

Karen R. Bailey.

**THE GIRLS ARE THE ONES WITH THE POINTY NAILS
(AN EXPLORATION OF CHILDREN'S CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER).
London, ON: Althouse Press, 1993.
136 pp. \$19.95. ISBN: 0-920354-35-1.**

Karen Bailey's study of children and their understanding of gender attempts to give voice to young children so adults can begin to discover their points of view. In terms of constructing conducive atmospheres for discussion and in rendering the different voices of four to six-year-old children, Bailey succeeds. Her sensitive autobiographical account of how she came to respect the value of children's knowledge and became a facilitator of their growth strikes a chord with all educators who believe in student-centred education, no matter the age level. Bailey brings searching questions about gender construction to her study. In terms of using children's literature as the vehicle for discussion she is careful in her review of the literature, particularly acknowledging the work of Jack Zipes and Bronwyn Davies.

Davies' work, particularly *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool children and gender* (1989) can serve as a fine comparison to Bailey's. Both use the same type of children's literature texts with their preschool children. Instead of selecting texts where the characters perform traditional gender role models, both choose books where the protagonists act unconventionally. Indeed, two of the picture books are the same: Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess* and Tomie de Paula's *Oliver Button is a Sissy*. Both Davies and Bailey probe the children's ideas about gender roles by eliciting the children's responses to the books.

In some ways Bailey's study can be seen as a practical application of Davies' theoretical study and the "hands-on" approach is both its asset and weakness. Chapter 2 on the design of her study is so clear that readers could follow her in designing their own studies. Similarly, chapter 3 on visible markers and play behaviours is very fine, particularly eloquent are the sections devoted to descriptions, child quotations, and discussions of specific play modes such as doll play, sports, aggressive play, dancing, and dressing up. Bailey observes that there seems to be three categories of play: girls only, boys only, and neutral ground. For example, six-year-old Matt succinctly explains the difference between dolls and action figures: "... They're figures. Figures are for boys. Besides, boys play with them differently. They have weapons and you have to make funny sounds and fight" (p. 46). A verbal motif in this chapter is "rule" used to describe the three areas of play. Unfortunately the rules tend to be exclusionary. Four-year-old Jill uses the term most to describe how football, dinky cars, and playing GI Joes are "boy's stuff." "They're supposed to like them. That's the rule - for boys only.

The boys I know always do play with them. . . . the rule says that girls are supposed to play with dolls instead of trucks" (p. 37). Six-year-old Dawn explains how boys exclude girls from their games " . . . boys think boys' games are just for boys and girls shouldn't play them. Some days there's just no sense in asking" (p. 41).

Despite the careful rendering of the children's voices, there are some aspects which could do with some rethinking. Bailey occasionally imposes an adult feminist position onto the children, expecting them to want to act subversively in the face of peer pressure: "In fact, when asked if they would stop doing an activity that elicited their peer's disapproval, most children reported that not only would they stop, but they would return to doing conventional boy or girl activities" (p. 78). While feminists such as myself would prefer children to learn flexible gender roles as early as possible, I believe it is unrealistic to expect learned resistance in children of this age. There may be stages in the evolution of gender role construction that are not necessarily sequential chronologically. Just as in literary appreciation, a reader has to learn the conventional before being able to appreciate the unconventional as an oppositional practice; it may be that in gender construction young children have to learn the "rules" of conventional behaviour before being able to appreciate the significance of reversing or breaking the "rules".

Another criticism concerns the occasional lapse in structural logic. Perhaps the impression derives from the book being the results of pruning a longer text. For example, at the end of Chapter Four " Social Relationships and Rules" there are some self contradictory sentences. After giving repeated examples of the similarity of the children's responses, Bailey then generalizes about the diversity of the children's views without providing sufficient instances to back her claim (p. 80).

Bailey's intent is to provide a practical book for researchers and in that she succeeds. However, when she occasionally leaves this realm to speculate, she detracts from her study. Bailey is very able at closely rendering the children's voices and in expressing her sensitive understanding of how to implement strategies for change without causing distress to her students. Her examples of means to evoke "gender talk" and her inventiveness in spontaneously dealing with class room incidents are funny and inspiring. For example, one day the children remarked on a boy wearing a gold chain, so Bailey took the class on a tour through the school to see if men "wear necklaces" (p. 86). Her wise advice to teachers, both practicing and aspiring, is that an important strategy is to appeal to the innate sense of fairness and justice that young children possess. As one four-year-old girl tellingly says: "You've just gotta sing about Mrs. Sun to make it fair" (p. 100).

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