

Student 2

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ENG 1304

Sample Summary/Response Essay

Fairy Tales and Family Life

The 2007 experiment and study conducted by Lori Baker-Sperry, reported in her article “The Production of Meaning through Peer Interaction: Children and Walt Disney’s *Cinderella*,” tests the hypothesis that to some degree peer interaction influences the themes perceived in children’s literature. She also questions whether or not children have the freedom to derive their own interpretations of gender roles or whether those roles are dictated by traditional values. The experiment takes place in a public elementary school where Baker-Sperry read to and observed 148 students, 50 of which participated in the reading groups. She read Disney’s *Cinderella* aloud to the students who wished to participate, stimulating conversation with questions regarding the appearance and behaviour of the characters. As she expected, the girls interacted with the fairy tale more than the boys, who either did not speak or spoke only to make fun of it. Interestingly, many of the students responded to the story by either acting out portions of the tale, or by relating it in some way to his or her own life. Conversely, peer interaction was strongest when the children could not personally relate to the tale, instead seeking the assurance of the group. Based on her observations and the children’s responses, Baker-Sperry concludes that by serving as a buffer against aberrant notions, peer interaction reinforces the gender roles the children already assume to be true. Whilst I concur with Baker-Sperry’s conclusion, I would emphasise that it is not peer interaction alone that shapes how children interpret these gender roles, but also their exposure to and experience with the adult world prior to group activity.

As Baker-Sperry observed in her group experiment, children are keen to win the approval of their peers, and the desire to be accepted obligates them to follow a peer script whether or not it reflects their beliefs. In several instances, a student voiced a view that was not well received among his peers, and so he altered his statement because it was more important to be accepted than to hold to his beliefs. Indeed, children only repeat ideas that they hear from others; the beliefs behind those ideas have not yet made a personal connection with the children's intellect. Therefore, it is easier for them to suddenly exchange one value for another if it means they win praise from their peers. Oftentimes, putting young children together in group discussion does not produce new interpretations. Instead, it reinforces the ones the children already subscribe to. For example, when asked to describe the prince's appearance, although the book gave no description, one girl responded "Charming!" yet she failed to explain what charming meant (Baker-Sperry 721). This illustrates that she had no real grasp of what she was saying: she was merely repeating what she had heard somewhere else. This sort of mechanical repetition is witnessed especially in religious groups, who traditionally employ sayings and chants for instruction. Unfortunately, one of the disadvantages of this method is that rote memorization seldom nurtures a real understanding of what is being taught. Thus, if presented with a favorable alternative, for instance in the presence of peers, no conviction will anchor their beliefs, causing them to change their tune more times than not.

Children are chiefly influenced by the values expressed at home or in their immediate social environment, and it is these values that they carry to a group activity. Even before they interact with other children, infants are continuously shaped by what they see and hear at home. In Baker-Sperry's study, for example, student Derrick expresses a familiarity with a version of the story that features his ethnicity, African American (725). Derrick, growing up African

American, would be exposed to cultural phenomenon that his white classmates would not be familiar with. Thus, what he brings to the classroom discussion reflects his unique family environment. Interestingly, Baker-Sperry notes that the other boys in the class did not chastise Derrick for showing interest in this “girls’ tale,” (725) and I believe it precisely because they were unfamiliar with this version. Their cues from the adult world were mute on the issue, and thus they were too because they had not been shown how to interpret it. Likewise, whenever someone crossed a gender boundary, the children acted quickly to correct him since any deviation from the cultural norms they had been taught confused them. And as children, confusion is uncomfortable so they protested the foreign concepts until they once more found a comfortable, familiar setting.

Toward the end of her report, Baker-Sperry asserts that it is possible for the boys to respond differently to the tale if they were “at home reading with a parent, or reading on his own” (Baker-Sperry 726). I agree that they would respond more favorably on occasions that they did not feel intimidated to “do gender.” In my experience, interaction with adolescent students serves more as a barrier than a place to develop ideas, for they have no basis from which to form ideas other than borrowed ideas of their surroundings. Discussion groups among the young monitor what one says or does not say, but rarely forms new thoughts; it is a limitation not an inspiration. Generally, the first voice to express an opinion is the most assertive (being first) and therefore also the most authoritative. The opinion is adopted by the group not because it is coincidentally the view shared by all, but because no one ventures to counter it.

Growing up, we begin to form an identity based on our beliefs, both through peer interaction and our respective social environments. Yet the absence of originality can have a negative effect on children’s development. Consequently, although peer interaction teaches

children to respect others, it is wise to keep in mind that peer pressure, even to adhere to the same interpretation of a fairy tale, is never good if it belittles individuality.

Works Cited

Baker-Sperry, Lori. "The Production of Meaning through Peer Interaction: Children and Walt Disney's *Cinderella*." *Sex Roles*, June 2007. Web. 19 January 2016.