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Primary Pupils' Creative Writing: Enacting Identities in a Community of Writers

Introduction

“.. the [artist] must develop or procure the consciousness of the past ... What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”

(Eliot 1997: 48)

These are the words of the poet T.S. Eliot who developed the idea of “depersonalisation” – a process whereby the artist would negate their own experiences to engage with literary history and refine their work in relation to the canon. Whilst reading of literature is acknowledged as being central to the teaching of creative writing at all levels (Andrews 2008; Dombey 2013; Magrs and Bell 2001), this paper challenges Eliot by using discourse analysis to think about pupils' creative writing in terms of their wider identities and in doing so argues that teachers should view pupils as “social beings” (Dombey 2013) in order to enrich writing outputs. This paper also explores the complex ways in which pupils' identities are interconnected with teachers' identities and in doing so an argument is made for practitioner research into the writing classroom.

Theoretical Frame and Relevant Literature

Figured Worlds, Identity and Creative Writing

Our understanding of identity is informed by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain's (1998) conceptualisation of identity as participation in “figured worlds”. A figured world is “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” (ibid: 52). As actors in figured worlds, we take on the roles that are available to us and play them through discourse. How we perform these roles is determined by wider figuring structures and our identities are “positional”. At the same time, actors 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”, Urrieta (2007: 113) emphasises how worlds can be re-imagined by marginal student groups re-appropriating the discourse that seeks to position them. More specific to literacy, Luttrell and Parker (2001) open up a space for teachers to harness high school students’ home literacy practices and refigure the world of school literacy.

In a global context where neoliberalism’s distribution of power in education through performativity re-positions teachers by changing “who they are” and replacing authenticity with “plasticity” (Ball 2003: 225), we argue that a focus on identity in literacy is a means of teacher resistance. As Cremin and Baker (2014) illustrate however, teachers wishing to take on a writer identity in the classroom are repositioned by the pupils who, for example, misread an enactment of “writer’s block” as an opportunity to transgress behaviour expectations. At the same time, as Dobson (2015) has illustrated, this repositioning of the writer-teacher in the year 6 literacy classroom can also be symptomatic of wider structures of performativity and testing. As explored below, that this writer-teacher tension was less keenly felt in the figured world of *Community of Writers* was perhaps because the project’s aims were not directly driven by performativity.

We were also conscious of the need to distinguish between creative writing and non-fiction writing in the primary classroom and Bakhtin’s (1986) comparison of

literature to everyday utterances was useful. For Bakhtin, literature is “complex” discourse, more open to individual “expression”. This expression takes place as creative texts disrupt the sedimentation of discourses through actively dialogising “heteroglossia” (Bakhtin 1981) and in doing so creating new worlds and innovative, “hybrid” texts comprising of different social languages. Because we see identity as a discursal enactment, we contend that through positioning the children as writers in a Community of Writers, we were able to harness their identities and in doing so hybridise their writing.

A Community of Writers: Balancing Pedagogical Approaches

Wyse et al (2013) refer to creative writing as an “open” pedagogical approach, indicating an absence of structure as pupils are given imaginative choice. In establishing our Community of Writers, we were keen to balance the “freedom” offered by the creative text with “structured” teaching (Davies et al 2012) in order to model the use of techniques. By positioning the pupils as writers with writing journals, we created a community which was underpinned by a view of learning as participation in cultural contexts (Wenger 1998). In Community of Writers workshops (Ing 2009; Cremin and Myhill 2013), teachers and children write together, sharing ideas and techniques. Whilst our Community offered “freedom” for the individual development of ideas in writing journals, it also offered us the opportunity to “structure” the composition process through guided and shared writing activities. As a Community of Writers, this structuring of the writing process was also informed through reading a published author. Due to previous positive classroom reading experiences and its sophisticated structure, we chose David Almond’s (2008) graphic novel *The Savage*. Set in the woods, *The Savage* is about a boy called Blue who is bullied and creates a savage to save him. As Blue’s story develops, the Savage comes to life and attacks Blue’s tormentors. The story ends with Blue discovering that the Savage had also been writing a story about a boy called Blue. The implication is complex, relating to the creation myth and leaving an unresolved question: is Blue the creator of the Savage or is the Savage the creator of Blue?

Thematically, *The Savage* linked directly to our context for writing for which we employed the “open” approach of dramatic enquiry to stimulate the children’s imaginations. Dramatic enquiry structures meaning-making (O’Neill 1995) and we valued its potential to promote “dialogic learning” whereby our questioning would shape pupils’ language in order to help them to “think” about and “understand” their stories (Alexander 2008). The enquiry we constructed was based upon the idea of a protagonist who spends the night in the woods on campus. We introduced this fiction first by asking the children to make dens and then having them discover items in the dens the following day. The children were made aware of the fictive nature of the scenario and engaged meaningfully in “agreed” rather than “imposed” problem-solving (Aitkin, 2014). The discovery of items positioned them as dialogic inquirers, generating questions about the protagonist. In the figured world of the Community of Writers, we all used our writing journals to “seize the moment to write” (Cremin et al, 2006), collectively creating back-stories before individually developing ideas in our writing journals. Process drama was then used to further develop the writers’ emerging stories, notably the protagonist meeting a savage child.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper focuses on our Community of Writers project that took place at our institution in the summer term 2015. As higher education researchers and initial teacher education practitioners, we worked with children from an inner city partnership school in a lower socio-economic area where the proportion of pupils eligible for government funding (pupil premium) is significantly higher than the national average. Accordingly, twenty-five mixed ability pupil premium children aged between 7 and 11 undertook creative writing workshops on our campus over eight mornings for a two-week period. Broadly speaking, we took on the roles of teachers in the figured world of Community of Writers, but in line with our adopted pedagogy and the contrived nature of our figured world, we

positioned ourselves differently from the children's other teachers. By having a teacher and a teaching assistant from the school in attendance as observers each day, we were able to explore differences in the identities enacted in the figured worlds of the Community as Writers and School respectively.

The school used pupil premium money to fund the project and the aims were jointly negotiated: ideologically, we were seeking to raise the aspirations of the children involved in the project; from a research perspective, we explored the questions below.

1. How does the creation of a Community of Writers affect identity and creative writing?
2. What is the relationship between our identities as writers and the children's identities as writers and how does this relate to the children's identities in School?
3. How can drama be used to mobilise identities and develop creative writing?

In line with the notion of community, the children worked in mixed age and ability groups of five selected by a senior member of teaching staff. Through the process of dramatic enquiry, the groups planned their stories before writing individually. As writers within the community, we developed stories and shared them with the children.

Data collection

We collected two forms of data: our own research journal reflections; and the community's creative writing. In terms of our research journal reflections, we engaged with practitioner research, using our practice as an area of critical reflection and disciplined enquiry. Cochran-Smith and Lytle state, "the questions that prompt practitioner research ... emanate from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two" (1993: 15). This involved us making notes whilst we were teaching as well as using the afternoon to reflect upon the writing. In line with this definition of practitioner research, our discussions of the writing helped us

explore theories relating to our creative writing pedagogies. One of the problems of practitioner research involves the researcher negating other perspectives (Goldbart and Hustler 2005) and we actively sought and recorded feedback from the school's observing teachers and teaching assistants. Ethically, we had received clearance from our institution, following guidelines set down by the British Education Research Association. This involved gaining informed consent from the head teacher and the observing teachers and teaching assistants as well as verbal assent from the children. In this paper, pseudonyms are used in place of names other than our own.

Data Analysis

As our focus was discursive identity enactments in our Community of Writers, we adopted Gee's (2010) language-context discourse analysis to help us answer our research questions. From Gee's perspective, discourse is inextricable from identity, conveying both "who we are" and "what we are doing" (Gee, 2015: 102) through "building tasks" which include enacting "identity" and "relationships" as well as privileging or disprivileging "ways of knowing" (Gee, 2010: 17). In line with this, Gee provides tools of enquiry (ibid: 17) to deconstruct how building tasks are achieved. We applied these tools of enquiry to our two sets of data in slightly different ways: for our research journals, the tools helped us simultaneously to identify lines of enquiry in our writing and shape subsequent critical reflections; for the Community's writing, the tools gave us a framework for analysing creative text. Below, we list Gee's tools of enquiry (ibid: 60) and where we feel clarification is needed we list in brackets the contextualized questions we asked of our research journals and the Community's creative writing respectively:

1. *What social languages are involved?*
2. *What socially situated identities and activities do these social language enact?*
3. *What sort of relationships are involved?* (How are the social languages of the figured world of the Community of Writers and

School dialogised and which is (dis)privileged and why?)

4. *What Conversations are relevant?* (What Conversations from School enter the Community and how are the Community's discussions about their writing acted upon by individual writers?)
5. *How does intertextuality work?* (How do writers use each other's and Almond's words?)

Findings and Discussion

Being Repositioned as Teachers

Analysis of our research journals largely involved asking questions relating to enquiry tools 1, 2 and 3. We found that our journals provided an insight into the way in which our figured world of Community of Writers positioned the children and ourselves differently as well as the ways in which this figured world was disprivileged by the figured world of School. The figured world of School was particularly strong at the start of the project, most notably when we visited their actual school to set up the project. In our research journals, we wrote about how we had used our "first names" (Tom and Lisa) to make it clear that the project would follow different ways of knowing from that of the figured world of School. We also talked about ourselves as writers, sharing our publications and asking the children to talk about their own interests in reading and writing. However, in line with Cremin and Baker (op. cit.), the identity enactment of the children as pupils repositioned us as teachers. During this initial meeting, for example, we reflected upon an episode that saw a group of boys play with a football they had found in the classroom. Tom wrote about his "unease" at this occurrence and his subsequent reliance upon the social language of a teacher who was quick to "position the children as pupils" and instigate the rules of the figured world of School.

Interestingly, our research journals reveal that such repositionings by the children taking on the social language of pupils in the figured world of School were less frequent as the project progressed and our ethos took hold. Indeed, our reflections in our journals

tended to focus more on how we were being repositioned as teachers by the school teaching staff who were present during the workshops. A notable occasion involved one of the girls, Elsie, being “reprimanded” by a teaching assistant during a drama session. Lisa had been setting up an agreement with the group to move “into the fiction” and Elsie, committed to the fiction, suggested that Lisa “should take (her) name badge off to signal that (she) was working in role as another character”. Within the figured world of our Community of Writers, such a suggestion fitted with the social language of learning as co-construction. In contrast, due to her reliance upon the hierarchical positional identities of the figured world of School, the teaching assistant viewed Elsie’s suggestion as transgressive of her identity as a pupil talking to a teacher. At the time this incident was invisible to us as it was outside our social language and it was only when we were told by the teaching assistant the following day that Elsie had been sent to isolation in the afternoon for “consistently shouting out during the sessions” that we began to reflect upon what had happened and why.

This positioning of us as teachers in the privileging of the figured world of School was also apparent in the drama workshop feedback given to us by a senior teacher. Here the Community was using freeze-frames to develop storylines prior to writing and the senior teacher felt that we could have provided “clearer feed-forward” comments and less focus on “task orientation” in line with “OFSTED requirements”. As she concluded, “OFSTED is progress and feedback.” What is clear here is the way in which the operations of performativity through intertextual borrowings structure identity engagement and use of social language in the figured world of School. As Ball says (2003: 221), teachers take on the language of performativity in acts of “ventriloquism” which can lead to “values schizophrenia”. In our research journals we reflected upon this and how we had valued the activity as means of supporting the children to “orally internalize” and how, therefore, our perception of progress and our use of social language was very different from that of the senior teacher.

Relationships and refiguring our world

Our figured world of Community of Writers was far from static and the use of practitioner enquiry structured by Gee's tools of enquiry (ibid) helped us to identify how our world was being figured by ourselves as teachers, the children and ourselves as writers as well as the school teachers and teaching assistants as observers. Crucially, this critical reflection helped us refigure our world through changing the nature of our participation. A good example of an alteration to relationships that we made involved Jane, a reluctant writer. Having developed ideas for the story as whole, Tom used guided writing to model Chapter 1, which involved the techniques of description and suspense building. The Community then wrote their own opening chapters. Later in the day when reading their writing, however, we realised that Jane had not written anything. We discussed possible reasons for this and wrote about it in our research journals, wondering whether Tom's modeling had been too confident and had made Jane feel she could not enact the identity of a writer. We agreed, therefore, that Lisa should position herself as an unconfident writer within the Community in order to create empathy with Jane and demonstrate how a range of identity enactments were possible within our figured world. Accordingly, at the start of the next session Lisa spoke of the difficulties of writing her text and she solicited the Community's help. Later, when Lisa sat with Jane's table, there was a definite shift in Jane's confidence and she mixed effective description with allusions to a back-story to keep the reader intrigued.

Following the first three sessions, we had also been reflecting upon the need to "closely integrate our use of drama with the writing process" as we wanted drama to "shape the language of writing" rather than simply being a vehicle to generate ideas. This involved Tom and Lisa team-teaching in order to synthesise their respective areas of expertise (writing and drama respectively). Using freeze-frames to enact the chapter where the protagonist meets the Savage, Lisa worked with the audience to unfreeze the characters and hear their speech whilst Tom acted as scribe in what became a structured process of shared writing. The focus was upon using the technique of 'showing not

telling' which is based on the long-established idea (Aristotle 1996) that characters reveal themselves through their words and actions, and Tom used questioning to recast the characters' and audience's suggestions. For example, when meeting the Savage for the first time, one protagonist said, "Hello, I'm pleased to meet you. Who are you?" Tom responded by asking the audience whether their protagonist would greet the Savage in this way.

Tom: What might they say then?

Callum: Who-who are you?

Tom writes on the board: "Who-who are you?"

Tom: How might the protagonist say this?

Callum: Stammered anxiously.

Tom: That's lovely.

Tom adds to the board: I stammered anxiously.

Intertextuality, Identity Enactment and Hybridity

The Community's creative writing provided us with data which we were able to analyse using the Gee's tools of enquiry (ibid) and what was of most interest here was the way in which "intertextuality" functioned. This was due to our promotion of the idea that the Community should "steal" words from one another as "stealing is what all good writers do". We emphasised that stealing was not hierarchical and that just as we wanted the children to steal from us and from each other, we would also want to steal from them. At the start of the project, for example, we were focusing on the technique of 'emotional landscapes' and, sitting beneath the branches of a giant eucalyptus tree, we worked 'within the fiction' to write descriptions of the tree in our journals from the perspective of the protagonist who was spending their first night alone in the woods. The Community shared a rich variety of descriptive and figurative language - "towering tree", "long arms reaching upwards", "bark falling like a snake shedding its skin", "ghostly, pale and silver"

- and when Tom shared his opening chapter with the class, he deliberately recast the Community's words:

"Escaping was easier than I thought... When I was certain that they'd given up, I slowed down and looked around me. I was in this wooded area on the edge of town, far away from home. The sun had begun to set and the thickness of the trees' branches reached across each other like desperate arms, blocking out what was left of the dying light."

This description and other descriptions from the Community appeared in different guises in the writers' stories and the Community's intertextual practices meant the social languages as they appeared in creative texts were often "hybrid" (Bakhtin, op. cit.) and, therefore, highly innovative. Such hybridity can be seen in the ending to Ben's story that recasts Tom's opening sentence. In Ben's story, the protagonist helps the Savage (Dave) return to society through adoption only to discover from his foster parents that Dave has escaped:

I decided to go to the woods. I ran faster than ever! I got to the woods and when I found the monument there was the Savage, lying on the dirty, rocky floor.

He was dead.

Now no one knows why and how he died, but I do and I'll never tell a soul about anything. My friend is dead. But I'll see him again.

Escaping was harder than I thought...

The idea of the circular story is a sophisticated one and relates to a "conversation" the Community had engaged with about what makes a good ending. Here Ben responds to that conversation by presenting an unhappy resolution not only to the Savage's story but to the protagonist's story as well: escaping may have been *easy*, but everything the protagonist learns from being in the woods and meeting the Savage not only fails to

resolve the protagonist's initial problems (bullying), but also serves to demonstrate how much *harder*, darker and more complex life has become. Here, Ben is enacting an author identity that demonstrates great depth of thought in utilising the Community's words to create new meaning.

A different form of hybridity is apparent in Emma's story. Partway through the project, Emma had told Lisa that she had a new half-sister and when faced with the task of thinking about a back-story which would explain her protagonist's reasons for running away, Emma writes about the arrival of baby:

““I was th-thinking,” the Savage stammered. “I was thinking if you would stay in the woods with me permanently.”

I gasped. I suddenly thought about the last few days at home. Mum was shouting, dad was shouting, it was all Ella's fault. That's my little sister. Nobody was too fussed about her at first, she was just a purple bawling alien. But then everything changed, she became their sugarplum; I became the slave, fetching bottles, running the bath, nipping to the shop to buy nappies. I knew I couldn't go back, even thinking about it made me tremor.”

Enacting an aspect of her identity at home, Emma's engagement with this creative text gives her the opportunity to express her feelings using extreme language (*purple bawling alien; slave*). Again, in relation to the Community's “conversation” about what makes a good ending, Emma's resolution deliberately disrupts a conventional response:

I remembered long ago when it was just me. We were a happy family. I wanted to go back desperately but I knew I couldn't... Suddenly I clenched my fists together, forcing my nails harder into my skin. “Ouch!” I didn't realise how long and sharp my nails were getting! A tiny rivulet of blood slid down my greasy skin. Bucketfuls of tears spurted down my pinched

cheeks. I could hear the distant gruntings of the savage. I suddenly realised I knew what I had to do...

Finally, morning came. I woke early to find I had black bags underneath my eyes. The Savage was towering above me, “Yes!”, I sighed confidently.

Now, two years on from my first night in the jungle, I’m completely different. I’m matchstick thin, all skin and bones. I’ve got wild, deep eyes and black bags all the time. I’ve got a sharp pointed nose and thin, cold lips; my feet are scrawny and I’m dressed in wrecked rags – my skin is greasy skin and my hair wild and knotted. I’m not boring old Holly Green anymore. I’m my free will. I’m, a SAVAGE!

This ending takes a tone completely different from the rest of the Community’s and demonstrates how the creative text gave Emma a space to enact her home identity as wish fulfillment. The protagonist both consciously and unconsciously becoming the Savage sees Emma recasting the words of Almond (*wild, deep eyes; sharp pointed nose*) to provide authenticity to the metamorphosis. What we have here, therefore, is a highly complex creative text where the community’s textual structure and ideas are hybridised through intertextual practices with Almond’s *The Savage* and, more pointedly, through the fantasy enactment of a home identity and its associated language.

Conclusion

Despite the small-scale nature of this project, we feel we can draw some conclusions relating both to policy and pedagogy. First, in terms of the ways in which our figured world of the Community of Writers was dialogised and disprivileged by different ways of knowing and social languages, it is interesting how our research journals demonstrate the extent to which teachers and teaching assistants seem to be more resistant to enacting different identities and figuring different worlds than the children. It would be worthwhile

exploring the reasons for this further, but as the two incidents described above illustrate, this appears to be both to do with the way behaviour is hierarchically managed in schools and the social language that goes with this as well as the ways in which the world of School is figured by performativity and managed by inspections and testing. To change roles and social languages in schools requires finding different spaces and partnership projects such as this are one way of figuring different worlds.

The other way of figuring different worlds would be to engage teachers in practitioner enquiry. As our own engagement in practitioner enquiry shows, it was only through thinking about research, theory and methodology in a systematic way that we were able to figure our world of Community of Writers for the better by, for example, introducing the identity of the unconfident writer and using drama to shape language through team-teaching. In light of current U.K. government legislation to lessen the role of Universities in initial teacher education (DfE 2016), an argument is made here for the importance of the continuation of research informed practice in collaboration with higher education institutions.

Our discussion of the children's writing illustrates how the establishment of a Community of Writers can promote intertextual practices and responses to writerly conversations which allow for different authorial identity enactments like Ben's in the construction of innovative, hybrid texts. Indeed, the fluid boundaries between one writer's text and another's within the Community can dialogise social languages within and across texts. As demonstrated by Jane's increase in confidence, the success of the community as a whole depends on the teacher's sensitivity to individual children's identity enactments and their ability to reposition their own identity accordingly. Equally, the teacher being sensitive to the need for balance between structure and freedom (Davies et al, op. cit.) in pedagogical approaches which align drama and writing has the potential to open up narrative gaps for the enactment of other identities like Emma's which can result in unexpected and authentic writing. At a moment in time when writing assessment in England values technicality over composition (see DfE 2015), pedagogical

approaches such as those outlined in this paper are key to ensuring that our writers of the future do not suffer Eliot's "extinction of personality".

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