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Still in the LEGO (LEGOS) room: female teachers designing curriculum around girls’ popular culture for the coeducational classroom in Australia.

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Still in the LEGO (LEGOS) room: female teachers designing curriculum around girls’ popular culture for the coeducational classroom in Australia.

While the issue of boys’ dominance of the curriculum has a long history, the paper examines this phenomenon in a contemporary context, through an empirical study with female teachers designing English curriculum around girls’ media in a coeducational secondary school in Victoria, Australia. In this space, teachers, and the researcher, produce and perform both individual gendered identities and plans for the identities of future student subjects, while negotiating subject positions made available to girls and women in broader social contexts. In this instance, negotiations that take place during the development of a unit of work on Mattel’s Barbie website form the basis of feminist discourse analysis, enabling us to ‘take stock’ in thinking about what curriculum design is, about where the past is situated in relation to the present, and to question why, within a discursive feminist/postfeminist entanglement, the heritage of feminist intellectual thought in this area seems absent.

**Keywords:** curriculum design; gender; feminist discourse analysis

**Introduction**

In 1989, completing a Diploma of Education at Australia’s University of Melbourne, I read Dale Spender’s *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal* (1989), on how curriculum excludes girls. In 2012, in my research notes after a planning meeting with a group of English teachers at a school outside Melbourne, I scrawled a line: ‘This is like going back to SPENDER!’ The capitals take up several lines; the pen has gouged the paper, in my fierce surprise. Yet from this frustration emerges a key theme in this study of how female teachers design curriculum around girls’ popular culture for the English classroom: how issues in gender and education can continue ‘relatively unchanged’ (Tinkler and Jackson 2014, 76). It remains difficult, decades after Spender’s ground breaking work, for some teachers to privilege texts designated as belonging to ‘girls’ in the coeducational environment; the legacy
of feminist scholarship in this area, of the poststructuralist work of the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Davies 1989; 1993; 1994; Walkerdine 1990; Gilbert and Taylor 1991; Gilbert 1994) can prove challenging to trace.

This study was originally conceived as a researcher/teacher collaboration to develop strategies for teaching multimodal texts, for example, websites incorporating images, text and sound. Anne, Elinor, Rachel, Jess, Zoe (the Year Seven Humanities team at Haslemere College- pseudonyms are used here for staff, students and school, a private school with a largely white, middle class staff and parent body) and I set out to plan a unit of work around Mattel’s Barbie.com, through a series of meetings and online interactions echoing the school’s usual method of designing curriculum. We also sought to reflect on this process; the school became involved voluntarily through a commitment to professional learning and reflective practice. Barbie texts were proposed as a focus because of the brand’s popularity.

However, my own years of teaching in girls’ schools had blinded me to the ongoing struggles, in coeducation, to study what is important to (many) girls, and to imagine ourselves feeling comfortable in this endeavour, as teachers, women and potentially as feminists; it quickly emerged in our discussions that Barbie would not find an easy path into the classroom. ‘If I put that up in my classroom,’ says Rachel, gesturing at the Barbie website on the screen, ‘I’d lose every boy in the room.’

Yet even prior to our first meeting, as I developed my research proposal and sought ethical approval, I became troubled by assumptions underpinning this work – assumptions, for example, about what has happened to girls in the classroom since Spender’s identification of what she called ‘the old, old problem’ (1989, 2) of sexism, realised in the way curricular
content is geared to boys. Had this problem ever been ‘fixed’? I wondered this in light of the disappearance of girls from the literature in the 1990s, for example in our national journal of English teaching, *English in Australia*, in favour of analyses of troubled ‘masculinities’ (e.g. Martino 1994) I also became intrigued by responses to our selected text; university ethics committee members were dismayed that students might be invited to deconstruct Barbie, and saw this as a pointless exercise, and my family were disappointed that I was not studying something ‘real’. The very idea of studying ‘Barbie’ provoked complicated responses.

As Anne says, reflecting on our first meeting:

> It highlighted the conflict I have felt as a parent and now as a teacher – when I have ideological opposition to something / girls making sense of their own gender and social norms via Barbie: body image / all about the clothes / blonde in high heels / the importance of ‘the look’ – also driving the need to consume – reeking of ‘consumerism’ more and more clothes and dolls that all look the same – crazy. Imaginative play corralled etc.

> But I also get the joy and need for girls to legitimately do girlie staff – and accept that it probably/ hopefully doesn’t limit their perceptions of themselves in other contexts.

She highlights the way entangled discourses of feminism and postfeminism (Gill 2007) make decisions in curriculum design fraught with ambivalence and hesitation; ultimately, this study has sought to explore this, shifting from finding ways to help students deconstruct how multimodal texts construct gender, to a more complex and nuanced invocation of design. In the little-researched space of collaborative teacher planning prior to classroom work, we have looked to how teachers, and the researcher, produce and perform both individual gendered identities and plans for the identities of future student subjects, while negotiating subject positions made available to girls and women in broader social contexts.
As designers, we are present in the materials emerging from this study as mothers, teachers, sisters, aunts, godmothers, colleagues and friends. These multiple perspectives offer a different way of ‘taking stock’ of curriculum from managerialist tools of ‘audit’ or ‘enhancement’. We also go beyond what Spender dismisses as ‘trivial’ interventions (1989, 37), such as the selection of more girls’ texts, to think more deeply about happens around such choices. In proposing greater reflexivity in curriculum design, we hope that Spender’s revelation (1989, 118) that coeducational classrooms institutionalise the denigration of girls’ experiences can genuinely become a thing of the past.

**Theoretical resources**

Initial plans for the study looked to multimodal semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Kress 2010) as a way in to thinking about Barbie as text, and also about our interactions around curriculum. Barbie was selected initially as an intergenerational brand familiar to both teachers and students, but also providing teenaged students with some theoretical distance from which to analyse texts. I began, however, to feel that the semiotic approach risked constructing teachers as deficient in complex metalanguage, and positioning me as an expert, with an MA in social semiotics. I sought more fluid and reflexive resources to think with, resources that would allow for struggle, rather than for designating what signs mean, and turned to Mikhail Bakhtin, and his heteroglossia: life envisaged as a struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces, whether describing curriculum design, applying semiotics, participating in a planning meeting, or writing up a research paper.

One conceptualisation of heteroglossia is particularly helpful. Bakhtin’s description of ideological becoming, of the way heteroglossia plays out in individual consciousness foregrounds how we wrestle with competing internal voices. Bakhtin keeps the notion of struggle uppermost, reminding us that the identity work we each do (in becoming teachers, or
research collaborators, or interpreters of texts) is part of ideological becoming, an ongoing process in which authoritative and internally persuasive discourses combine in a dialogic struggle (1981). This takes place between the stern authoritative word, ‘the word of the fathers’ (1981, 342) and internally persuasive discourse, or ‘one’s own word’ (1981, 345), not isolated and distant, but animating and awakening new words within us.

While mandated curriculum might form an authoritative discourse, in internally persuasive discourse, ‘thought begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way’ (1981, 345), as ‘an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values’ (1981, 346). Our curriculum meetings and conversations at Haslemere College, our interactions via email and telephone, all suggest this, as we deliberate over whether or not we are feminists, even if we can ‘do that stuff’ of critical literacy in the classroom, whether we enjoy or despise Barbie, how we might negotiate relationships with our students and our own children or relatives. There are propositions, revelations, realisations, revisions, recantations, conflicts.

In the audio files of the meetings, our words overlap, mingle and populate each other, sometimes one voice is dominant, sometimes another, in a struggle to be heard, to produce meaning in a language complicated by memories of what has come before, and imaginings of what is to come later in the classroom, in dialogue. The unit of work that emerges from this is revealed as a fragile textual overlay, masquerading as truth and cohesion, a frame of printed sentences and dot points, a bombshell, even, that temporarily conceals and constrains the myriad interactions that have brought it into being, both in our individual consciousnesses and in the social setting of our work.

Thinking about how we are addressed in discourse, and an interest in the volatility of the word also lead me to Judith Butler, in particular to her *Excitable Speech* (1997). She defines
‘interpellation’, a term developed by Louis Althusser (1971), as the way ideological subjects are created though being ‘hailed’ or ‘interpellated’, through forces of ‘reiterated convention’ (1997, 32). In being addressed, and in recognising that address, one becomes a subject of the speaker’s discourse. Who do we call into being, when we create curricula?

Butler is also interested in the power of language to both determine something and call into play other possibilities, in its instability. Through the insult, for example, ‘one is not simply fixed by the name one is called’ (1997, 2). She explains that ‘the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyse the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response’ (1997, 2). The name one is called both subordinates and enables, producing agency from ambivalence, and creating effects that exceed the animating intention of the call: it is Butler who might provide hope that, despite the persistence of Spender’s ‘old, old problem’ (1989, 2) the invisibility of girls in the curriculum, the absence of address, and also the hostile comments of male students, might yet incite a more lasting rebellion.

Butler also offers a theory of identity as performative, as effect that is produced or generated, creating potential for agency (2007). Acts, gestures and enactments are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other means: gender itself is a masquerade. Through Butler, we can complicate the notion that we teach from who we are (Boomer 1988, 31) with the proposition that we teach while negotiating who we are required to be, interpellated even as we seek to interpellate. As we jointly ‘make’ Barbie for the classroom, we are also making ourselves, both as women and as teachers.

Concurrently with these theoretical readings, I was reading a corpus of mostly male writings on curriculum theory. Gradually, over time, I found myself returning to my notes on the works of Dorothy Smith. Smith’s Everyday World as Problematic (returning us again to the
decade when Spender was writing about curriculum) introduces her project: to create a sociology from the standpoint of women, instead of traditional sociology, which gives us:

*a consciousness that looks at society, social relations and people’s lives as if we could stand outside them, ignoring the particular local places in the everyday in which we make our lives. It claims objectivity not on the basis of its capacity to speak truthfully, but in terms of its specific capacity to exclude the presence and experience of particular subjectivities*’ (1987, 10).

She goes on to say that ‘established sociology has objectified a consciousness of society and social relations that ‘knows’ them from the standpoint of their ruling and from the standpoint of men who do that ruling’ (1987, 11).

What if I were to relate this to curriculum design, and to Spender’s observations? To consider how modes of ruling in curriculum are extralocal, how ‘its characteristic modes of consciousness are objectified and impersonal; its relations are governed by organizational logics and exigencies’ (1987, 11)? In one of the meetings at Haslemere, while contemplating ways the unit could be interdisciplinary, we become bogged down. The school’s formalised timetable emerges as one of Smith’s forms of externally constituted organisation vested in and mediated by documents, as do the descriptors of the national curriculum, described by the teachers as both ‘pedantic’ and ‘vague’. Smith is alert to the gendered subtexts of these documents, and the way they appear gender neutral in their rational and impersonal guise, yet are fundamentally patriarchal, in that ‘direct and personal relations are organised and determined by an impersonal apparatus’ (1987, 159).

Anne notes that the teacher being hailed by the national curriculum has no life. What if the curriculum field is viewed as a fundamentally patriarchal system that conceals the lived experiences of people (teachers – who often happen to be women – and students)? I start
revisiting my curriculum theory books to find actual examples of design embedded in the lives of the writers and find none. Smith, however, offers a way to think about society from ‘where we are actually located, embodied, in the local historicity and particularities of our lived worlds’ (1987, 20) by taking the everyday world as matrix, and linking it to both locally organised and larger social processes. This standpoint is never universalised, never fixed, never seeks to tell the true story, or to become itself the phenomenon under examination. Such a positioning is beyond that of even the curriculum theorists I have found most inspiring, including Garth Boomer. Green describes him as offering ‘curriculum theorising expressly from the standpoint of teachers’ (1999, 3) yet after reading Bakhtin and Smith I find even in his voice a distant, fatherly authority: he notes it is ‘pleasing to see how English teachers are beginning to liberate themselves from a narrow conception of the literary text’, for example (1988, 7). Even other theorists like Michael Apple (2004, 2012), or Stephen Ball (2003), who explicitly critique neoliberalism in education, start to sound as if they are analysing teachers from a long way off.

This has meant, for this project that initially asked how we might achieve imposed outcomes through textual study, finding a closer standpoint, not off with the national curriculum, or even school curriculum documents, or textbooks, which state what must be taught or know. I can use these, though, as Smith advises, to ‘rework and reformulate’ (1987, p. 23), moving from actualities to formulations and back again, collecting materials, moving from story to theory and back. This animates a dialectical relationship between academic writing and memory/imagination, and between broader social contexts and local realities, where curriculum can be revealed to be personal, and therefore political. This personal/political nexus is a key facet of Smith’s world view (1987) and highlights how the curricular choices we make are intricately linked to the ways we perform identity in these other roles, and the shifting standpoints we inhabit.
**Research design**

What began as a neat, instrumental case study (Stake 2005) of curriculum design in a particular setting became, with this theoretical impetus, more oriented towards action research, ethnography and narrative inquiry, blending methods within the research strategy in the creation of a ‘glitterbomb’, a metaphor embodying centripetal and centrifugal forces, packing materials tightly into a bomb, only to release them wildly. I sought to remain close to the everyday work of teachers and design a unit with a team within a school, but, with ethical considerations in mind, to avoid making teaching this unit compulsory. Participation was entirely voluntary, but provided opportunities for professional learning; we met three times over two terms, talked on the telephone and exchanged emails.

Around our work, I created a research journal of notes and memories, a visual diary of images encountered during the project, meeting and telephone conversation transcripts, emails, a collection of dolls used as stimulus materials for our discussions and detailed semiotic analyses of Barbie texts. I shared this with teacher collaborators as much as they desired, then brought these materials together in a heteroglossic endeavour, splicing academic writing with images and anecdotes, using writing with text and images as ‘a form of inquiry’ (Richardson and St Pierre 2008). I also sought to identify and name particular sites of struggle, or ‘bifurcated consciousness’ (Smith 1987, 16) or failures in interpellation (Butler 1997), places where, in our performances of self, everyday lives, our professional work and broader social contexts meet in discursive conflict.

The study as a whole uses these thematical arrangements to discuss how these struggles have played out in the project, to create an understanding of curriculum as constructed and redolent with ideology, and with gendered performances of identity: in itself, a site of struggle. This forms a counterpoint to masculinised and centralised discourses of curriculum
and pedagogy, from which struggle is excised. I have aimed to contribute an intimate and practical realisation of curriculum design embedded in everyday lives to the work of curriculum theorists (e.g. Greene 1992; Pinar 2011) who have called for curriculum to be understood as something other than a means to an end. This is to expand notions of curriculum as a story about the world, to curriculum as emerging from the struggles of storied lives.

I have recognised, in my writing around these thematic arrangements, the commitment and professionalism of the teachers with whom I worked, and implicated myself in interpretations. St Pierre advises researchers to think, rather than to code data (2011, 621), and this I have done, by listening, reading and reflecting, and above all, by writing. I also bring to this process my theoretical understandings of the purposes of communication acts in social semiotics – the representational, interpersonal and textual needs we seek to fulfil (and that I am enacting here too).

Yet just as a semiotic approach to Barbie seems inadequate to ‘explain’ her, conducting a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992) on interview transcripts seems to reduce teachers to being subjects to whom I apply tools. Similar dilemmas have given rise to methodologies such as feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (Baxter 2003). This approach, influenced by both Bakhtin and Butler, suggests the performance of discourse analysis needs to be reflexive, alert to multiple positionings and open to multiple voices. It advocates textual play and the juxtaposition of voices so that they ‘generate something beyond themselves’ (Baxter 2003, 67). Baxter advocates looking at identity in ‘a given setting where competing discourses lead, temporarily, to more fixed patterns of dominant and subordinated subject positions’ (Baxter 2003, 71). She aims to ‘identify and represent sites of struggle in stretches of spoken or textual interaction’ (Baxter 2003, 187), and also to combine both close analysis of utterances, and broader, interpretive social commentary. These aims
are congruent with my own, both in the creation of the glitterbomb as a whole, and, in considering closely, in the next section, the conversations of our planning meetings.

**Discussion**

What emerges, in this study, thinking with Bakhtin, Butler and Smith, is a simultaneous embracing and pushing away of girls’ culture, as teachers wrestle with Barbie from their own standpoints, and in their own performances of both personal and professional identity. This heteroglossic conflict fits with Stuart Hall’s definition of ‘disavowal’ as ‘the strategy by which a powerful fascination or desire is both indulged and at the same time denied’ (1997, 267). He explains how disavowal allows for simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret. There is a resonance here with Bakhtin’s ideological becoming (1981) and the internal clash of authoritative and personally persuasive discourses.

Disavowal in relation to girl culture is already flagged by the literature, including the propensity to disparage girls’ texts (Weber & Mitchell 1995) and to treat girls’ toys as abject (Jones et al. 2012). I desired to study girls’ culture but found myself dissembling about the focus of my study or the object of ridicule when I revealed it. The shame my storied self, described in my research journal, feels at the laughter of male university IT staff assisting me with Barbie.com screen captures, the disgust shown by my family in responding to my research interests and the disapproval in the voices of the ethics committee are all powerful evocations of the need to disavow girls’ culture. I wrestle with authoritative masculine and feminist voices telling me Barbie is worthless, while I am also seeking to work with a text I have loved, and that I see my daughter loving. These insights have come into focus as I have moved outside the curricular dialogue of ruling relations, and taken up the standpoints of woman, mother and girl.
Why is teacher Zoe so exasperated by her goddaughter, invoked as a Barbie girl? ‘Ever since she could walk she’s been trying to get into my shoes and carry my handbag,’ she tells us, shaking her head in dismay, as she trials one of the activities in the unit we have written together. How do the compulsory feminine accoutrements that form the basis of our own consumer fetishes and desires become things from which we must protect our children?

Elinor says of wide reading in her classroom, ‘There’s been a lot of Twilight; [low mocking voice] [giggles, and murmurs of assent] I’m not saying that’s a good thing, I’m just saying in being embracing of that, having quite serious discussions.’ How do we view the passions of adolescent girls? How can Twilight, the bestselling teen vampire media franchise, be both bad and embraced?

Curriculum around girls’ digital popular culture emerges as designed and performed in the context of contradictory discourses coalescing as a broader cultural disavowal of culture that we ascribe to ‘girls’. Curriculum design does not take place in isolation from these broader cultural concerns, but mediates them, offering a collegial space where discourses might be both performed and challenged, as Elinor shows in her comment on the Twilight phenomenon. Her deep, masculine, disapproving voice for the word ‘twilight’ creates distance, and yet at the same time she uses the metaphor of an embrace, immediately drawing this devalued culture close again and acknowledging how it initiates meaningful dialogue with students.

In our discussions we express distaste for the pinks and purples of the potential Barbie website text, for ‘Barbie pink’, and the home page as ‘the adult world… pinked,’ yet my daughter’s toy basket at home is full of pink costumes. We have before us on the meeting room table a girls’ toy, yet most of our talk is of boys. We are keen to explore ‘the construction of Barbie and all it symbolises’ yet our consensus is that the unit cannot look like a unit on Barbie, the unit must be ‘framed’ for boys. These contradictions suggest a site
of ideological struggle that comes into view through our work, and the study as a whole, where we are interpellated as appropriately feminine women ourselves while seeking, as teachers, to deconstruct and enact the interpellation of girls.

But why should girls’ play culture be so reviled? And why so much more so than, say, LEGO (LEGOS in the US), the plastic construction toys, invoked neutrally, or even admiringly by co-researchers in the meetings?

Elinor: I had a boy one time who came along with a suitcase on wheels and he opened it up and it was all compartmentalised LEGO.

Anne: Was that Scott?

Elinor: No, he has a LEGO room at home. No, this was Davey.

Rachel: I had four boys and I reckon I could put our breakables away and put out LEGO and change our décor... [LEGO statues!]

While we might gently mock the passion for plastic behind this play, LEGO represents resourcefulness, ingenuity, creativity and industry. Barbie, on the other hand, is regarded with distaste and anxiety. Not exclusively, however, as our shared memories suggest. Yet these personal memories of family solidarity, fashion fun or aspirational adoration remain just that: personal. They are not translated into pedagogy and explored in the unit.

Barbie as abject

Jones et al. (2012) suggest an answer to the question of why so-called girls’ culture is so reviled, claiming that Barbie represents the abject (Kristeva 1982; Butler 2011), that Barbie is cultural rubbish that must be rejected in the process of subject formation. Certainly the images collected in the visual diary support this view, from a jumble of Barbies at a junk sale
(Tofolletti 2007), to Barbie in a blender, on a barbecue and smashed with a hammer on YouTube, not to mention vilification websites such as the Anti-Barbie League. The sheer volume of these sites emphasises the need to push Barbie away, even to eliminate or annihilate her; this also references academic work on Barbie destruction (Griffin et al. 2008).

Yet at the same time the visual diary is also full of contradictory images of Barbie revered and emulated, with the world wide celebrations of her 50th birthday, Michelle Phan’s YouTube makeup tutorial video (2011) on how to become Barbie with its 15 million hits and girls’ own websites proudly displaying the fashion creations they have made for their dolls. There are multiple sites suggesting that girls no longer aspire to have a Barbie, as I did; instead they literally and publicly try to be her, following highly stylised and eroticised pedagogical routines for becoming an icon, ultimately adopting her name – Barbie – as a slippery signifier for different generations of feminists.

I twist and turn in all these words and images, high/low, trash/precious. A friend suggests Barbie is just not interesting any more, but the frenzy of online activity negates this, as do Barbie’s sales figures. A former teacher colleague reads some of my research notes and sends a lively description of what she would like to do with Barbie in the classroom. I find myself returning to two diary images that provoke meaning through their juxtaposition: a snip from the Barbie website that caused so much hilarity and embarrassment when I asked the IT staff to look at it, and a snip from the university website that provides an official portal to their place of employment. These snips are almost identical; Barbie as girl icon and Barbie as girl university student.

How does what is reviled become what is aspirational? All that has changed is the palette and the context: our adult desire to stare at a beautiful young (artificially) blonde woman, centred and salient, is made acceptable by a shift to the tool box primary colours of blue green and
red. She becomes a shining example of academic success offered up for our gaze, yet at the same time, she is Barbie, the embodiment of McRobbie’s hyperfeminised top girl (2009) who will never be a threat because you can take the pink out of the palette, but you can’t take the Barbie out of the girl. What does it mean that we inculcate girls in a culture that is reviled, then require them to reject it to grow up, but still partly embody it? Their worth comes from us continuing to seek it out in them even as we perform disgust.

How does this tortuous pedagogy impact on our curriculum design? At Haslemere College I set out to design a unit on Barbie only to find it is a struggle to get Barbie into the classroom at all. What I had anticipated would be fun, engaging and appealing to both teachers and students proves to be otherwise, as we perform both disavowal and delight in our representations of Barbie as text.

Rachel positions Barbie firmly ‘outside’, saying:

The faces freak me out a bit, bit like she’s on Botox or had a facelift, it’s really just kind of... yes, bit scary, isn’t it, so I was a tomboy, I was already too old for Barbies by the time I was three. I had four boys so Barbie has not managed to cross my threshold and I probably wouldn’t buy one for a girl even if I did, because they’re a bit unrealistic. The Bratz are even scarier.

Ironically, this quality is what appeals to Michelle Phan and her fans. ‘Creepy… I know…’ she writes across the screen, paired with her smile of satisfaction at her transformation. It is not clear why this creepiness should preclude Barbie from study, rather than make her more interesting as a cultural phenomenon, suggesting the more parental or feminist discourses of protection or correctness that may inform text selection.
Yet there is more at work here, too, with members of the group using metaphors that invoke
the abject, as several teachers envisage that boys will verbally ‘heap scorn’ or ‘pour scorn’ on
girls if Barbie is the subject of study. Barbie is not just creepy (referencing the cadaver), she
gives rise to oral disgust, Kristeva’s ‘most archaic form of abjection’ (1982, 2) with its
metaphors of vomit, trash and expulsion. The reaction to Barbie is extreme; this is no shrug
of the shoulders, but an embracing of boys’ predicted need to push Barbie even further away
than we do. It is not limited to the boys, either. In a rare prediction of girls’ reactions to the
Barbie.com artwork, Anne says, ‘There’s a subset of girls who’d be repulsed by that pink
swirl.’ ‘Repulsed’ suggests utter rejection and even convulsion, beyond dislike or boredom.

Boys not girls

It seems the bulk of our conversation is actually around boys: representing boys, storying
boys, naming boys, meeting boys’ needs. Boys’ words are quoted, while girls are not quoted
at all. Girls are described in terms of dress and demeanour, when at all, or in the context of
more disavowed culture, such as the Twilight franchise, referred to with a verbal shudder and
cringe to emphasise its awfulness. ‘Have you seen the Twilight thing? It’s shocking. I only
looked at it because the girls are reading it in my class,’ says Rachel. Disavowal again:
looking, but not looking. The absence of girls in the content of our conversation re designing
curriculum around girls’ texts, in the representative work we do in imagining past or future
classroom practice emerges as hugely significant. I check this impression with some quick
content analysis. In just the first meeting, we refer to male students 22 times and female
students only six.

Do we perform the discourse of the ‘boy turn’ (Weaver-Hightower 2003) in education,
although we attempt to hide it in our rationale? As Elinor says, referring to Barbie’s global
revenue:
It doesn’t matter that it’s Barbie. It’s not that we’re choosing it because the girls are familiar with it. We’re not choosing it for any other reason than let’s look at something that really, really works.

Why not look at something with which girls are familiar? I don’t think this at the time, but only later, on reflection. Similarly, Elinor writes in a later email:

I did wonder if it was a little skewed to the girls, but then I asked myself how often we skew things to the boys and drag girls along for the ride.

In this collegial space for discussion and design, there is room for debate and reconsideration; cracks appear in our disavowal, in our insistence on catering for boys, and in our performative shoring up of middle class feminist-informed tastes requiring the rejection of trashy Barbie. There are no clear positions, we all twist and turn and struggle, with each other and with finding a rhetorical place from which to argue.

The unit is written up and does not look like a unit on Barbie at all. I dither over the image chosen for a long time, in the process of writing up the unit. It felt like I was relinquishing a profoundly held desire to make a unit around girls’ texts, by choosing a picture that would appeal to boys, by selecting, as advised by the teachers, a masculine ‘frame’, a photograph of a gender neutral hand on a furry (rather than computer) mouse. The unit is titled, safely, ‘Play On’.

But Barbie is included, and even comes first, before the Transformers. This is something I feel I get away with, in the design process. Barbie, however, must be justified and legitimised by Mattel data, by the economic imperative to study the most popular toy in the world. The teachers insist on this, and we return to this sequencing of material several times – they also insist that we should start with it – gaining the attention of the boys is seen as paramount. In
our final meeting, at the teachers’ request, I teach part of the unit to them, and they do some of the activities, including mocking up a play website home page that is to be inclusive for boys and girls: the rough version is shown in Figure. 1.

![Figure 1. Teachers’ drawing of an inclusive play space.](image)

It is only much later that I revisit this design, and look to critique it too. What is meant to be universal might be read as masculine; the whole activity might be read as a further disavowal of girl culture. The stick figures are not nobodies, but clearly masculine signs. The colours chosen (green, brown and grey), while meant to represent nature are again those of the semiotics toolbox image (hammers and saws) shown in one of my seminars, and also those of the Transformers website in the unit and the school website. In our enthusiasm for challenging consumer culture by creating a non-branded site, and lamenting lost outdoor
childhoods, we lose sight of the desired gender discourses, or rather, continue to perform what is ‘natural’ to us: the exclusion of girls.

Loving and Loathing the Fairy

In attempting parts of the unit, the teachers also draw the girl, the ‘fairy’ as they call her, the Barbie site is addressing (Figure. 2).

Figure 2. Teachers’ drawing of the ‘Barbie girl’.

As they draw, they chat:

Anne: I have a very clear idea of what this child looks like.

Zoe: I can see her too.

Anne: She might have her little ballet slippers on and she’s sort of [gestures daintily]
Zoe: It’s my goddaughter. It’s her. Ever since she could walk she’s been trying to get into my shoes and carry my handbag. Some of these kids are just born like this.

Yet later, when they draw their play site, there is no discussion of where this girl might feel at home, or the contrast between the two drawings. At home, I hunt through old photographs and find a picture of myself aged around six (Figure. 3). I am struck by the similarity, by a sense of the countless repetitions via both embodied practices and in representations, over time, of exaggerated gender.

Figure 3. In my fairy costume, 1972.

Months later, I am browsing through our photographs on the computer, and stumble upon another similar picture (Figure. 4), of my daughter aged five, on a kitchen chair.
Many more weeks later again, I flick back through Walkerdine’s *Schoolgirl Fictions* (1990) and come across her aged three, dressed as the Bluebell Fairy (Plate 1). This is a timely intersection of theory, empirical research and lived experience. These photographs seem to emphasise ‘the imitative structure of gender itself’ (Butler 2007, 187) and the pedagogies of ‘dressing up’ that seek to reinscribe it, across time and space, in family life and curriculum work. Walkerdine sees the fairy as an archetypal fantasy, and the raised wand as a phallus, a symbol of power. It seems these fairies do hail us, with their raised hands, as if about to perform some action that their daintiness belies. Femininity confined to a costume, but with the potential to wreak havoc; this is the girl who, in our discussions, we speak of both fondly, and with frustration.

Girly play involves pleasures girls must put aside, must disavow, to grow up. Trying to gauge the age of the girl the Barbie website addresses, the teachers say:

*Rachel: I think you’ve already lost Barbie by that stage.*
Elinor: Do you think?

Jess: Or you’ve lost this particular Barbie. You’ve lost Princess Barbie.

The repetition of the word ‘lost’ highlights its salience; this is a transition experienced and named as a loss, and gives rise to Jess’ wistful tone as she laments not purchasing a replica of her favourite childhood Barbie. Yet we also hint at how this gendered masquerade has returned in the neoliberal imaginary, with young women required to return to ultra-femininity to diminish their threat (McRobbie 2007). Rachel, however, admiringly describes female students resisting this hyperfeminised girl, and wearing suits to go out instead of dressing up. There are myriad addresses telling us how to be, and especially how to be girls and women, forms of ‘reiterated convention’ (Butler 1997, p. 32) that we negotiate in shaping Barbie for the classroom.

Further Disavowal

Meanwhile, in my research journal, I write about taking my children to school, about walking past boys snarling contemptuously at each other, ‘You girl. You’re a girl. You throw like a girl.’ Girl as hate speech. I write about press fascination with and condemnation of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s breasts, thighs and vagina, her ‘big red box’, all of which feature, thinly disguised as dishes, on a menu for an official Liberal Party political fundraiser. I watch Puberty Blues, a television show resurrected from my 80s adolescence, so we can gawk at its adolescent gang rape victim, ‘the slag’, spat on and reviled, in those bad old days. I see Australia’s Biggest Losers – overweight participants in reality television – told to ‘man up or go down Pussy Street.’ Online, I watch the Barbie doll corpses dangle in Kayne West videos. In my academic reading I meet Pollyanna as the epitome of research naiveté and foolishness (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007, 50). These observations, of virgins and
whores, recorded in cut and pasted images and in words, layer up a picture of larger cultural disavowal of girls and women.

One of the teachers tells me about the students’ desire to celebrate Movember (the annual global party around men’s health), but not International Women’s Day. She uses the word ‘cringe’ to describe their response to it: a physical, whole body spasm of revulsion. In the staffroom, teachers wish to tell me about a former student, Kate Tindall, who was victimised for her feminist activism.

What of the rejection of the pleasures allowed women by culture? Gradually, as the meetings become more casual, as we get to know each other as a group of women, the masculine school context, where school is the repudiation of sensuality (Grumet 1988, 141) recedes, and we might be a group of girlfriends chatting. ‘Female’ pleasures do not have to be so denied; they can be countenanced, admitted to and celebrated. This echoes the pattern of my own writing in the research journal, which commences with denial of any personal interest in Barbie and moves to fond reminiscence via memory work. Collecting, play, mimesis through dressing up and role play, shopping, purchasing, clothes, excess, accessories, all are mentioned.

Early on, Jess says of Barbie dolls, to a performance of universal consternation, of class-based disavowal of consumerism:

*That hasn’t been a big thing in our household… more things like, I think it’s a Barbie thing, it’s more sort of like a wardrobe, but it’s interactive, you get a pretend credit card and you swipe and [murmurs of disapproval] change the outfit… I know!*

[acknowledging disapproval]

Elinor says in the second meeting, in relation to having students design an online play space:
It’s a bit sad, really, but you can almost imagine some of those Year 7 girls creating the shopping... [laughter] the shopping space where you can go and relax.

So we distance ourselves from consumption with our laughter. Yet Elinor also says she herself learnt about ‘fashion sense’ from Barbie, acknowledging the doll’s pedagogical function in teaching about appropriate femininity.

Anne laments that the Barbie texts are ‘reeking’ of consumerism, again invoking the abject, and Zoe is horrified that there might actually be an ‘Imelda Marcos’ Barbi commemmorating the famed shoe collector widow of former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos; this figure emerges as a spectral feminine monster of consumerism. Yet we have already revealed through shared stories the pleasures we ourselves find in fashion, in collecting desirable, culturally appropriate consumables. We are working, designing curriculum, from an impossible position, a position of ambivalence, a position both inside and outside consumer culture. ‘We are all targets,’ says Anne – yet this is not prominent in the actual unit. Neither is any sense of celebration of popular culture or pleasures that might be found in exaggerated gender play.

Ambivalence also emerges powerfully in our discussions as we reflect on our own parenting. Barbie is age appropriate ‘safe’ children’s popular culture, yet at the same time dangerously toxic, as we live out the conundrum that we encourage girls to perform a gender spectacle that we know is destined to be despised, inculcate them in what we know will trigger disgust. The stories perform the same kind of zig zagging, see-sawing shifts of social distance that take place in the meetings – we move from socially affirmed denial, with me as the outsider seeking to prove I am not a Barbie fan:

*Researcher:* I wouldn’t have bought Amy a Barbie anything, never, I haven’t, but our house is full of Barbie stuff [gifts] yes [murmurs of assent]
Or disapproval:

Anne: I didn’t really promote Barbie because I didn’t see her as the sort of toy that I was really wanting my kids to embrace.

And socially affirmed feeling:

Jess: I wasn’t a huge Barbie fan except for... Well, there’s one Barbie that really does stand out and that was Barbie and the Rockers [Elinor: You see, you’re younger than us] and I, like, I remember I had the stage, I had Barbie and all the other performers and things and that’s really the only one and I just absolutely loved it and I was in ToysRUs, probably about 12 months ago and all the limited editions had come back out and it was Barbie and the Rockers 1984 and I saw it there and even though I wasn’t really into Barbie, I was sort of, like, I was just [struggles to find words] [emotional] ...emotional [you bought it, didn’t you] I didn’t but I actually regret not purchasing it because it was 50 dollars and it was in the collector’s box and...

Anne: You should have had it.

Jess: I really should have... and I think that if I see it again, I probably will buy it, so although I’m contradicting myself and I wasn’t a... like the girlie Barbie wasn’t really me when I was little, but Barbie and the Rockers and you know, wanting to be a singer and all those things certainly was, yeah...

Yet in the social space of teacher curriculum design, there is room for change. I present the following interaction as an example of curriculum design as a collegial space for the enactment of professional identity:
Rachel: I’m just thinking about my particular class and this faction of boys who feel that they’ve just got to go up against this sort of thing. It’s part of their persona...

Zoe: I know what you mean...

Rachel: They’re struggling with their identity in here, so they’re not comfortable enough to sit there. Their identity is to say, ‘We’re not going to do that!’ so you’d have to work very hard to frame it.

Anne: It will depend on the dynamic.

Rachel: Of course the class next year might be completely different.

Anne: You’re right.

[mmm]

Rachel: I’ve just got a few boys who...

Anne: And sometimes you’ve just got to make that call about... your group.

Elinor: And what they’re ready for. It’s not that they can’t do it; it’s just not yet.

Rachel: I could frame it. I’m very good at convincing people that it’s a good idea, but it would take a lot of work to frame it, to get to the stage that we could do it.

Here are agreement, support, empathy, understanding, recognition of the highly individual and particular nature of any teacher’s work, of teacher autonomy and expertise in his or her own context, awareness of the broader rhythms of teaching, the time frames, the annual
change, of class dynamics, awareness of broader perspectives, including developmental discourses. This is an intergenerational conversation, too, in which the experienced teachers Anne and Elinor hold back and let Rachel speak, acknowledge her concerns, and at the same time support her to consider using the material.

This is not a victory narrative, though: in the next meeting, Rachel still says:

I find that all this... It’s... it’s just... it’s alien. And I’m thinking that one of my boys, if one of them had to do this, then that would be a totally alien thing that they would have no starting point in this.

She is speaking of her sons, illustrating how our own lives and stories might inform curriculum design, of how pedagogy at home might link to pedagogy at school, ironically referencing the curricular frustrations of my own secondary education explored in my research journal, the absence of female characters in set texts, my own lack of a ‘starting point’, which suggests the backstory of generations of girls educated in alien canonical worlds which were entirely naturalised.

Rachel’s hesitations are also supported by the literature, which suggests that based on empirical evidence, attempts to enforce a gender inclusive curriculum can actually lead to the marginalising of gender issues (Gilbert and Taylor 1991) and the disparaging of girls’ texts (Spender 1989) despite the teacher’s best intentions, as well as loss of control in the classroom. Even when we are trying to embrace these texts, we may be denigrating them, especially if we have trouble finding a comfortable discursive space in which to explore them.

Conclusion
This paper begins to suggest the challenges that have faced generations of teachers in acting on Spender’s imperative to make girls visible in the classroom. We come to curriculum design around Barbie with needs to both push this ‘text’ away and to hold it close, mired in the contradictions of other discourses. As the hundreds of images in my visual diary illustrate, Barbie images are prolific in culture, yet at Haslemere, Barbie cannot be the sole focus for study. We have Jess’s precious ‘big, beautiful princess Barbie’ that she has bought for her daughter, Barbie tangled, naked and contorted at the bottom of my daughter’s toy basket, Barbie human copies exquisitely groomed in online tutorials, Barbie chopped to bits in blenders on YouTube, Barbie the source of delight and even learning, around ‘fashion sense’, creepy Barbie, and even Presidential Candidate Barbie. Simultaneously, Julia Gillard is the heroine of ‘an incredible tale where Australia chewed up and spat out its first female prime minister’ (Murphy 2013). She is deposed amidst scandal and vitriol.

I write in one note about my daughter’s consumption of Barbie branded goods:

*There is only so much sugar you can take until your teeth start to ache.*

Oral imagery again. I am sickened by girl culture, just as Australia was sickened by Julia Gillard, by a woman in power, and regurgitated her.

I have sought to illustrate here how curriculum design is performed in the context of both disavowal of girls’ culture, and, ultimately, of misogyny, and of competing personal and authoritative discourses around these phenomena. Yet the unit of work is the place where these are least evident, highlighting the documents produced by curriculum design as masquerades, official versions that plaster over disagreement and, here, disgust, with a smooth and coherent narrative, a drive for textual integrity that glides over fury and frustration, a temporary ‘happily ever after’ that reinforces a gender binary.
If you scratch the surface of any unit of work, it is likely a similarly complex struggle lies beneath. Currently there is little time or impetus to explore these struggles in day to day teacher work. Yet this paper suggests how silences in our curricular documents, how the things we disavow perhaps should be the focus of contemplative study, in which we interrogate the textual prompts that we proffer, and that others do as well, and to think about our rationales for performing them over and over again, both in design settings and in the classroom. Particularly, we might consider the status of girls’ cultural texts in our courses, and revisit rationales for including or excluding them, and make explicit our positions on feminisms in relation to their selection, and to associated pedagogies. Perhaps it is this kind of work that might assist us in moving forward, and addressing Spender’s concerns about the intractability of male-dominated curriculum. I hope this paper will encourage others to re-read Spender and participate in a dialogue that takes stock of how far we have come, and also to adapt the methodology described here to further complicate our understandings of curriculum design.

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