Research article

“This is a different kingdom”: A case study of gender-creative feminine expression during princess play

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ABSTRACT

Many children, but predominantly young girls, gravitate towards princess play. In response to previous academic findings suggesting that princess play is always detrimental to young children's developing perspectives of femininity, this qualitative study explores the potential for gender-creativity during this roleplaying game. In an effort to refute the pre-existing literature, the current case study asks the following question: To what extent does princess play offer creative or confining possibilities for childhood feminine expression? While much of the literature in early childhood education (ECE) indicates that Disney is the sole inspiration for every child's construction of this imagination game, the findings in this article indicate that Disney is one influence among many for focal participants. Using open coding to analyze data generated during play-based interviews with two cisgender girls, this article demonstrates that the creative possibilities of princess play remain underrepresented in research. Although princess play offers only partial potential for non-stereotypical feminine expression, gender normativity can be actively challenged, especially when adults support and encourage unconventional formats of princess play during early childhood.

1. Introduction: princess play and early childhood

In Western societies like Canada and the United States, princess play is a popular imagination game during early childhood (Blake, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009). While princesses are beloved, enchanting fairytale figures to many children (Lee, 2015), there remains discursive ambiguity over what or who ‘a princess’ actually represents. Is a princess just a monarch—the daughter of a king or patriarch—or is a princess a beautiful role model, a person with power over others, or some other sort of heroic figure for young children? Despite the lack of definitive boundaries around the princess role, princess play is often socioculturally understood within narrow parameters, as a form of pretend play singularly suitable for young girls (Madrid and Kantor, 2009). For this reason, the majority of the available research on princess play is obsessed with chronicling the restrictiveness of this game, especially when it comes to girls' developing perspectives on gender roles and femininity (e.g., Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011; Golden and Jacoby, 2018). Yet childhood play is as diverse as childhood gender expression, a nuance that is problematically absent from the pre-existing literature on princess play. This article represents some of that nuance, arguing that princess play can actively support gender-creative feminine expression during early childhood (birth to age nine), even amidst the navigation of stereotypical gender roles informed by Disney Princess media.

According to Golden and Jacoby (2018), “princess play confines girls to preset and gendered narratives in their play” (p. 309). While this conclusion may be true for stereotypical reenactments of this roleplaying game, scholars who are quick to dismiss princess play as productive in any capacity end up misrepresenting this game as one-dimensional (Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011). Even among young girls, this reductive assessment of princess play erases the potential for creative, autonomous decision making on the part of children who play it on their own, with their peers, or—in the case of Elsa-Anna and Broolala (the self-selected pseudonyms of the current study’s focal children)—with the author, in this case. Although this game undeniably tends towards the taken-for-granted reproduction of traditional gender roles, the one-sided emphasis on the harm caused by princess play within the pre-existing literature discounts the possibility that children can and do express themselves in gender-creative ways. Even the two child participants in the current case study prove that previous claims about how all children play ‘princess’ are overgeneralized and oversimplified.

Through a play-based research design that offered two young girls the opportunity to ‘play princess’, the potential for princess play to challenge
stereotypical gender roles is shown to be both child-specific and adult-supported in the current case study. Complicating the unidimensional conclusions presented in most of the literature on princess play, this case study offers a methodological solution to the clinical history of child developmental research on play, acknowledging the ever-present challenge of researcher bias. The significant moments of non-stereotypical princess play presented in this paper reveal how robust results can be produced during play-based research conducted in settings familiar to and comfortable for child participants like Elsa-Anna and Broolala (see Tables 1 and 2). Thus, this case study explores the legitimacy of the idea that princess play is somehow always harmful to young children, and especially girls (Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011; Golden and Jacoby, 2018). By challenging paradigms of data collection within early childhood education (ECE), the current study asks this guiding question: To what extent does princess play offer creative or confining possibilities for childhood feminine expression?

Throughout the sections of this paper, childhood feminine expression, as a concept, is shown to be malleable for child participants. First, a summary of the pre-existing literature on princess play is provided, situating the current case study within the larger academic landscape of early childhood and gender studies. Next, descriptions of the focal children and the author are provided in order for the relationship and play-based interactions between Elsa-Anna, Broolala, and the author to be contextualized. Then, the play-based methods characterizing this study are outlined and accompanied by brief vignettes of all the interviews. To analyze the audio and artifacts that emerged from these interviews, an open coding approach was used; the thematic findings stemming from this analytical process will be discussed. The implications of this case study's findings for the field of ECE as well as childhood engagement in princess play are explained primarily through Elsa-Anna and Broolala's decision making during non-Disney gender-neutral versions of this imagination game. Overall, this paper argues that princess play offers gender-creative potential for feminine expression in early childhood even as it is informed by overarching systems of gender inequity—often exacerbated by Disney Princess media (Wohlwend, 2009)—that children navigate in both make-believe and real-life situations.

2. Literature review: the gendering of children's play

Research spotlighting children's perspectives on the centrality of gender during pretend play reveals important information about socialization processes during early childhood (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Hine et al., 2018). Princess play is a popular and highly gendered form of early childhood pretend play (Blaise, 2005; Cechin, 2005; Kalkman and Clark, 2017; Lee, 2015; Madrid and Kantor, 2009; Wohlwend, 2009). In addition to chronicling young girls' engagement in princess play, Wohlwend (2011) research looks at the ways that young boys' participation in this form of pretend play can be restricted by Western gender norms associated with the gender binary. Because princesses are often considered cultural icons of extreme femininity (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Hine et al., 2018), there is little social space given for children who are not girls to play this game in early learning environments (Golden and Jacoby, 2018; Wohlwend, 2011, 2012). This gender policing happens because “[b]oys playing princesses represents a transgressive blurring of expected gender roles that can evoke vehement opposition from peers” (Wohlwend, 2011, p. 9). Social validation of gender diversity, including active recognition of the worth of feminine expression, is important for all children's developing self-concepts in early childhood (Coyne et al., 2016; Earles, 2017; Fast and Olson, 2018; Golden and Jacoby, 2018). Exclusory princess play reifies gender stereotypes around “the ‘correct’ ways to be masculine and feminine” (Madrid and Kantor, 2009, p. 230), such as which children are encouraged or discouraged to wear dresses. The tendency for princess play to be exclusionary towards gender diversity is its most harmful attribute.

Yet research into how young girls manoeuvre within princess play's gendered parameters is still necessary to understanding broader attitudes towards early childhood feminine expression. What possibilities for gender-creative princess play exist when expectations attached to early childhood femininity are resisted as the game unfolds? Golden and Jacoby (2018) research suggests a penchant for princess play to be primarily concerned with dress-up in Disney Princess costumes: “Some girls could not even consider what else they did when they pretended to be a princess, other than wear a dress” (Golden and Jacoby, 2018, p. 207). Certainly, pretend princess play defined solely through young girls' adornment in Disney Princess costumes is confining in terms of feminine expression. On this point, I agree with scholars who document the gender-specific limitations of this imagination game (Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011; Golden and Jacoby, 2018). However, the assumption that dressing up in Disney Princess costumes is what princess play means and looks like for children of all ages, gender identities and cultural backgrounds is too simplistic. This homogenous assessment is reductive of children's choices and creativity during imaginative play. Thus, the current case study is concerned with the navigation of feminine gender norms by two young girls during princess play, asking whether their play, too, is as inevitably stereotypical as previous academic findings predict it to be.

2.1 Pre-existing research on princess play: problems, paradigms, and possibilities

Golden and Jacoby (2018) define princess play as, ‘any time a girl played with a princess costume or verbalized that she was playing princess, as when girls announced that they were specific princesses’ (p. 304). Also taking place in a preschool classroom, Madrid and Kantor (2009) eight-month ethnography pins the gendered nature of princess play this way: childhood feminine expression?...
play to a preoccupation child participants had with “the overarching issue of being female” (p. 239). However, princess play gets reconstituted through the prerequisite of girlhood in both these definitions. The play dynamics that these adult researchers observe as ‘characteristic’ of princess play is therefore limited by the exact definitions being imposed on children’s play. This bias inadvertently accomplishes a further perpetuation of early childhood gender expectations via neglectfulness and a lack of imagination for other pretend play forms and possibilities.

What does princess play look like when children and adults think outside of Golden and Jacoby (2018) costume box? As Adriany (2019) research with Indonesian kindergarteners shows, the role of ‘princess’ and all its trappings often carries with it “the messiness of power” and “multiple meanings” (p. 737). This important finding speaks to the myriad meanings associated with the role and symbolism of ‘a princess’ for children in non-Western contexts too (Adriany, 2019).

While preschool girls are indeed “the target market for Disney Princess multimedia and an accompanying line of licensed toys, collectibles, apparel, and household goods featuring the film characters” (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 57), children of all genders have agency over the choices they make with regard to reproducing or challenging gender expectations during play. Research shows that Disney has a massive influence on early childhood princess play, mainly due to its corporate pervasiveness in Western culture; children seem to internalize messages about gender via representation within the Disney Princess films especially (Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018; Streiff and Dundes, 2017).

However, assuming that all princess play is doomed to reproduce Disney tropes is dangerously simplistic. Scholarly analyses that arrive at this conclusion effectively undermine the myriad ways in which children display gender-creativity during princess play. In fact, Wohlwend (2009) contends that even when children are “avid Disney Princess fans … they are not passive consumers” (p. 78). Children of all genders make agentic choices about their conformity to gender norms during princess play, even amidst the over-saturation of Disney-specific ideologies and materials that bombard them at home and in early learning spaces. For this reason, Golden and Jacoby (2018) conclusion that Disney is harmful to young children’s developing understandings of femininity when Disney-related materials were directly incorporated into the study’s design is problematic. Early childhood princess play is much more nuanced, especially when gender-neutral materials are incorporated into play.

In a study meant to uncover the relationship between children’s exposure to Disney and the tendency for American children, especially little girls, to “rehearse gender stereotypes” (p. 1910), Coyne et al. (2016) use gender-neutral toys during data collection. This gender-neutral approach sounds promising, but the authors actually fail to report on child participants’ interactions with these items. Inquiring into Disney Princesses specifically, this study incorporates data from 198 parental reports on children’s media exposure; observations of children’s toy preference tasks; and teacher reports on children’s classroom behaviours.

Children’s perspectives were singularly sought during the toy selection activity, when participants were given “a number of toys and … asked to sort them into boxes of which they like to play with ‘a lot, ‘a little, or ‘not at all, ‘” (Coyne et al., 2016, p. 1915). Unfortunately, this activity does not reveal much about children’s play-based interactions nor their potential interest in manoeuvring beyond what the adults consider to be confining gender expectations. As well, neglecting to report on children’s gender-neutral toy preferences as potentially correlated to their Disney media exposure is a significant limitation of this study. While the researchers conclude that Disney is preferred by little girls, and that this preference is proportionately related to the reproduction of gender stereotypical behaviour by these same children, child participants’ voices are obscured within the research design (Coyne et al., 2016). This study’s results would have been more compelling had the researchers “actively defer[red] to children’s choices” (Colliver, 2017, p. 856). When adults avoid imposing their own expectations onto children’s play choices, children are better supported in their decision-making both during research and within ECE settings.

While children’s agency to mobilize gendered discourses during play cannot be ignored, the role of adults in affirming gender diversity—by redirecting children’s play choices away from the gender binary—cannot be understated either. Chapman (2016) advocates for the importance of adult intervention in “help[ing] children to deconstruct their gender binaries” (p. 1273) by offering non-gendered play materials, when possible, and getting involved in children’s play instead of merely observing. Meanwhile, Prioletta (2018) description of care-based ethics in early childhood demonstrates that nurturing behaviours are valuable and necessary for more than just girls, thereby “challeng[ing] the gender binary upon which gender inequalities rely” (p. 92). Rather than dress-up, Wohlwend (2012) study made use of classroom toys and asked children to create drawings. Aligned with Chapman (2016), Prioletta (2018), and Wohlwend (2009; 2011; 2012) research, the current case study therefore complicates the majority of the pre-existing literature on princess play by responding to generalized assertions that, when this game is Disney-infused, it is automatically harmful to all young children, especially girls.

3. Method

3.1. Elsa-Anna and Broolala: the child participants

This study’s design was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Because this research project was a graduate-level course requirement, recruitment was based on a convenience sample. This recruitment approach—when attention to bias and power dynamics is foregrounded—can illuminate participant perspectives in a way that random sampling cannot achieve. Convenience sampling in this study included two young cisgender girls, the youngest of whom self-selected the pseudonym “Elsa-Anna Buratino” when endorsing to participate, following her mother’s demand for parental consent. (It is likely this ‘secret name’ was chosen by the child in order to demonstrate loyalty and allegiance to her favourite Disney Princesses. However, the author methodologically avoided questioning Elsa-Anna’s pseudonym choice in an attempt to honour the child’s agency). Elsa-Anna’s mother informed the author that Buratino, a wooden boy similar to Pinocchio, is a popular Russian literary character. While Buratino in Tolstoy’s (1936/2007) The Golden Key is a fantastical character comparable to Elsa from Disney’s Frozen, the genders of these two inspirations are distinct. Elsa-Anna’s pseudonym choice is therefore the first indication that princess play, for her, is gender-creative.

At the time of the study, Elsa-Anna was 5 years-old. Born in Canada, she is bilingual, speaking both English and Russian with her parents, great/grandparents and older sister, Broolala (also a self-selected pseudonym). From her first exposure to Disney’s Frozen, Elsa-Anna experienced a strong admiration for both of the film’s princess protagonists. This interest included collecting and receiving as gifts various figurines, dolls, art supplies, toothbrushes, blankets, puzzles and books related to Frozen, as well as frequently wearing costume versions of Elsa and Anna’s dresses inside and outside of the family house. Although the enthusiasm over both Frozen and Frozen 2 is mostly independent from Broolala’s interest and possession of princess paraphernalia, Elsa-Anna inherited general exposure to Disney Princesses from her old sister, including a toy chest, notebooks and colouring books that featured the full company of princesses. In kindergarten, Elsa-Anna was aware of but impartial towards other Disney Princesses, like Snow White, Mulan, and Sleeping Beauty; only The Little Mermaid seemed to moderate her otherwise sole preference for all things Frozen. When her family visited Disneyland the same year as the study, Elsa-Anna was excited to show the author photos with her favourite princesses in-person. She also spent one day in Disneyland, in California, when she was two.

However, 11-year-old Broolala’s interest in Frozen was comparatively short lived compared to Elsa-Anna’s. Also bilingual and born in Canada, Broolala’s self-proclaimed favourite Disney Princess has always been Cinderella. According to her family, she also experienced a brief but
invested fascination with Frozen when the film was first released. However, Disney films have never been of sustained interest to Broolala, making her media consumption patterns unique from her sister’s (it is not Broolala’s inclination to watch shows or movies on repeat). Before her sister was born, Broolala went to Disneyland twice with her parents when she was both 4 and 5 years old. She went back again when she was 7, with her whole family. Around this age, she sometimes liked to show the author photos of her posing with the various princess characters while on this trip. Along with Elsa-Anna, Broolala visited Disneyworld, in Florida, the same year as this study took place. The author never saw Broolala dress up as any kind of princess at all despite having access to an assortment of Disney Princess crowns in a costume bin at home. Parental consent and child assent was given for Broolala’s involvement in the study; she participated in two out of the three play-based interviews featured in this case study.

Although this study was primarily concerned with Elsa-Anna’s thoughts about and experiences of princess play, Broolala’s input during two of the interviews enriched the findings. At an age beyond the spectrum of early childhood, she offered a critical, questioning voice to the play-based choices that Elsa-Anna and the author made. During the recorded assent discussion prior to the interviews taking place, Broolala reflected on the recurring symbolism attached to princess play, including crowns and dresses. Her comment below reveals that princess play is enjoyable to “little children” because of the costumed elements associated with the game, consistent with previous research (e.g., Golden and Jacoby, 2018), and that the exceptionalized status of princess play is a key part of what makes the game appealing:

It’s fun, well, I think it’s fun for like, little children … it’s because they get to feel like they are royalty and they’re in charge of everything … And then they get to wear like, a pretty dress and crowns, and they, they like that.

That princess play is a game for “little children” and not children of the same age as Broolala also reinforces the significance of examining its influence during early childhood.

3.2. Researcher as third participant: addressing bias

The author is a graduate student in her late twenties. She is an English-speaking white woman who was born and raised in Canada and identifies with the LGBTQ2S+ community. She grew up watching most of the Disney anthology (especially the princess films) on VHS. For almost a decade, the author has worked as a nanny in private households in Western Canadian provinces. She has been to Disneyworld once, Disneyland twice, and is well versed in Disney Princess lore, having been born during Disney’s resurgence of princess movies (between 1989-1998). All 5 Disney Princess films released in this decade were viewed to the point of memorization during her early childhood. Having noticed a similar fascination among many young girls, the author initiated this case study investigation with Elsa-Anna and Broolala, relying on a convenience sample.

Having provided childcare to Elsa-Anna and Broolala for four years, on a weekly basis with varying hours, prior to conducting this study, the author remained cognizant during data collection and analysis of mitigating bias in a few key methodological ways. First, the author was careful not to bring information from outside the study into the analysis: Only the recorded conversations and artifacts made during interviews were used to draw conclusions about princess play. In other words, nothing discussed outside of the allotted research time was included in the findings presented here. Secondly, even in qualitative research where researchers are not previously acquainted with participants, “the researcher’s status as both an outsider and insider is constantly shifting as relationships are continually negotiated during fieldwork” (McCorkel and Myers, 2003, p. 204). As a caregiver, the author’s knowledge of Elsa-Anna and Broolala positioned her as an insider; as an adult researcher, she was no longer a part of the culture of childhood.

Third: The structure of the interviews created boundaries that made princess play look and feel quite different during the research process than during the author’s regular caregiving shifts. As well, the author strived for reflexivity through a process that resembled field notes before and after each interview. Because children occupy a marginalized position in Western society (Punch, 2002; Tangen, 2008), reflexivity during play-based research “requires … an awareness of ones’ own values and interests, as well as being open to the ideas and perspectives of children” (Crump and Phipps, 2013, p. 143), in an effort to maintain mindfulness towards any potential biases that might alter the goals of the child-led research.

3.3. Data collection: play-based interviews as a child-centred approach

Parental consent was obtained prior to data collection. All of the play-based interviews with Elsa-Anna and Broolala began with the children’s assent. Then, Elsa-Anna pushed the red button on the audio-recorder and the game proceeded from her choice of two options: Either dress-up, or a non-Disney gender-neutral princess play alternative. Methods were play-based and “child-focused” (Rogers and Evans, 2008, p. 42), ensuring that the interview process was as reciprocal as possible for the child participants and author. Play-based research is effective in terms of data collection because it situates children as “active participants in the research process” (Curtin, 2001, p. 295). According to Crump and Phipps (2013), “providing spaces for children to play is a critical part of creating conditions in which children can share their voices and their stories” (p. 139). Elsa-Anna and Broolala were directly involved in the production of knowledge by participating in these princess play-based interviews. The methodological design in the current study aimed to empower these children to share their perspectives as they played, avoiding a stifling or overly formalized interview process—as early childhood research has a historical tendency to do (with warped results). The children’s assent was obtained before each interview; Broolala participated in the first and second interviews only.

The play-based interviews took place once per week, during one month of the author’s regular scheduled shifts, culminating in 2 h of recorded audio data, as well as photographs of the three-dimensional artifacts created by the participants using the research supplies (with their permission). Each interview was between 20 and 40 min, depending on the day, so as not to over-tax child participants. The structure of each interview followed the arc of the children’s collaborative narrative construction during play. Interviews were recorded on the author’s iPhone using the Voice Memos app. Reflective notes were taken before and after each of the author’s caregiving shift in an effort to remain aware of bias and stay consistent in the child-centred goals of the study. Before recording each session, the child participants provided assent specific to that day’s interview and were given the option between two modes of princess play. Child participants could choose between either the dress-up version of this game—so well documented in the pre-existing literature and often described as the only shape this imagination game can take—and alternative formats not reliant on Disney merchandising. These alternatives were intentionally selected by the author ahead of time and were non-Disney and gender-neutral, in order to test the limits of what child participants understood as princess play. Supplies for this project included 14 cans of Play-Doh in rainbow colours; a pad of Crayola construction paper with 10 different colours; and a package of 12 Frang markers. The author provided gemstones and dragon stickers as optional materials for the second interview. For the final interview, four sheets of Canson Bristol paper were cut into the shape of crowns beforehand. Stickers of various creatures and themes (including planets, underwater animals, ladybugs, dinosaurs, unicorns and anthropomorphized weather characters) were supplied. Elsa-Anna contributed stickers from her personal collection for this activity; she generously shared the watercolour paints, Crayola markers and ribbon used for these crowns too. It was the
children’s idea to incorporate their own Play-Doh tools and molds into the first interview. Child participants kept the artifacts and remaining play supplies as a form of child-friendly renumeration.

3.4. Data analysis: constant comparative analysis

Three interviews were shared and analyzed in this article; a fourth interview was excluded from analysis due to the author’s caregiving duties being necessarily prioritized more heavily that evening than her researcher’s gaze. Following data collection, the author’s analytic process involved listening multiple times to each of the audio recordings. According to Tracy (2020), this process of familiarizing oneself with data is called “the data immersion phase” (p. 213). This strategy was applied in this study in order to identify which conversational snippets responded directly to the guiding research question: To what extent does princess play offer creative or confining possibilities for childhood feminine expression? All moments where child participants or the author explicitly discussed princesses during interviews—either by referencing a Disney character or describing non-stereotypical forms of princessing—were isolated from the collection of audio-recordings in preparation for verbatim transcription. Through this process, at least two transcribed excerpts were pinpointed per play-based interview, generating a total of 21 excerpts of dialogue between Elsa-Anna, Broolala, and the author to be coded. Mirroring the time spent strictly listening to the audio versions of the data, the author repeatedly read these mini-transcripts until broad themes began to emerge. This process is sometimes referred to as constant comparative analysis (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2008) due to noticeable consistencies across transcribed data. In other words, a theme that emerged in one transcript but was not present in at least one other transcript, by comparison, did not end up being used for further analysis; transcripts were constantly compared in order to verify consistent thematic overlap. Example codes emerging from this process included “Disney”, “princess”, and “femininity”.

The axial coding process involved a deeper dive into these three categories, with similar codes grouped under more specific labels. For instance, phrases previously labelled “Disney” became either “Disney reproduction” or “Disney resistance”; “princess” became “stereotypical princess” or “non-stereotypical princess”; and “femininity” became “creative feminine expression” or “confining feminine expression”. In keeping with the playful approach used during data collection, data analysis was completed manually and each axial category was colour coded for ease of comparison between transcripts.

4. Results

In constant comparative analysis, the final stage of analysis is often referred to as selective coding—conclusions about the data finally materialize in the form of a theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2008). In the current study, this final stage of the analytical process revealed three overlapping themes around Elsa-Anna, Broolala, and the author’s princess play. First, the establishment of a hierarchical play frame (Griswold, 2007) surfaced as a necessary part of the analytical process revealed three overlapping themes around Elsa-Anna, Onwuegbuzie, 2008). In the current study, this materialize in the form of a theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Leech and

4.1. Interview one: introducing the princess who is also a veterinarian (on Tuesdays)

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either, according to Elsa-Anna. She explained, The threat of dragons crashing our party wasn’t worth worrying over they were born in outer-space and aliens ate them. Anna contested this information, stating, track to be a celebration!

As all three participants carefully crafted party invitations, they discussed the sad event of their imaginary parents’ death. Directly referencing the Disney film from which her sister got her pseudonym (Frozen), Broolala explained, in practical terms, “I can’t shape-shift.” With the true aplomb of a party-planning expert, Elsa-Anna replied, “We will have it outside.” As all three participants carefully crafted party invitations, they discussed the sad event of their imaginary parents’ death. Directly referencing the Disney film from which her sister got her pseudonym (Frozen), Broolala suggested that the parents “died on a ship like Elsa’s parents did”. Elsa-Anna contested this information, stating, “This is a different kingdom.” The threat of dragons crashing our party wasn’t worth worrying over either, according to Elsa-Anna. She explained, “We’re gonna say that they, that they are, that they are, that they are – are dead now because they were born in outer-space and aliens ate them.” The party was on track to be a celebration!

Disney Princess films turned out to be an embedded and unavoidable reference point for determining the hierarchical play frames established during play-based interviews. This over-reliance on Disney during the characterization component of princess play signifies the second main finding of this study, reiterating the red-flagged aspects of the game that previous research has deemed restrictive (Coyne et al., 2016; Golden and Jacoby 2018). The problem with relying on Disney characters as role-playing templates is that Disney Princesses and other characters, like Prince Charming, are largely gender stereotyped (Hine et al., 2018; Streiff and Dundes, 2017). The salience of Disney during princess play in this case study was not just exemplified by Elsa-Anna’s pseudonym choice, but allusions to Disney-specific princesses occurred across all the interviews and were made by both child participants and (unfortunately) the author. During princess play, allusions to Disney most frequently occurred while making decisions about the characters involved in the play frames. Thus, Disney references during princess play are somewhat inevitably tied up in this game due to this corporation’s pervasive media presence, especially in early childhood (Golden and Jacoby, 2018; Hine et al., 2018). Defaulting to Disney occurred even when gender-neutral materials (e.g., Play-Doh, blank crowns, etc) were used in the current study. Yet Elsa-Anna and Broolala’s style of princess play demonstrates that, while Disney certainly influenced the construction of characters during the game, Disney Princess tropes did not wholly restrict opportunities for gender-creative feminine expression either. Child participants also enacted resistance towards and deft manipulation of these pop culture references (as evidenced in the previous Prince Charming example and as well as the following vignette), nonetheless performing an altogether unique version of princess play during each interview.

Crowns certainly symbolize princesshood, but these accessories don’t always have to be dainty or breakable. Elsa-Anna and the author started the last interview with pre-cut blank crowns that were painted with watercolours, tied together with ribbons to fit properly, and decorated with an assortment of stickers (see Figure 3). As the participants painted, they discussed the type of princesses they wanted to be in the imagination game. Princess ‘types’ developed out of this creative process and Elsa-Anna’s directive assigning of magic powers. According to Elsa-Anna, they were each different princesses at night and during the day: “Mmmm … so we don’t go to bed at night – so we change crowns – mmmm … Then it’s pretty cool, what my idea is.” In the end, Elsa-Anna deemed herself the “princess of everything” while bestowing the author with the title of “a princess that makes fire”.

The third major finding from this study is that, during interviews, discussions about the hierarchical relationships between characters always also relied on collaborative narration construction for the trajectory, or improvisation, of the game. Without collaborative narrative construction between children and adults during pretend play, the game stalls. Collaborative narrative construction with children, as a thematic finding, includes dynamics especially related to turn-taking and idea-sharing. Only through this negotiated process could a successful, flowing princess play frame (Griswold, 2007) emerge during interviews with Elsa-Anna and Broolala. From here, the reproduction of and/or resistance towards pre-existing Disney Princess stereotypes and storylines could be explored. For example, because Frozen is Elsa-Anna’s favourite Disney film, this storyline served as a reference point for the narrative thread of the game. Yet the above vignette demonstrates collaborative narrative construction that at once adhered to and challenged the pre-existing Disney storyline the children mobilized. This finding demonstrates
“children’s abilities to distinguish for themselves ways in which the social world is organized and how they take an active part in the construction of gender by making choices” (Blaise, 2005, p. 14), even during princess play.

4.7. Summary of findings: interactive integration of princess play-based ideation

As the above vignettes and transcript excerpts show, pretend characters constituting Elsa-Anna, Broolala and the author’s princess play were often organized hierarchically. Play roles usually needing to be negotiated included the king, the queen, the princesses, the princes, and dragons. This negotiation around characterization—and the extent to which the roleplaying borrowed from Disney Princess films—varied during, yet was a key feature of, the interviews. Because of the impressive cooperation exhibited by the siblings during this study (including turn-taking and a general willingness to share ideas as the game developed) collaborative narrative construction emerged as the third defining feature of princess play with Elsa-Anna and Broolala. Inconsistencies in hierarchical roles and characterization were justified and either validated or contested (as happened with Broolala’s Play-Doh cake) through the children’s collaborative narrative construction. Because of the improvisation involved in princess play, the children’s collaborative narrative construction sometimes challenged the potentially gender-restrictive qualities of the game, especially in terms of the stereotypical characteristics of Disney Princesses (Streiff and Dundes, 2017). Thus, the process of collaborative narrative construction, which includes establishing the game’s hierarchical characterization though idea-sharing and turn-taking, allows for moments of important gender-creativity that manoeuvre around—rather than solely reproduce—Disney Princess tropes. At least for the participants in this study, and even amongst the otherwise confining influence of patriarchal gender hierarchies and Disney-inspired characterization within play-based interviews, gender-creative princess play was not only possible (and fun!), but productive.

5. Discussion and implications

In response to the pre-existing literature condemning princess play, the current case study indicates that—although princess play is indeed informed by the “ubiquity of Disney” (Hine et al., 2018, p. 161, p. 161)—opportunities for gender-creativity exist during this imagination game. Play-based gender role negotiations during princess play are indicative of “children’s ability to construct and expand the meaning of the princess to serve their own purpose” (Adriany, 2019, p. 735). During the first interview, Elsa-Anna decided that “the king” would join “the queen” at the hair salon. O’Donoghue (2012) writes about the ways in which the barber shop is a historically masculine space, with hair salons stereotypically considered feminine in contrast, as per the gender binary. Yet Elsa-Anna’s narrative construction in this interview relied on gender-creative expression in order to affirm, rather than threaten, the king and queen’s authority as equals in this pretend scenario. Furthermore, Elsa-Anna imagined that “the princess” in this family unit worked as a veterinarian on Tuesdays; this character’s femininity was not limited to stereotypical understandings of princesses as helpless or castle-bound. Thus, gender-creative femininity is shown in the current study to propagate much more of Elsa-Anna and Broolala’s pretend play than the pre-existing literature suggests ought to be the case.

This gender-creativity is especially present during princess play when the game is defined through materials that go beyond Disney Princess merchandise and fancy dresses. However, an important finding from this case study is that, even when gender-neutral objects are the source from which princess play unfolds, Disney’s influence over narrative construction and characterization are somewhat inescapable. Even the author was not immune to referencing the Disney Princess franchise during princess play (much to her chagrin!) While Disney allusions anchor princess play within familiar discursive frameworks, actively questioning these references as they crop up can offer small moments of narrative reconsideration. For example, during the second interview, child participants discussed how their pretend parents died as they narrated the game. While Broolala’s initial idea that the queen “got drowned in a fountain” was both absurd and unrelated to Disney, her follow-up suggestion, that the king and queen died “on a ship like Elsa’s parents did”, was directly from Frozen. In response, Elsa-Anna insisted, “This is a different kingdom.” Here, Disney’s influence was circumvented at least once by both Broolala and Elsa-Anna. The children’s collaborative narrative construction in this example reveals princess play to be influenced, rather than solely determined by, Disney discourses. This influence was present but inconsistent for Elsa-Anna, Broolala, and the author during pretend princess play. In response to the pre-existing literature, gender-creative opportunities were possible in negotiation with, and not only confined to, Disney’s omnipresence in the current study.

The final emergent theme in this study emphasizes the importance of collaboration during pretend princess play. Although Broolala opted out of participating in the last of the three interviews, her overall involvement enriched the negotiated process of the pretend play-based narratives in this study. Conflict between the child participants occurred once during interviews, when Broolala did not want to decorate her Play-Doh cake in the way that Elsa-Anna wanted (Figure 2). The game (not the recording) was paused until this disagreement was sorted out in a way that allowed pretend play to move forward. Play, like research, is messy. Since it was Broolala’s cake, she ultimately was the one who decided its decoration, but the compromise, appeasing Elsa-Anna, was that it was the queen’s birthday cake. Allowing space for disagreement means that children learn to view conflict as a form of collaboration, rather than an automatic reason for exclusion. According to Griswold (2007), these negotiations during play occur because “no authoritative criterion, be it age, knowledge, expertise, and so forth, is absolute in its power to organize hierarchical relationships” (p. 312). This reorientation of conflict into collaboration through turn-taking and idea-sharing has important implications for including and inviting boys and gender-nonconforming children into princess play too. Even when ideas during pretend play are not synchronized, children can be prompted to try and include everyone’s ideas, even those that move away from stereotypical gender scripts (Keenan, 2017).

5.1. Adults playing princess: child-centred research methods

This study’s findings carry significance for how adults can complicate highly gendered forms of children’s play by engaging in—rather than just observing—it. For researchers, this paper’s methodology reiterates the
importance of child-led, play-based approaches to data collection, with an acknowledgement of “children’s ability to express their views on diverse matters that influence and affect their lives” (Nicholson et al., 2015, p. 1583). Research in early childhood centreing children’s perspectives has the potential to “illuminate how children interpret and voice their social worlds, which can lend us insights into understandings about children and childhoods often obscured by [adult] assumptions and desires” (Yoon and Templeton, 2019, p. 57). This case study represents the voices of Elsa-Anna and Broolala as they complicate, copy, and confront gender stereotypes during princess play. Yet the way that these two children engage in this game is not representative of anyone else’s play; more research is needed into how children of all ages, genders, and familiarity with Disney play this game too. Current literature makes the claim that princess play is always harmful and always enforces gender conformity during early childhood—this case study shows that two children’s princess play is much more complicated.

Play-based methodologies have much to offer to the field of ECE, as do research projects that explore children’s interests in different settings like the home or the classroom. The gender-neutral materials (all affordable!) discussed in this study can be used at home and in early learning settings to encourage children’s gender-creativity during princess play. Similar to Keenan (2017) call to unscript gender through curriculum, Lyttleton-Smith (2017) offers insights into how the gendered meanings attached to common play objects in ECE classrooms can be intentionally disrupted by practitioners. Documentation (Albin-Clark, 2020; Giamminuti, 2016; Schultz, 2015) like pedagogical narration (Berger, 2015) as a collaborative summation of children’s thoughts, actions, and learning is an established practice in many daycare and early learning centres. Through play-based experiences, adults can support children in coming to know their social roles for and responsibilities towards themselves and others (Cillessen and Bellmore, 2011). Since children who are not girls are typically excluded from princess play, except when they take on the roles of princes or rescuers of princesses (Golden and Jacoby, 2018; Madrid and Kantor, 2009; Wohlwend, 2011), collaboration between children and adults can support gender-creative expression during this game.

The empowerment piece in play-based research arises from viewing children as “active agents experiencing and shaping their own lives” (Hill, 2006, p. 72) through the use of methods aimed to “promote agency, mastery of experiences and inclusion” (Tangen, 2008, p. 165). By using play as a method of data collection (Clark, 2017; Dockett et al., 2011; Punch, 2002), children may feel more willing to express themselves in a manner in which they’re already comfortable, rather than through more formal approaches like structured interviews. In addition to outlining critical and creative alternatives to traditional forms of princess play, this paper’s methodological design describes the ways in which child-centred research can empower young participants to share their perspectives on things in their lives that are important to them, including play experiences. By acknowledging and managing bias as part of qualitative research design, ECE research not only better evokes children’s voices, as the current case study demonstrates, but has the potential to reveal findings that rarely arise from other methodologies.

5.2. Limitations and future directions for research

The claims made in this paper are not generalizable to all children who like play princess; the findings presented here are representative of Elsa-Anna and Broolala and are specific to the time, place, and relationship within which the data was collected. There remains a dearth of research on gender non-conforming, transgender, Two Spirit, and non-binary children’s experiences of princess play. Future research is needed on how children of all gender identities play this imaginative game, with sustained mindfulness towards the “differences between what adults want for children and what children desire for themselves” (Yoon and Templeton, 2019, p. 56) as a foundational principle of research with children in ECE.

6. Conclusion

Although princesses (especially Disney Princesses) are icons of femininity often tied to stereotypes of Westernized girlhood, moments of gender-creativity are shown to exist through the play-based decisions made by the child participants in this study, contrary to previous research arguing for its restrictiveness (Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011; Golden and Jacoby, 2018; Hine et al., 2018). Even as they navigated the influence of Disney Princess media as the play-based interviews unfolded, Elsa-Anna and Broolala expressed themselves in more gender-creative ways. Possibilities for non-stereotypical play increased when gender-neutral play items were presented by the author as an alternative to dressing up in Disney Princess costumes.

Collaboration and conflict within princess play were therefore integral to the overall narrative and characterization of this role-playing game, whether Disney-inspired or not. Thus, this study’s findings reveal the play-based process of young girls’ compliance with, and deviation from, stereotypical gender norms during this game. While image-obsession and idol worship of Disney Princesses is certainly problematic, the establishment of a hierarchical play frame (Griswold, 2007) through child participants’ reliance on Disney during characterization was not always patriarchal—nor was it restricted to—the reproduction of Disney narratives. Elsa-Anna and Broolala’s princess play consisted of moments of confinement to gender stereotypes as often as it exhibited gender-creative feminine expression.

Through a qualitative design that aimed to centre two young girls’ perspectives on princess play, this study shows that child-led play-based methods can offer illuminating insights into the gendering of early childhood imaginative play. Rather than oversimplifying all children’s pretend princess play as entirely harmful and restrictive to children’s understandings of femininity, it is important for early childhood researchers (who may also be educators and caregivers) to pay attention to children’s gender-creative expression even as they engage in highly gendered activities. When adult biases are carefully examined, researchers and educators reporting on children’s play can better showcase the nuance and uniqueness of child participants of all genders. By opening ourselves up to children’s understandings of their play-based experiences, we begin to see how gender and femininity are in constant negotiation during early childhood—even for princesses.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Cayley Burton: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.
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