculum and pedagogy in the way of educating for peace and nonviolence. Further inquiries can extend upon this work to better explore: what do young children know of, experience, and have to say about, power, peace and violence in their own lives, in their classrooms, and in the world? How can we critically and meaningfully dialogue with them about this knowledge? What roles might literacy, literacy practice, and engagement with literary texts play in this work? How do we as adults learn from and with children, in seeking to co-create curriculum and pedagogy to counter violence, cultivate peace, and promote productive and transformative subjectivities and engagements of power?

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