



Crossing gender boundaries with storytelling in schools

Sally Veale from Ash Grove Academy, a MakeBelieve Arts Helicopter Stories Centre of Excellence, discusses the power of storytelling

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Crossing gender boundaries in the classroom

During the three years that I have been delivering Helicopter Stories in my Year 1 classroom, the issue of children crossing gender boundaries has arisen with every single cohort at some point during the year. However, it has been interesting to note how the frequency of incidents has decreased as time has gone on. This may be due to the different personalities that present themselves on the stage each year, the fact that children are using the approach in Reception, or simply due to an increase in my level of confidence when tackling and discussing this with each new group of children I teach. Whatever the reasons, the issue hasn't gone away and I know it is something I will continue to deal with. It is for this reason that I chose to focus on it during my training to become one of MakeBelieve Arts Certified Helicopter Stories Centre of Excellence.



The ethos, methods and practices of Helicopter Stories

Helicopter Stories is, in theory, a simple approach. Based on the work of Vivian Gussin Paley, the teacher or workshop leader scribes a child's story word for word, and then the class come together to act it out. The equipment needed is minimal: a roll of masking tape, several sheets of A5 paper and a pen.

The first time the issue of crossing gender boundaries presented itself during a session was when the 'Frozen' phenomena was still at the forefront of most children's (and more specifically, girls') minds.

It became apparent to me, when reading the first sentence of a story during an acting session, that while the little girl whose story I was reading had chosen to be Elsa, the next character in the story was her sister Anna and the next child in the circle was Jamie, a lively, wriggly, physical 5-year old boy. When I invited him to take the stage and asked him to 'show us how Anna moves around the stage', Jamie refused, turned, and smirked at Nicholas who sat next to him in the circle. This led Nicholas to refuse to be Anna, and created a subsequent chain reaction of 'Nos' until I reached the next girl. This girl happily stood up, lifted the sides of her imaginary skirt, and the two sisters began the fantasy of building their snowman. Interestingly, the next child in the circle was a boy, who stood up without any hesitation and willingly pretended to be Olaf, built out of snow with a carrot for his nose and sticks for arms.

At the time, I stayed true to the belief that the children sat in the circle had as much right to refuse participation in the story acting as they did to stand up and take part. However, when the same boys who had refused to be Anna jumped up at the opportunity to be Power Rangers and took part in a timeless battle of goodies beating baddies, something made me question whether I had been right to leave things as they were. The following day, when a similar 'Frozen' story was being recreated on our stage, the same pattern emerged, with the boys being quite happy to take on the role of Kristoff the hero, Olaf the snowman, or even Sven the reindeer, antlers aloft, charging down the snowy hillside. However, their reluctance remained when it came to taking on the role of Elsa or Anna.

This picture was not mirrored by the girls. I cannot recollect a single time when a girl in my class has refused to play a Dad, a boy, a snowman, a reindeer or a Power Ranger Superhero Ninja – good, bad or otherwise. This opened up a range of questions for me. Was this stage a place where the girls could finally be part of the physical play that they may have often felt excluded from? Was this why they so willingly embraced the opportunity to take on these roles?

And, conversely, did this format reveal issues of self-esteem or maybe even peer-pressure for the boys, things that the girls didn't share in this context when performing in front of their peers? These boys, who were quite happy to dress up in the role play area and pretend to be animals in the Amazon jungle or dancers in the Rio Carnival, were not comfortable, for whatever reason, pretending to be female characters in front of their classmates.

As I grew in confidence with the ethos, methods and practices of Helicopter Stories, and through the training I was given by MakeBelieve Arts, I decided to broach this subject of crossing gender boundaries during a story acting session with the same class of children.



At the start of the session, before any story acting had begun, I asked the children how they might show they were 'pretending' to be an animal when they were on the stage. The children came up with a huge range of suggestions, from how they moved to the noises they could make, and even how they might curl up to go to sleep. This was then extended to fantasy characters – witches, dragons and superheroes – all with similar responses. At this point, I steered clear of asking how boys might behave or what we might do if we were pretending to be a girl, through fear of consolidating already perceived stereotypes. However, when we began our story acting session on this day, I chose to use the word 'pretend' much more explicitly for each character that came on to the stage. 'Can I see you pretending to be a tiger? Can I see you pretending to buy an ice-cream? Can I see you pretending to be Anna?' And it worked. One of the more confident boys made the leap and stood up ready to 'pretend' to be a little girl, a sister to the story-teller's main character. He was congratulated and recognised for his excellent skills at 'pretending', and as a result, several other boys were much more willing to cross the gender boundary and receive the same praise and recognition.

What it means to 'be a boy' or to 'be a girl'

Helicopter Stories allows all children to explore what it means to 'be a boy' or to 'be a girl' in the realm of storytelling and story acting. It gives girls the opportunity to be praised and recognised for their baddie-defeating ninja skills, their ability to drive a police car in a high-speed chase or to dribble a football across the stage, while also giving boys a chance to pretend to be Pocahontas or a princess, a sister or a mum.

This, in my opinion, is one of the many strengths of the approach. The fact that Ray, one of the most confident and popular boys in my current Year 1 class, will willingly stand up and pretend to be the Mummy, while Mandy (the girl he is sat next to) is the Daddy, is a testament to the power of storytelling and story acting. The same can be said for Lorraine, who has significant and complex learning, speech and language difficulties, but who giggles with enthusiasm when it is her turn to become a baddie on our stage. As Mac so eloquently put it as he confidently stood up to be a princess during one of our recent Helicopter Story sessions, "It's just pretend."

For more information, [visit the MakeBelieve Arts website](#) or purchase Trisha Lee's book *Princesses, Dragons and Helicopter Stories*, published by Routledge in August 2015.