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Citation:

Dobson, T (2017) Disrupting hegemonic masculinity through creative writing. In: Gender Differences. InTech. ISBN 978-953-51-2906-6 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5772/65074>

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Disrupting Hegemonic Masculinity Through Creative Writing

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/65074>

Abstract

Taking a view of identity as a discursal participation in figured worlds, this chapter draws upon data collected during a longitudinal, small-scale research project, exploring the relationship between creative writing and boys' identities as they make the transition from primary to secondary school. Using language-context discourse analysis, creative writing from six of the boys is analyzed in order to illustrate the ways in which the creative text can open up a space for hybrid discourses with identity enactments that disrupt hegemonic masculinity. This radical potential for boys to enact other identities through creative writing is seen as being related to the pedagogy adopted by the teacher. Accordingly, an argument is made: against a restrictive backdrop of a neoconservative curriculum and global neoliberalism's state-controlled decontrol, it is only through pedagogies that involve weaker framing and choice that boys can realize other ways of being.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, creative writing, boys, primary education, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The growth of New Literacy Studies (NLS)—a field of research that views children's literacy practices as "socially motivated" and textual production as inextricable from identity [1]—is in direct tension with recent curriculum changes to the teaching of English in English schools. The NLS approach requires a "weakly framed" pedagogy [2], which would see the teacher of English actively building upon their pupils' interests to be responsive in facilitating the development of pupils' voices in writing. In contrast to this, the national curriculum for English [3] requires

all pupils at primary school level to meet prescriptive targets for spelling, punctuation, and grammar (SPaG). Whilst the academization of schools in England means schools are not required to deliver this neoconservative curriculum, the global underpinning of neoliberalism's "state-controlled decontrol" [4:225] in the form of the standardized national testing of curriculum requirements means that schools have little option but to comply. The government's framework for teachers' assessment of pupils' writing is only interim [5], but this current set of criteria for assessment is one that clearly values the technical aspects of writing over composition and in doing so limits pupil choice and voice.

The implications for writing pedagogy are clear: a neoconservative curriculum aligned with a broader neoliberal education system means the teaching of English in England's schools is in danger of entering a period of "strong framing" [2] where the need for pupils to develop technical skills and knowledge sees the rote teaching of technical aspects of writing eclipsing the more child-centred approaches favoured by proponents of NLS. In this chapter, I will present a research-informed argument that if teachers teach to the test and implement strongly framed pedagogies, this could well result in gender differences that benefit men over women through "hegemonic masculinity" [6] being perpetuated by education. On the other hand, I will illustrate how teachers adopting more weakly framed pedagogies in the teaching of creative writing can open up spaces for boys to enact less sedimented identities [7] and in doing so disrupt hegemonic masculinity. The argument is shaped initially by presenting a theoretically informed view of identity as enacted through creative writing texts. To build this theory, a view of identity as socially constructed through discourse is adopted and the works of Bakhtin [8, 9] are used to illustrate how the creative text can be seen as a place where discourse is "dialogized" and identity is challenged. This view of the creative text is then explored and illuminated through the discourse analysis of two pieces of writing produced by six 10–11-year-old boys in response to strongly and weakly framed writing pedagogies, respectively.

Prior to this chapter, I have written about these two pieces of creative writing separately [10, 11]; however, the comparative analysis undertaken here adds a new dimension, emphasizing the extent to which strongly framed writing pedagogies lead to hegemonic masculinity limiting a writer's identity enactment. This comparative analysis is significant and novel in that a direct link between global market conditions, government educational policy, teachers' pedagogy, and gendered identities is clearly established. The implication is that in order to disrupt the ways in which gender is socially structured for the benefit of men over women, changes need to be made at all levels of society in relation to education.

2. Identity and hegemonic masculinity

Throughout my research into boys' writing, my theoretical view of identity has been informed by Holland, Lachiocotte, Skinner, and Cain's [12] conceptualization of identity as participation through discourse in "figured worlds." In their seminal work, they define a figured world as: "a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are

valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts" [12:52]. In this sense, I view the English classroom as a figured world where teachers and pupils adopt the roles available to them and play them through discourse. Of course, within the figured world of the English classroom, the hierarchical "positional identities" of teachers in relation to pupils is more palpable than some of the other dynamics explored by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain but, as with their examples, the figuring of these positional identities is affected on what Connell [13] defines as global, regional, and local levels. On global and regional levels, the effects of neoliberalism's state-controlled decontrol through a nonmandatory national curriculum and mandatory national testing, can be seen to position teachers and "change who they are" as "authenticity" is replaced by "plasticity" [4:225]; on a local level, the extent to which this figures teachers' pedagogies and the ways in which they actively position their pupils on a spectrum of active and passive learners, is down to the negotiated ethos of the school and the identity of individual practitioners. Or to put it in Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's terms: the extent to which pupils' identities are recognized within the English classroom through an NLS approach and the extent to which the enactment of these identities are mobilized by teachers to shape and value creative writing outcomes is, at a local level, dependent upon the way in which pupils are positioned by the school and its teachers.

As outlined above, figured worlds are more context-sensitive than Bourdieu's view of identity as "habitus" operationalized by "field" [14], and they offer more scope, therefore, for individual refiguring or agency. This is not only due to the way which Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain describe their worlds in highly context-specific ways but also because of the way they view these roles as being performed through discourse. Building on the work of Derrida, discourse is seen as functioning through a process of "différance" [15] whereby the ultimate meaning of a word is always already deferred synchronically, through the difference between signifiers in a system, and diachronically, through the deferral of meaning over time. From this poststructuralist perspective, therefore, discourse used in figured worlds is never stable or absolute and meaning and its value is negotiated and subject to flux depending upon context. Actors within figured worlds—i.e., teachers and pupils—therefore, necessarily have agency to refigure both the nature of their roles and the worlds themselves through discourse. This radical potential for change has made the theory attractive to researchers in education. In an introduction to the *Urban Review's* special issue on the ways in which figured worlds enable educational researchers to explore "sociocultural constructs in education" [16], an emphasis is placed upon how worlds can be reimagined by marginal student groups reappropriating the discourse that seeks to position them. More specific to literacy [17], evidence is presented as to how teachers can open up a space to harness high school students' home literacy practices and refigure the world of literacy in their school.

In relation to gender as a macro-figuring power within education, however, the extent to which worlds in schools can be refigured is unclear. Earlier sociological work [17, 18] highlights the ways in which teachers perpetuate gender inequalities through the language they use with their in pupils in school. Indeed, the ways in which the teachers are either complicit or dominant in participating in gender stereotyping is in line with Connell's concept of "hegem-

onic masculinity”: “a pattern of practices” that allow “men’s dominance over women to continue” [13:832]. Reviewing the critiques of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Connell counters claims of essentialism by emphasizing that practices are not fixed entities “embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals” [13:836] and that the concept is intended to grasp “a certain dynamic within the social process” [13:841] which results in men and women being positioned through their actions and interactions. In relation to education, this figuring power of gender becomes particularly salient for boys at points of transition in mainstream education [19]. In this qualitative study, boys’ reliance on predictable and dominant gendered identities that “other” the feminine is seen as a male reaction to the trauma of the change of context from primary to secondary school. This salience of hegemonic masculinity at transition was one of the reasons why I had decided to look at whether creative writing could lead to different identity enactments with Year-6 boys and, as I outline below, this is why I also undertook follow-up focus group discussions with the boys once they had started secondary school.

3. Creative writing and identity

Before I go on to look at the boys’ writing in terms of their gendered identities, I need to clarify from a theoretical perspective why I was interested in thinking about identity in creative writing. Whilst there has been a long literary tradition of seeing creative texts in relation to their author’s intention, and whilst some work has been done in relation to thinking about creative writing in relation to the unconscious [20], identity studies of educational writing have tended to focus on nonfiction texts [21]. The reasons for this are potentially manifold and no doubt partly linked to the mythologizing of the artist as experiencing writing as an out-of-body experience [22], and partly linked to nonfiction being more readily viewed as discourse linked to identity. Against this backdrop, Bakhtin’s bridging of sociolinguistics and literary criticism provides a framework for thinking about creative texts in terms of identity. For Bakhtin [8], the novel is made up of different “social languages,” or discourses, which he terms “heteroglossia.” From Bakhtin’s [9] perspective, the creative text is different from other texts in so far as it belongs to a “secondary genre” that offers more room for authorial “expression.” In terms of thinking about what this authorial expression might look like, Bakhtin has two related ideas [8]. First is the idea that the creative text “dialogises heteroglossia” with no single social language given the ascendancy. This occurs due to what Bakhtin terms the “interindividual” nature of language: the words an author uses belong to them in the present, to others in the past, and to readers who will respond in the future. Within this complex temporal-contextual dynamic and in line with Derrida [15], ultimate meaning is always already deferred and the dialogizing of heteroglossia is infinite. The second idea is that in dialogizing social languages, the process of “hybridization” takes place [8]. Bakhtin defines “hybridization” as: “a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance ... between two linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” [8:358]. To bring this back to my focus upon the boys’ identity enactments in their creative writing, I was interested in the relationship between the use of

different creative writing pedagogies (weakly and strongly framed), and the potential this gave for the boys to enact new, hybrid discourses and different gendered identities in their creative writing texts.

4. Methodology

As indicated above, the research project undertaken to explore boys' gendered identities through creative writing was qualitative and longitudinal. The main context was a coeducational inner city primary school in an area of low socioeconomic status. Whilst the six boys were in Year 6, I taught them and the whole class for one day a week throughout the year and for full weeks at three points during the year. In line with ethnographic research, my aim was to get to know my participants [23], both as pupils within the figured world of the English classroom and as boys with other identities to enact. Accordingly, I kept a research journal which I updated after every taught session and which provided me both with a means of thinking about my pedagogy as well as thinking about the interactional dynamic that constituted the boys' identities.

As well as my research journal, I also collected data through undertaking focus group interviews with the boys, following each substantial piece of writing they produced. I opted for focus groups rather than individual interviews as I wanted to identify the ways in which the boys' identities were socially constructed [24] and the role of hegemonic masculinity in this process. As indicated above, while it was not possible for me to continue to teach the boys when they started secondary school (they went to two different schools and within these two schools, they were dispersed across different classes), I was able to continue to undertake focus group interviews at four points throughout their time in Year 7. One aspect I was keen to explore in these later focus groups was how the boys would respond to the creative writing they had written in Year 6. In line with Bakhtin [8], the boys would effectively become the future addressees of their own writing. I talk about the boys' responses in the conclusion as they are illuminating in terms of the relationships between the boys' identities, their texts, and the pedagogies that stimulated production.

Name	Involvement in this chapter
Spurs606	Focus group discussion; knight quest story; play script
Kay4559	Knight quest story; play script
The Drawer	Focus group discussion; knight quest story
MR. JONES	Focus group discussion; play script
Jim bob	Knight quest story
Dominic Leon	Knight quest story
Countdukutroopvader	Play script
a can of coke	Focus group interview

In order to preserve anonymity, all of the boys discussed in this chapter are represented by self-selected writer-pseudonyms that are used in place of their real names. The table above outlines which boys are included in this chapter and the nature of their involvement. It should also be noted that I appear as Mr Dobson (the boys' English teacher) in one of the focus group discussions.

5. Pedagogy

Broadly speaking, my pedagogical approach was informed by my theoretical view of identity as social participation within figured worlds. In line with this and in line with research into writing that highlights the "generative" relationship between talk and writing [25], both pieces of writing analyzed below involved pupils generating ideas in groups before writing their creative texts individually. Aside from this general approach and as indicated at the start of this chapter, the two texts analyzed below were written as a result of different pedagogical approaches. The first text about the knight Gawain was written following input from an external drama company that I was able to observe. For the drama, the boys worked in mixed gender groups, exploring a plot where Gawain is joined by another knight called Gareth who is really a girl (Gweneth) in disguise. During my reflections, I commented on how the drama company provided a means for the pupils to "work within the fiction" [26], but how "decisions" over events and character traits were largely determined by the drama company themselves. Accordingly, when it came to writing the stories individually, both the boys and the class as whole wrote stories that were similar in structure and for this reason, and in spite of the use of drama, I broadly categorize this approach to teaching creative writing as an example of strong framing.

The second text, a playscript about a girl experiencing transition, was more weakly framed by me as a teacher, mainly due to way in which I handed greater control over decision making to the class. Drawing upon research that indicates the effectiveness of the teacher writing with and for their class [25, 27], I wrote the opening two scenes of a playscript for the class and then gave them the opportunity to continue and finish the text. The scenario for the text was deliberate on my part—the female protagonist had moved house and was starting secondary school—and echoed the transitions the pupils were about to undertake. After we had read my opening, I allowed the class to self-select groups for discussion and drama activities that would help them to develop the text. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the eight boys decided to work separately from the girls in two groups of four, and this gave me the opportunity to observe and reflect upon the social dynamic of identity construction as well as how the boys generated and developed their ideas. Whilst elsewhere I have analyzed the texts written by both groups of boys [10], due to this chapter's focus on hegemonic masculinity, I am going to focus on the text written by the boys in one of the groups.

I was also interested in the 'teacher as writer' approach as an analysis of the boys' creative writing enabled me to think about how they read and responded to my opening two scenes. In these two scenes, I deliberately created two plots: a main plot focusing on the female

protagonist's need for a new friend; and a subplot focusing on what is happening in the attic after the protagonist hears "whirring" noises. In reflecting upon my own construction of this text, I invoked Bakhtin's concept of the "superaddressee" [9] as a heuristic device. For Bakhtin, the meaning of any text is only made possible due to the author presupposing a "superaddressee" who will perfectly understand the author's intended meaning. Whilst from a poststructural perspective, the actual existence of a superaddressee is impossible, a consideration of the extent to which the boys responded to my opening as I would have responded at that time allowed me to think about how they apprehended my superaddressee. Accordingly, I was able to consider how the boys dialogized the social languages of my texts and to what ends.

6. Data analysis

In addition to my focus group transcripts and research journal reflections, my key data source was the boys' writing. As mentioned above, I saw this writing as heteroglossia, and I used Gee's version of discourse analysis to think about the ways in which they were enacting their identities. According to Gee [28], language is used by writers in context to achieve "building tasks" that include identity recognition. In order to bring these building tasks to the surface in the boys' writing, I used Gee's related "tools of enquiry" [28:60] and have placed my own questions in parenthesis after Gee's:

1. What social languages are involved? (*To what extent does the discourse of hegemonic masculinity feature in the boys' writing?*)
2. What socially situated identities and activities do these social language enact? (*In relation to masculinity, what identities are enacted by the writers?*)
3. What sorts of relationships are involved? (*How are social languages dialogized/hybridized in creative writing?*)
4. How does intertextuality work? (*How do writers recast other texts?*)

7. Hegemonic masculinity in the English classroom

Before I discuss my analysis of the boys' writing, I want to establish the ways in which hegemonic masculinity operated as a figuring dynamic in the English classroom. In order to do this, I draw upon both my reflections from my research journal and transcripts of the focus group discussions.

Towards the beginning of the year, the class teacher had commented upon how this class was characterized by a clear social "divide" between the boys and the girls. The seating plan operated within the class was fairly fluid, and this meant that boys and girls often chose to sit and work separately from one another. In focus group discussions, the boys would often tease

one another through evoking the feminine “other” and through being complicit with the wider figuring discourse of hegemonic masculinity. Here, for example, *The Drawer* conflates film genre with gender and MR. JONES seeks to position a can of coke as feminine:

The Drawer: Yeah cos we don't like chick flick and stuff like *Twilight*.

MR. JONES: (*To a can of coke.*) You like chick flicks.

a can of coke: No, I don't.

MR. JONES: You told me you watched *Bridget Jones*.

The Drawer: I went to his house to sleep once and he put *Mamma Mia* on.

a can of coke: It was my mum who came in and wanted to watch something.

MR. JONES: (*To a can of coke.*) You like *Mamma Mia*.

In terms of the dynamic of hegemonic masculinity, a can of coke becomes complicit in wanting to be included in *The Drawer's* “we” by defending his participation and attributing the watching of “*Mama Mia*” to his “mum.”

This conflation of genre and gender extended to a type of text often categorized within schools and libraries as “stories with issues.” Stories with issues feature first person girl protagonists who experience difficulties in their home and social lives, as in the books of Jacqueline Wilson. When initially discussing my play script, *The Drawer* expressed a dislike for my protagonist, Lucy, on the basis that he did not “like stories with issues.” The other boys generally agreed with this sentiment and refused to engage in any sort of meaningful discussion of Lucy's emotional needs. As the discussion moved on to thinking about the boys continuing the play script, I interrupted the discussion to question *Spurs606* further about what he perceived to be difficult of writing from the point of view of a female protagonist:

Spurs606: It's easier to write when you're a boy cos you can think.

Mr Dobson: Do you think girls think differently to boys?

Spurs606: Yeah.

Mr Dobson: Really?

Spurs606: Sometimes.

Mr Dobson: Can you give an example?

Spurs606: Like they always think about ballet and stuff and boys think about football.

Here *Spurs606's* gender essentialism is palpable and flippant, and these kinds of comments, along with a reluctance to discuss emotions, were indicative of some of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity figured the boys' participation in the world of the English classroom. Whilst my explicit challenges to their stereotyping often fell on deaf ears, as explored below, my use of weakly framed pedagogy and the ‘teacher as writer’ approach to teaching creative

writing provided a more subtle and effective means of allowing the boys to refigure their world.

8. The cross-dressing knight

I want to begin, however, by analyzing the story the boys wrote about Gawain, the Knight, following a strongly framed drama workshop. As explained earlier, the whole class was to write a quest story that saw Gawain teaming up with Gareth (who is actually Gweneth). There were two obvious narrative potentials: would the knights succeed in their quest? And would Gawain discover that Gareth was a female? When reading the boys' stories, my first point of analysis was to consider which narrative potential the boys valued most. Unilaterally, none of the boys were interested in developing the gender identity story, and all of them focused exclusively upon the quest story and the action-orientated social language they used through their writing reflected this. I then went on to consider point of view in the text: in line with Spurs606's elaboration on the difficulty of writing from the point of view of girl, on the whole the boys adopted a form of limited third-person narrator which focused on the actions of Gawain and which marginalized Gareth. Finally, I considered the ways in which this process of marginalization was operationalized in the boys' writing and the ways in which the two characters were represented by social languages in the boys' texts.

At the far extreme in terms of marginalizing Gareth was the writer Jim bob. Jim bob's story opens with "Gawain and gareth set of to green chapel," but the appearance of an "8 legged Dragon" in paragraph 2 is enough for Jim bob to reconsider the value of "gareth" (note how the lack of significance is indicated by the use of the lower case) in the story. Initially, Gareth is partly preserved as the two characters attempt to overcome this obstacle by morphing into "Gawrath," but by the end of the sentence, Gawain emerges from this linguistic struggle to take hold of the subject position in the clause and "chop [the Dragon's] hed off." As with the other boys' stories, the active voice dominates and Jim bob clearly identifies this action with the masculine Gawain as the pronoun "he" appears throughout the rest of the story to indicate the exclusive nature of Gawain's accomplishments ("and he killed the green knight"). In Jim bob's masculine story of bloodshed and gore, there is no place for Gareth.

Spurs606's story is similar in marginalizing Gareth and focusing on the masculine attributes of the active Gawain. Unlike Jim bob's story, however, Gareth's value in the story is maintained but only by having Gareth adopt the passive and feminized role of the Damsel in Distress. Gareth's fate in playing this limited role is cast even before the first obstacle in the quest story appears: they are walking along together when Gareth "slips" and Gawain "throws his rope. And pulls Gareth back to the path." Gareth taking the Damsel in Distress role is at its most palpable in The Drawer's story. For the first two pages, Gareth is known to the reader only as Gweneth and is openly and uniquely feminine. It is only at the end of the story that The Drawer uses parenthesis to indicate that Gweneth had been in disguise: "Gweneth (or Gareth as he knew)." What is different about this text, however, is that by casting Gweneth as the Damsel in Distress, The Drawer is able to allocate the limited third person point of view to Gweneth,

who in turn can amplify the heroic actions of Gawain. An example of this stereotyped identity enactment occurs when Gweneth is caught by a creature and screams “Gawain! Gawain! Help me.” Gawain responds instantaneously: “As soon as the noise hits his ear drum he ran towards Gweneth.”

There are the beginnings of different identity enactments, however, in the stories of Kay4559 and Dominic Leon. At the beginning of Kay4559’s story, it is Gareth who takes the active role by apprehending the first sign of danger in the forest and saying, “What’s that?” Interestingly, Gawain is made to look foolish claiming “it must be you’re imagination” only to find in the next sentence a tree falling “in front of them.” The potential for a reversal of power is short-lived, however, as Gareth’s capture repositions him as the Damsel in Distress. Dominic Leon, on the other hand, maintains the greatest balance of power and point of view between Gareth and Gawain. This is largely because his story quickly digresses from a quest structure and focuses on them fooling around: they are hungry, but they use their last potato as the belly button of their snowman; their tummies rumble; they regret their decision and an avalanche traps them. However, whilst both Gareth and Gawain find the “sharp stone” that lets them dig their way out, it is Gawain who ultimately kills “a white yoigi bear.”

In these predictable texts, characters are ciphers as the social language of the quest story positions Gawain as heroic and active and Gweneth as dependent and passive. Any potential for dialogizing this social language and enacting other identities through exploring the gender of Gareth is quickly closed down as hegemonic masculinity limits identity enactment and asserts its figuring power.

9. The taboo of boy/girl friendship

The playscript, as indicated above, was written as a result of weaker framing and me taking on the identity of the writer in preparing the opening scenes of a story about Lucy who had moved from London to start a new secondary school in Leeds. As I reflected in my research journal, my superaddressee for this playscript was someone who “empathized” with Lucy’s loneliness and someone who understood her “emotional needs.” Unlike the drama piece, ideas for completing the playscript were generated in self-selected groups, and I here want to focus on the stories written by Countdukutroopvader, Spurs606, MR. JONES, and Kay4559. As I observed this group working, it became clear that a social language figuring the development of their characters and humour related to intertextual borrowings from American High School Dramas. This is evident both in the language used by characters in all of the scripts (“kid” and “word” as exclamations; “Yo!” as a greeting; and the question tag “Do you copy?”) and in the labelling of one-dimensional characters. In all of the group’s playscripts, scene 3 (the first scene after my opening two scenes) takes place in the classroom where Lucy, the “new girl,” is asked to sit next to “Gilbert.” Gilbert is the geek from American High School Dramas: an intertextual borrowing that means because he is the “smartest kid in the school” and because he has “big feet,” he is marginalized as a subordinate version of masculinity who must sit “in da corna.” In all four stories, Gilbert is the object of crude humour, but in line with the boys’ view of my

playscript belonging to the “stories with issues” genre, in three of their scripts Gilbert also adopts the position of “friend” for Lucy. Accordingly, Lucy invites Gilbert home and their boy/girl friendship is most clearly signalled in Spurs606’s playscript as his Lucy declares: “I’m Lucy and I’m here with my brother Max and my friend Gilbert.”

The other narrative potential I had left open related to the noises in the attic and in all of the boys’ stories the “friends” Lucy and Gilbert go there and discover Billy. In Countdukutroopvader and Kay4599’s script, Billy is described as a real boy who acts “nervously” and who has been “locked” in the attic by “friends” for some unknown reason; in Spurs 606 and MR. JONES’s story, Billy is an intertextual borrowing from spoof horror movies with his one liners (“When I getch you I’m gonna eat ya”) and a penchant for “eating flies or bugs” and “being sick.” As soon as Billy appears in all four scripts, Gilbert is no longer able to occupy the position of Lucy’s “friend.” With Spurs606’s story, Gilbert is simply not mentioned again as Billy takes centre stage. For Kay4599 and Countdukutroopvader, Gilbert’s disappearance as “friend” is announced by him taking on the subordinate masculine position of the “geek” who is “scared” by the attic and who “runs away.” What is the significance of this? In the figured world of their English classroom, the possibility of boy/girl friendship was precluded by gender segregation and the othering of the feminine through the figuring power of hegemonic masculinity. Within three of these stories, however, the apprehension of my superaddressee’s need for a “friend” and the boys’ intertextual borrowing of the “geek” character, brought about a momentary enactment of boy/girl friendship which would not have been permitted within the English classroom. The implication is that greater pupil choice through more weakly framed creative writing, as well as the teacher as writer setting up deliberate narrative potentials, can result in creative texts that dialogise heteroglossia and create hybrid discourses. At the intersection between the social languages of the American High School Drama and the friendship story, Gilbert is locus of this new, hybrid discourse: simultaneously occupying the positional identities of “geek” and “friend,” however briefly, Gilbert offers a different narrative potential and a different identity enactment and in doing so he presents a disruption to the figuring power of hegemonic masculinity.

10. Conclusion

As indicated earlier, I was interested in what would happen when the boys became the future addressees of their own creative writing texts. In line with this, some six months after having written the texts and in the new context of secondary school, I gave the boys all of the stories that they had written with me in Year 6. In terms of the Gawain story, the boys expressed very little interest, saying it was “boring” and “stupid.” As I questioned them further, what became apparent was that they had forgotten that Gareth was meant to be female, and it was left to me to remind them of this. The reason for this was that the boys were not engaged at all in reading the text: the text was closed to them and their lack of interaction meant that they did not infer from the way Gareth adopted the position of the Damsel in Distress that he was actually Gweneth. With the playscript, however, the boys expressed more interest and engaged in a more detailed discussion. Whilst this discussion was figured by hegemonic masculinity with

The Drawer, for example, professing to have forgotten the protagonist by asking “Who’s Lucy?,” the boys spontaneously read lines from their play scripts to one another, particularly enjoying the “attic” characters they had created.

Of course, it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions from this small sample and I realize that the comparison of the two texts above is selective. However, two key points in terms of the relationship between teaching and the creative writing texts produced do, I feel, merit further consideration. First, there does appear to be a relationship between the extent to which the teaching of creative writing was framed by the teacher(s) and the ways in which the boys engaged with the texts as future addressees. Second, this future engagement seems to be related to the potential for more weakly framed pedagogies, which involve the teacher as a writer, to offer a space for pupils to enact different identities through creating hybrid discourses. The hybrid character of Gilbert is a symbol of this: both “geek” and “friend,” his instability is his value as he brings into the existence the promise of different worlds, with different actors and different sets of rules. Gilbert’s hybrid existence, however, does not mean that the boys in my study were suddenly enacting different identities and disrupting hegemonic masculinity. This certainly was not the case, but at least in their writing they opened up the possibility for disruption in exposing the mechanisms of identity construction.

To return to the opening of this chapter, the disruption of hegemonic masculinity is even more vital, given the ways in which policy and the free market is figuring education. On a global scale, neoliberalism’s state-controlled decontrol [4] through the technology of accountability leads to stronger framing in the classroom as teachers come under increased pressure to teach to the test. As I have illustrated above, the result of this strong framing is the enactment of sedimented gender identities that perpetuate hegemonic masculinity. On a national scale, the UK Government’s neoconservative national curriculum with specific spelling, punctuation, and grammar requirements also leads to stronger classroom framing and, in turn, perpetuates the dynamic of hegemonic masculinity. From a practical perspective, resistance has to come locally from teachers themselves being empowered to adopt more weakly framed pedagogies that permit different gender enactments. Clearly, there is role here for universities to collaborate with schools in order to generate a better understanding of the ways in which schools and their pedagogies can disrupt hegemonic masculinity to figure more equal and imaginative worlds for girls and boys, women alike and men alike.

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