

Running head: AN EXPLORATION OF MASCULINITIES IN  
LEVELLED TEXTS

An Exploration of Masculinities in Levelled Texts

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I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Angela Morris at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

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### Abstract

This document analysis examines how hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities are portrayed in levelled texts. Using the principles of grounded theory, the texts and illustrations of a sample of eleven chapter books used in schools for 2nd class children were examined. Non-hegemonic masculinities were depicted as acceptable ways of “doing” gender provided that they also attempted to engage in hegemonic practices. In most cases, masculinities were constructed in opposition to femininities. The texts reflected the heteronormativity of Western primary classrooms.

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### An Exploration of Masculinities in Levelled Texts

“When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.”

(Rich, 1986, p. 199)

I learned many important lessons during my initial teacher training, many of them from pupils I encountered in schools. One particular boy completely altered my thinking about gender in a single, small incident. He enjoyed a dance class with many of his female classmates, was one of two boys in the choir, was an enthusiastic high-achiever in schoolwork and used flamboyant gestures to express himself. One day, this boy asked “Do you have to be born a boy or a girl?” to which his teacher responded, “Yes”, before moving on with her work. The question was asked unexpectedly, and I was unable to locate anything specific preceding the question that may have prompted him to ask it. But the longer I knew the child, the more convinced I became that if anyone in that classroom needed a more detailed answer than “yes”, it was this child.

Education professionals in Ireland are striving to make our education system more inclusive. We endeavour to include people of all kinds, “irrespective of gender, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic background or special educational need” (Shevlin et al., 2009). One of the ways we can do this is by providing materials that reflect the lives and identities of our pupils. The Irish curriculum advocates building new learning upon the child’s previous knowledge and experience

(Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 14). Resources and materials used to support this curriculum should take a similar approach. For that reason, many books and levelled texts used in classrooms deal with concerns facing children in their everyday lives: events at school, sports, family dynamics, moving house and making friends.

According to research, children may spend between 85 – 90% of time in the classroom using textbooks, and most of teachers' instructional decisions are heavily influenced by their textbooks (Sadker and Zittleman, 2007, p.144). With textbooks having such a major influence on the everyday life of school children, it is imperative that they are thoroughly examined with regard to direct and indirect lessons they teach. Many studies have examined gender in textbooks and children's literature (e.g. Blumberg, 2008; Gungor & Prins, 2011; Crisp & Hiller, 2011; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido & Tope, 2011). Primarily, the focus has been on the representations of girls, women and female sex-roles. The women's liberation movement and later developments related to gender equality have contributed greatly to progressive changes in school materials over the past fifty years. In 2015, the United Nations published the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal four refers to "inclusive and equitable quality education...for all" and goal five is "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (United Nations, 2015). Although not enough has yet been done to combat discrimination against women in textbooks (Blumberg, 2014), it is clear that many people are conscious

of the need to change this. It is less clear that actions are being taken to ensure that non-stereotypical constructions of masculinity are being represented. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant or 'ideal' form of masculinity in a given culture. This research examines the way non-hegemonic masculinities are represented in a sample of levelled texts used as part of literacy programmes in primary schools.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first put forward in the 1980s by Connell and her colleagues (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 830-831), and has since been adopted and adapted in a variety of fields of research, including education. What is considered the hegemonic masculinity in a culture is very specific to the place and time in question. It is constantly being renegotiated. Although wider groups, such as a state, may have a shared regional form of hegemonic masculinity, smaller, more concentrated groups in towns or smaller communities may accept a form of masculinity which varies slightly as hegemonic in their community. For example, although undertaking paid work is likely to be considered part of the hegemonic male's life in most communities, the kind of work most valued may differ between rural and urban communities. Similarly, heterosexual behaviour tends to be more highly valued in societies and features as part of the dominant male's life (Wilson et al., 2010). However, within the smaller gay community, this will not be the case. Similarly, bisexual behaviour can even be viewed with suspicion and disdain (Mitchell, 2015, p. 246). A crucial point within the concept of hegemonic masculinity, therefore, is that it is very specific to the community under



consideration and the cultural views and practices of that community at that time (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831).

R. W. Connell theorizes a hierarchy of masculinities operating within gender relations (2005). Hegemonic masculinity is at the apex of this structure. She defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.” (2005, p. 77).

A criticism of the theory is that employing the language of Connell’s hierarchy of masculinities, including hegemonic masculinities, encourages researchers to think in terms of gender binary and in contexts that are fundamentally patriarchal. The artifacts examined for this research are being used in Irish primary schools, a place where the gender binary is acknowledged and often encouraged on a daily basis. Classrooms have gender specific toilets, children often are asked to perform tasks like lining up in groups differentiated along gender lines, and research indicates teachers attitudes and interactions with students are regularly influenced by gender (e.g Lynch, 1989, p. 28; Graham McClowry et al., 2013, p. 296.; Nürnberger, Nerb, Schmitz, Keller & Sütterlin, 2016). By asking children to separate people into the categories of boys and girls on a daily basis, Irish primary schools legitimate gender binary. There is a whole body of work examining the presence and effects of hegemonic masculinities in many other

institutions and societies globally, including secondary schools, prisons, armed forces and business management.

Non-hegemonic masculinities are defined in relation to their local dominant hegemonic masculinity. They are ways of performing masculinity considered “other” in a given context. The aim of this research is to investigate the how non-hegemonic masculinities are represented in early readers for primary school children in Ireland. To do this with an appropriate thoroughness was not possible given the small scale of this research project, and as such this research only looks at the representation in a small collection of books, which gives a taste of materials that children are exposed to in Irish primary schools. A sample of ‘chapter books’ from a set Cengage of levelled texts, the PM+ series, was examined. Levelled texts are often used in schools because they provide a form of readymade differentiation for use in the classroom. These sets often come with multiple copies of each book to facilitate guided reading and group read-alouds. As such, these sets can be very expensive for a school to replace or renew and are a substantial investment of funds. These sets are a resource to be used for years to come, and will pass through the hands and minds of many children. A long-term resource of this kind should be subject to scrutiny, not only in terms of the words, fonts and gradients of complexity, but also in terms of the messages overt and covert contained within them. This study attempts to look at some of the messages regarding masculinities contained within this series.

### **Literature Review**

The gender binary positions masculinity and femininity in opposition with one another. Within patriarchal structures, women and that which is feminine are Other. The hierarchy of masculinities is theorized to exist within this structure as well, and non-dominant performances of masculinity are also positioned as Other. This section presents a number of theories that had significant impact on our understanding of gender and its place in society, as well as a number of key studies and researchers examining gender in schools and school materials.

Renold (2004) conducted a year-long ethnographic study of working and middle class (predominantly white) boys aged 10 – 11 in two schools, observing how they performed their masculinities. She conducted focus group interviews with the boys and discussed many topics with them, including bullying, schoolwork, homophobia, friendships, boyfriends and girlfriends, music and appearance (p. 250).

She writes about three kinds of Other she witnessed during her study; 'Othering', 'doing Other', and 'being Other'. She uses Davies and Harré's work (1991) about children's active participation in the process of their own social positioning to support the concept of these three kinds of "Other". There are two aspects of positioning; reflexive positioning, where the child places themselves, and interactive positioning, where they are placed through social interaction (Renold, 2004, p. 249). "Othering" is being considered different by another group of children (interactive positioning). "Doing Other" is performing

a behaviour that is non-hegemonic, and in this case often a behaviour considered non-heterosexual (reflexively positioning oneself as “Other”, but not considered “Other” by classmates because of previous or concurrent behaviour deemed more dominant and more heteronormative). “Being Other” is practicing behaviours considered outside of the norm for “proper” or classically male behaviour without any hegemonic behaviour to counterbalance it in the eyes of the dominant group. “Being Other” occurs through both reflexive and interactive positioning.

This paper was very illuminating because it included examples of behaviours that were considered by the boys to be appropriate or inappropriate, and the contexts in which they might be acceptable. The texts analysed in this study are aimed at children only a few years younger than the boys in Renold’s study. Their opinions of masculinities, therefore, were particularly relevant when analyzing texts and trying to determine which behaviours might be valued by readers, as opposed to valued within the text.

It also highlighted the pressure felt by many of the boys who expressed themselves in non-traditional ways. At the beginning of the study, Renold identified eleven boys who chose not to “construct their identities through hegemonic discourses” (2004, p. 251), yet at the end of the year only 5 boys, all of whom were middle class high-achievers, persisted against the norm.

The significance of “Othering” within the hierarchy of masculinities and the concepts of reflexive and interactive positioning

led me to look at Butler, Foucault and queer theory. According to Callis (2009) queer theory is the area of academic thought focused on “the constructedness of gendered and sexual identities and categorisations” (p. 215). Key questions in the field are the alleged link between gender and sex, and the binary of homosexuality and heterosexuality, as both are only intelligible in relation to one another (p. 215). “Other” can either be defined in relation to the self, or that which is most prominent. Policing of non-hegemonic masculinities resembles policing of homosexuals by those desiring maintenance of our heteronormative society.

Foucault’s work on the subject looks at divisions either inside the self, or between the self and others (1982, p.778) and investigated forms of power by examining their modes of resistance (1982, p. 780). Foucault’s writing, particularly his belief that “the individual was created through and by discourse, which itself was created by systems of knowledge power” (Callis, 2009, p.221) had a major influence on queer theory and discourse analysis. He relates the medicalization of sex and subsequent confessions and conversations between doctors and homosexuals to the creation of the gay identity (2009, p. 22-223). The power instilled in doctors to reveal ‘truths’ to homosexuals about themselves lead to an unequal power relationship between them. Foucault also referred to reverse discourse when people given a certain label by others gather together and discuss, from their own perspective, the meaning of the label they have been given (Callis, p. 223). The gay rights movement arose from such reverse discourse. Foucault’s theory

gives strength to the idea that what is written about people has power and influence. It is therefore important that we are cognisant of what schoolbooks tell children about people, explicitly or otherwise.

Butler (1990) is considered a foundational theorist for anyone looking at the effects of gender. Her theory of gender performativity suggests that gender is not something fixed that we are born with, but rather it is dynamically shaped over time through our repeated behaviours and gestures, that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 179). For Butler, society’s ideas and expectations of what is masculine and feminine are hugely influential on how gender is ‘done’. Butler discusses how the “received notions of masculinity and femininity” fortify and aid in the reproduction of what she refers to as the “heterosexual matrix” – the way in which bodies, genders and desires are culturally understood to naturally interact (p. 194). She uses drag performance as a parodic example of performing gender; it highlights the instability and lack of foundation, or even “origin”, of what society’s received notions of masculine and feminine are (p 175). In some ways this adds to the comedy element that is often associated with drag performance. It should be noted, however, that unlike drag performances, although Butler’s theory is based on the repetition of acts, ‘performing’ gender is not acting. Acting implies a consciousness, and we are not always conscious of the precise way we move or do things. Our gender is fluid and constantly building, it cannot be turned on and off as we choose, because those choices of how to walk or

stand or gesture become part of the script we improvise to perform our gender. These signs, words and gestures can be read in books as well as in life, and the concept of gender performativity is a key influence on our understanding of how gender is expressed and known.

Gender is an important aspect of identity and self-esteem (Tsao, 2008, p. 109). "Identity politics emerges out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle" (hooks, 1994, p. 88 - 89). In this way, using queer theory and the work of Foucault helped me to analyse the power structures within the hierarchy of masculinities. It is nearly impossible to successfully define an identity. It is "fundamentally unstable, ... a shifting field of only temporarily meaningful significations." (Talbert, 2001, p. 5). Languages specific to a community could be considered a defining characteristic. However, it is also one way groups marginalize themselves from other people (Talbert, 2001, p. 5 - 6). If the discussion cannot be accessed by others, it creates further distance between groups, developing an 'us' and 'them' opposition.

The parvenue is defined as "a person who has newly acquired wealth or influence, but has not yet acquired the acceptance or social qualifications associated with it." (Talbert, 2001, p. 1). I found the idea of the parvenue relevant to my work because it reminded me of the gender proofing of school books in recent years. Theoretically, if books have been deemed not to present stereotypical portrayals of gender, one could expect to encounter a range of untraditional and more

traditional portrayals of masculinity and femininity. I hope my investigations will find this to be the case, but I suspect that pink boys will feature far less frequently than tomboys.

Talburt (2001) advocates for a more open and receptive dialogue between narrators and scholars to reinvigorate social foundations academia. Hopefully, by critically analyzing the ways non-hegemonic masculinities are included or excluded in textbooks, I can contribute to that cause.

Jackson (2007) conducted interviews with children about representations of gender and work in illustrations in early childhood readers. Her analysis of these interviews was very informative both in terms of analyzing visual material myself, and the importance of continuing research in this field. Children interviewed read deeply into the illustrations. Jackson used feminist poststructuralist analyses to examine representations in illustrations and how children made sense of them (p. 61). Children were found to have access to both egalitarian and gendered discourses (p. 69), as well as being “active producers of meaning”, drawing on their own “experiences and observations of the social world so that their understandings may piece together fragments from various social texts” (p. 64). Throughout the article, Jackson acknowledges the multiplicity of readings available of any given text and the importance of considering context.

In her conclusion, Jackson stated “the wider issue of children’s storybooks as one of many cultural resources through which children may come to make sense of self, other and gender, [had] been an



influential factor in motivating [her] study”(p. 76). I feel similarly towards the investigation of levelled readers as material we ask children to engage with nearly daily. I agree with Jackson when she writes that early school readers are “contextualized within a realist mode and are accordingly more geared toward reproducing or reflecting what they perceive to be the social worlds of their child audience (albeit a white middle class social world)” (2007, p. 76). The reader is left wondering at the end of the article if worlds without gender hierarchies, be that the child’s reality or not, were represented in early school readers more often, could they help to produce a society where gender inequalities were less likely to exist.

Despite developments and increased visibility since the gay liberation movement, society is undeniably heteronormative and gender binary. For many, these two aspects of life, that one will be either male or female and sexually attracted to members of the opposite gender, can be taken for granted, as members of the LGBTQ community will attest. Even in the primary/elementary school classroom this is the case (De Palma & Atkinson, 2009, 880-882; Ryan, 2016, p. 85-86). In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler examines the relationship between normative sexuality and normative gender, and asks the question “is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts?” (p. xi). I, therefore, feel it is relevant to examine the pervasiveness of heteronormativity and lack of homonormativity in the course of my research, as although they are not the same issue, they appear to be inextricably linked, particularly in the cases of the LGBTQ minority.

This understanding led to my reading of Sunderland and McGlashan's "Heteronormativity in EFL textbooks and in two genres of children's literature (Harry Potter and same-sex parent picturebooks)". The article examines heteronormativity in three sections. Firstly, it collates a number of studies on heteronormativity in English as a Foreign Language textbooks. It then briefly looks at criticisms of the heteronormativity in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series as well as proposed queer readings of the saga. Finally, the authors present their own analysis on Same-sex Parent Family Picturebooks and the ways parents in these books are identified (relational identification like 'dad', informalization like 'Eric', or relational identification and informalization like 'Mummy Fran'). I found the authors' explanation of what they meant by representation and why it is significant to be particularly useful and accessible.

"Representation can be seen as always a set of *choices* (e.g. words and/or (juxtaposed) images), made from a wider pool. As a set of choices, a representation is never a simple mirror on 'reality'. This understanding of representation entails creativity, agency and intention (or at least consciousness) on the part of the writer and/or image-maker, while the availability and desirability of choices is always filtered through ideology and socially-shaped beliefs."  
(Sunderland & McGlashan, 2015, p. 17)

Throughout the article, the authors are very understanding of the global market of EFL textbooks, and the business sense it makes to use heteronormative examples in textbooks so that they can be used in societies where homosexuality is legal and accepted, as well as societies where it is not (p. 24). They are, however, critical of the lack of ambiguous examples included in textbooks, where queer readings

could be possible, particularly when textually ambiguous examples are fortified as being heteronormative by inclusion of a heteronormativity-affirming image (p. 19). They suggest that inclusion of less explicitly heteronormative narratives and pairings, such as single parent families, close same-sex friendships and males in childcare roles, could allow for more non-heteronormative readings (p. 20). This suggestion pointed my attention to the possible readings of pairings and sexualities during analysis.

The findings made by Sutherland and McGlashan that are relevant to my work are: lesbian couples are represented more frequently than gay couples; and that mothers in same-sex relationships were twice as likely to be represented as using a relational identification (such as mum) than fathers, who were most likely to be represented as using an informalization (such as Steve)(p. 23). The significance of this is that women are more likely to be represented as child-carer, and that role in their life is considered significant enough to become part of the title they are known by. Men are less likely to be seen in this role of primary child-carer, which harkens back to gender-stereotyping, and again, that they are more individuals than fathers, or at least, that being a father is less likely to define them, than motherhood defines women. I would be quite surprised to find same-sex parents in sets of levelled texts published in the early 2000s, but it will be interesting to see how long it takes for examples to appear in classroom materials in the wake of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Ireland and the UK.

Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s (Davies, 1989; Anderson & Many, 1992; Trousdale, 1995) indicated providing children with literature featuring characters in non-traditional gender roles was not an effective way to expand their definitions of masculinity and femininity (Rice, 2002, p. 33). Separately, Rice conducted a study with a co-educational third grade class to investigate the development of their perceptions of masculinity and femininity during the scheme of work based on four books featuring protagonists in non-traditional gender roles.

One of the major challenges faced by Rice while conducting her study was resistance from the school superintendent. Throughout her time with the class, he daily walked past the classroom, and stopped to observe in the classroom at least weekly. The superintendent only consented to the study when Rice agreed to change the title “so that the word “gender” did not appear on the letter of informed consent” (Rice, p. 34). After consent forms were sent home, Rice was also contacted by a parent concerned about her son being exposed to homosexuality. This seems to indicate that a proportion of the population are still concerned with men and women displaying characteristics not traditionally associated with men or women. Although Rice had difficulty acquiring realistic fiction picture books with protagonists in non-traditional gender roles this was particularly acute in the case of male characters (Rice, p. 34).

Over the course of the study, Rice had the opportunity to examine the children’s definitions of masculinity and femininity several

times during a number of activities she set them. By comparing their definitions over time, she was able to judge whether or not the activities had affected their views of masculinity and femininity. Generally, the class were more accepting of women with non-traditional characteristics, such as characters likely to be labelled “tomboys”, than they were of boys in roles deemed feminine, such as caring for the elderly or tap dancing. She found that by engaging more meaningfully with the books, through transmediation<sup>1</sup> activities and discussions with both peers and adults, representations in literature of characters in non-traditional roles can help to expand children’s definitions of masculinity and femininity.

Rice’s research both criticises and supports my research. Her theory that children’s definitions of masculinity and femininity can only be expanded through deeper, more meaningful engagement by means of transmediation activities would mean that research like mine into the forms of masculinities represented in readers was of little consequence. However, the possibilities of different ways of performing gender needed to be presented to the children before many of them would carefully consider alternatives to traditional and stereotypical displays.

A comparative study of two primary school English language textbooks published for use in Hong Kong examined gender representation in two series of books, one published in the 1980s, and the other published in 2005 (Lee, 2014). The study used quantitative

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Transmediation’ is the word Rice uses to refer the moving of story from one mode of communication to another, e.g. text to theatre (Rice, 2002, p. 33)

methods to investigate the ratio of female to male appearances in the text and in visual elements, the prevalence of male firstness, and the extent of gender stereotyping regarding the association of females with the private arena and males with the public arena.

Lee's hypothesis that male firstness would occur less frequently in the newer publication was disproven. The study found no major difference regarding the order of mention in the two series. This occurrence could be attributed to the fact that both series were written by the same authors.

The study was conducted with the changing place of women in society in mind, and hypotheses about the increased representation of women were posited. Lee found women to be more frequently represented and in slightly more diverse roles in the more recent publication. Although Lee found that females were more equitably represented in the newer publication, closer inspection of the context of their appearance revealed that many of them were in conjunction with familial/domestic roles. Similar gender stereotyping was remarkable in a chapter relating to a police investigation, where most of the secondary characters were male. Lee, citing Harrington, states that counting the number of appearances of female and male characters is considered more objective (p. 369). However, having conducted this research, Lee asserts that increased frequency of representation is "not sufficient" (p. 369). Lee noted that the quantitative nature of the study restricted some of the interpretation of the data. For example, although women were depicted more often in occupational roles, Lee felt that the

choice of occupations did not always challenge gender stereotypes (p. 371). I hope that my qualitative approach will prevent me from encountering similar frustrations.

In this section I have examined key theories and pieces of research which have informed my own study. Renold (2004) and Foucault's (1982) work show how identities of "Other" are created through reflexive and interactive positionings by means of discourse. Butler's (1990) theory of performativity suggests that each act in our daily lives contributes to how we "do" gender. The theory suggests that gender is fluid, dynamic and unique to individuals despite the prevalent representations of the gender binary in society. Many studies, like those of Lee (2014) and Blumberg (2008; 2014), have found that women are underrepresented in textbooks, both visually and in text, and when they are represented, it is often in stereotypical roles like domestic settings or working in occupations like nursing or teaching. Studies of children's literature have similar findings, with passive female characters and active, loud, clever male characters (Tsao, 2008, p. 110). Although representation of women in these kinds of literature is improving, depictions of men are often still stereotypical (Rice, 2002, p. 34). Heteronormativity is also dominant in children's literature (Sunderland & McGlashan, 2015) and primary school classrooms (De Palma & Atkinson, 2009, 880-882; Ryan, 2016, p. 85-86). These theories and studies have influenced this research project in its development and analysis. The next section will discuss the development of the research project and its methodology.

### **Methodology**

This research took the form of document analysis. Therefore, the primary concerns of this section are processes used to select and obtain documents for analysis, methods of analysis used, why these methods were selected, how they were applied to the documents in question, and how findings were arrived at and collected. A series of levelled texts were examined in this study, and this section will outline why these kinds of texts are popular in school and why they should be subject to scrutiny. Grounded theory and discourse analysis informed analysis methods. Some potential limitations of the study are acknowledged, and a statement of positionality is included.

To facilitate guided reading in junior end classrooms, many schools use levelled reading schemes. There are many benefits to using these schemes, primarily the ease with which they allow teachers to acutely differentiate for students according to their own levels of ability with regards to reading (Fang and Pitcher, 2007, p. 43). Reading Recovery is a literacy intervention programme for learners who have completed at least one year in school but made significantly less progress with literacy than their peers (European Centre for Reading Recovery, 2013, p. 3). The PM+ series analysed in this study is available in thirty different levels, which correspond to Reading Recovery levels 1 – 30. Of the schools implementing the Reading Recovery programme in Ireland in 2013, over half were DEIS schools, and boys participating in the programme outnumbered girls by nearly three to two (European Centre for Reading Recovery, 2013, p.7).



Participating in the Reading Recovery programme involves a daily one-to-one session lasting thirty minutes (European Centre for Reading Recover, 2013, p. 4). A significant portion of this time is spent working with levelled readers to develop skills required to be a successful reader. The Reading Recovery programme is additional to time spent on literacy in the main classroom. Children participating in Reading Recovery and children using levelled texts as part of their general literacy programme spend substantial amounts of time working with these materials. It is therefore important that the materials are of high quality, both in terms of their appropriateness as tools for language instruction and in terms of the rich, diverse world view they present to students.

### **Sampling**

Initially, for this research project, it was intended to examine the entire collection of levelled readers being used in a school. By examining the entire series being used by the school the researcher would be in an authoritative position to comment on the masculinities the series represented, exalted and marginalised. However, a number of circumstances rendered this impractical for this piece of research. The series contains 354 titles (Randell, 2003), including fiction and non-fiction. To facilitate developing readers, lower level books contain less text, more repetition and many high frequency words. As a way of narrowing the sample, I chose to only examine the chapter books at the end of the series (levels 25 – 30). The logic behind this was that more text and a greater variety of language would provide a richer insight into

the characters and attitudes included in the series, even with a smaller sample. Despite this reduction, the sample still included 60 texts. The sample was further narrowed by only including fiction books in the analysis. Although writing of any kind is a selective process, fiction writing is especially so. Editors, authors and illustrators could have included anything in these readers, and chose to include these attitudes and characters. By doing so, they valued these ideas about others that were not included. Fictional writing also counts for the majority of the series.

I have included brief summaries of the books analysed as part of the study below.

Artefact A: *Bowled Over!* (Greenaway, 2002) charts Callum's relationship with his grandfather. He gains self-confidence by learning to be a successful bowler.

Artefact B: *Scamp* (Weeks, 2002) documents a visually impaired boy's friendship with a possum at his holiday home and how he overcomes his fear and dislike of dogs with help from his uncle and his uncle's dog Scamp.

Artefact C: *Ironkid* (Wolfer, 2003b) is the story of Zac. Many people call Zac a dreamer because he likes to daydream, write, draw and observe life around him. This book shows how Zac is determined to impress his father by completing this year's Ironkid race.

Artefact D: *The Beast* (Bell, 2003) tells the story of Bryn's relationship with Drago, the bull on the family's new farm. Despite their

initially antagonistic relationship, Bryn is very concerned when Drago goes missing and he finds him stuck in the dam.

Artefact E: *Night Fishing* (Scott, 2003) sees active Nat on an overnight fishing trip with her father. Nat must think quickly and take action when her father is knocked unconscious in an accident after dark.

Artefact F: *Underground Adventure* (Graf, 2003) is about Nina, a girl who becomes separated from her parents and the rest of the group while touring a network of underground caves by floating on inner tubes.

Artefact G: *Elissa and the Stone* (Mitchell, 2003) is about not letting fear prevent action. When Elissa's brother reminds her that her stage-fright might prevent her from effectively running for student council, she has a dream about a dwarf named Shale. In the dream she goes on an adventure with Shale to destroy a cursed stone kept by an evil tyrant in his magical fortress.

Artefact H: *Being Billy* (Wolfer, 2003a) is about the relationship between Billy, a boy with Down's Syndrome, and his older brother, Andrew. When Andrew goes to high school, he begins to treat Billy differently and is embarrassed by him. That is, until Billy gets a recurring role on a local soap-opera.

Artefact I: *Boys Don't Dance!* (Lindquist, 2002) Luke is torn about whether or not to join a local class after he discovers the joys of dance for the first time. Despite being taunted by the school bully, Luke is encouraged by his mother and the male dancers he sees in films.

Artefact J: *The Man Who Sat in the Park* (Schofield, 2003) is homeless man, Stanislav. Bradley's diary tells how he becomes friends with Stan and volunteers at the men's shelter. Bradley's parents help him to remember happy times with his friend after Stan's sudden death.

Artefact K: *Needing a Friend* (McMillan, 2003) charts the friendship of Tony and a new boy in his class, Jamie. Jamie has Asperger's syndrome but shows his friendship by meeting Tony and his dog everyday, and promising to look after the dog when Tony goes to boarding school.

### **Limitations**

A possible limitation of this study is that convenience sampling was used to access data. The books analysed were also in use by the students, and, therefore, a copy of every book in the series was not available during analysis. The PM+ series is not the only set of levelled texts in use in Ireland. A way to strengthen and improve on this research in the future would be to conduct research across the country to investigate the popularity of different levelled readers in primary schools. The results of this would aid in calculating the generalisability of the findings of reader analysis.

### **Analysis and Coding**

Analysis methods for this project were informed in part by grounded theory. Grounded theory makes use of systematic methods, including theoretical sampling, constant comparison between coded materials, identification of a core variable and saturation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 598).

The central idea within grounded theory is that the theory arrived at by the researcher at the end of the research was already in existence within the data, and simply required the researcher to examine the data in order to find it (Cohen et al., 2011 p. 598). By thoroughly examining the data, the researcher can make new connections between pieces of information which reveal complex truths. The phenomena described at the end of the research have always been present within the data, but it is only after systematic analysis and comparison that they can be identified. The theory is therefore said to be grounded in the data.

Researchers cannot be certain about the results and theories that will emerge from their analysis of data before commencing work. The theoretical sampling employed in grounded theory means that the sample can be added to as analysis progresses. As the researcher begins coding and analyzing the data, themes, ideas and key features begin to emerge. The central theory arrived at may not be provable from the sample selected at the beginning of the project and may need to be added to, as was the case with this project. Analysis is continued until the core variable reaches saturation point. Saturation refers to the point at which the researcher's theory continues to hold true regardless of the amount of new data included (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 601). The original sample did not discriminate against books with female protagonists, and several were included (Artefacts E, F and G). However, after analysis E and F yielded very little information about masculinities. In order to gather confirm or deny findings from other

books, books H, I and J were added to the study, analysed and compared with the other books.

Coding the artefacts took place in a number of phases. Initially, each book was read as a whole to gain a superficial impression of the book, the impression one might have if reading the book in isolation with a child at home. Next, key features of the book were recorded. these included the number of named male characters, the number of named female characters, the number of unnamed male characters, the number of unnamed female characters, genders of authority figures in the text, genre of the text, and any remarkable themes or words encountered on first reading. As the analysis progressed, these records also included notes about other texts which immediately came to mind for comparison.

After these initial notes, the researcher engaged in open coding. Open coding is the practice of identifying units of data within the artifact for analysis, marking the unit in some way, and recording it for comparison later. Units marked for comparison within these artefacts included the gender of the initiator of conversations, same gender and opposite gender relationships, the gender of authority and role-model figures, power relationships between characters, personality traits, colours, words and activities associated with particular characters.

Open coding resulted in a large collection of data, which although interesting, was difficult to make coherent. In order to navigate the material more strategically, open codes are grouped together in a practice known as axial coding (Cohen et al., 2011, p.

600). Verbs and adverbs relating to speech seemed to fall into two groups: loud and aggressive or soft and passive. Authority figures could be classified according to whether or not they were presented as benefitting the protagonist. Male characters could be grouped according to their status within the hierarchy of masculinities within the community of their story. It is important to note that not all characters grouped within marginalised masculinities were marginalised for the same reasons. Similarly, not all the characters grouped as hegemonically dominant could be considered to perform their masculinity in the same way. It is unlikely that all characters grouped as hegemonically dominant would maintain that status if they were in community together. However, their group was determined based on the status they occupied within the community and story they featured in.

### **Ethics**

There were few ethical concerns relating to this project, as the document analysis did not bring the researcher into contact with any vulnerable individuals and the information being examined is available in the public domain.

Early in the process, I had concerns about the validity of conducting research on masculinities as a woman. Throughout the process, I have been acutely aware of the need for reflexivity in relation to this research. While endeavoring to remain as unbiased as possible during the selection, analysis and writing process, it is impossible to do so entirely. My analysis is shaped by my thinking, understanding and

experience; it is directly related to me. S. J. Smith refers to “the active role of the analyst’s *self* which is exercised throughout the research process” (as cited in England, 1994). As such, it seems appropriate to include a statement of positionality to acknowledge how my background may affect the findings of this research. I am a white, middle-class, cisgendered Irish woman. My mother and father both always lived in the family home, and my life was generally reflected back to me in the materials I encountered in school. I consider myself a feminist in the sense that I believe everyone should be treated equally regardless of their gender. I recognise the patriarchal roots around me in society and the disadvantages women experience as a result. In my own life, I endeavour to treat men and women equally and to actively engage with work and conversations that challenge systems benefitting men over women. My belief that people should be treated equally extends to those who perform gender in untraditional ways, and those who do not fit into the heterosexual matrix (Butler, p. 194). I recognise that, like women, marginalised masculinities suffer because of the perceptions many societies hold regarding gender, dominance and power.

I have explained the role of levelled texts in primary school classrooms, and outlined the methods and reasons for selecting and narrowing the data sample. I have explained the coding process used to break down the data. Brief summaries of the books analysed have been included. I have acknowledged limitations of the study and given my statement of positionality. Now I would like to present the results of



my analysis and discuss the implications they could have in the classroom.

### **Analysis, Findings and Discussion**

Of the eleven books analysed, most had male protagonists, with only *Night Fishing*, *Underground Adventure* and *Elissa and the Stone* having female protagonists. All texts featured characters of both genders. The gender of the authors and illustrators appeared to have little impact on the characters, plot or visual representations.

The majority of the male protagonists did not perform their masculinity in a way considered hegemonic within the universe of their story initially. Indeed, the crux of the stories surrounded this fact. Subordinated and marginalised masculinities achieved acceptance by participating in behaviour associated with the hegemonic masculinity, such as displays of physical capability, activities traditionally gendered as masculine and heterosexual behaviour. Complicit masculinities managed to maintain their status once engagement with activities considered feminine ceased. Only one story finished with a boy who continued to choose to construct his identity through non-hegemonic discourses (Renold, 2004, p. 251).

The theme of masculinity was brought to fore in each book in a number of ways. Protagonists sought approval from male authority figures. Key relationships were often between male characters, and rarely did boys have female friends. Female authority figures were only involved in the key relationship in the absence of a male authority figure, such as in single mother families. Masculinities were often constructed in opposition with weakly drawn female characters and femininities. Physically developed and capable bodies, aggressive

behaviour and language were associated with dominant masculinities and name-calling and humiliation were strategies used to police subordinated performances of masculinity.

*Bowled Over!*, *Ironkid* and *Scamp* all featured male protagonists who developed their relationship with a male authority figure through engaging in hegemonically masculine practices. *Bowled Over!* and *Ironkid* dealt with boys striving to achieve success in physical activities in order to fall in line with social expectations. Both of these stories also showed the development of new physical skills and involvement in physical competitions as a bonding experience between the protagonist and a beloved male authority figure. In *Scamp*, Uncle Ray helps Dylan overcome his fear of dogs. Emphasis is laid on the assistance of these male authority figures in the texts.

The importance of these male authority figures is heightened because they are contrasted with very thinly drawn secondary female characters. In each book, the femininity of these characters is accentuated by their appearance in illustrations and close association with traditionally feminine spaces and occupations like the home and teaching.

In *Bowled Over!* the protagonist, Callum, scoffs at his mother's suggestion that he should join a bowling league. However, he goes on to ask his grandfather's opinion on the matter and, once sanctioned, joins the league and expresses how much he thoroughly enjoys it (p. 17 – 20). This behaviour indicates that he places more trust in the advice he receives from his grandfather than in advice from his mother. His

mother's unsuitability to aid him in his bowling endeavours is highlighted in the illustration on page 14, as she attends the bowling alley in a pencil skirt and high heels. These hyper-feminine signifiers are in sharp contrast with the casual trousers and flat running shoes worn by everyone else in the book.

Masculinity of any kind only exists within a system of gender hierarchy (Connell, 2005, p. 71). The system of gender relations in contemporary European/American contexts is patriarchal (p. 74). The dominant group of men subordinates both women and other men. Less powerful men are perceived as being closer to women within this structure. In *Bowled Over!*, Callum distances himself from his mother and ingratiates himself with his grandfather, increasing his perceived power. The grandfather is able to offer Callum things his mother cannot. He can give his perspective as a man, has trophies to prove his knowledge and skills related to athletic proficiency and has the ability to satisfactorily reassure Callum. Through his strong relationship with his grandfather, the protagonist can distance himself from his relationship with his mother and he endeavours to counteract the behaviour that marginalised him from mainstream expressions of masculinity, such as ineptitude at sports (p. 7). In her ethnographic study, Renold found that boys largely constructed their gender-identity and "'boy-ness' in opposition to girls and femininity" (2004, p. 258 – 260). Callum's actions, words and attitudes in *Bowled Over!* seem to approve of that method of construction. We cannot expect children to

treat all people equally regardless of gender if we encourage them from a young age to base their identities on opposition with another gender.

Similar to the grandfather/grandson relationship in *Bowled Over!*, is the father/son relationship in *Ironkid*, which sees Zac encouraged by his father as he participates in a triathlon for the first time. Zac's main source of motivation and assistance is his father. Repeatedly, while participating in the event, Zac focuses on his father, reminding himself how pleased his dad was to hear he was taking part in the competition. There is no mention of the mother's reaction, even though we know that she is invested in Zac's ability to swim. There is also no evidence of her attending the race. Zac cares immensely about what his father thinks, and apparently, not at all about his mother. As he struggles to finish the race, he concentrates on his father's face rather than the finish line. It is clear that the need to please his father is the ultimate goal of participating in this race. "This is *fun*," I tell myself. "You *want* to do it. You *chose* to do it!" I can't really convince myself, but muttering helps" (*Ironkid*, p. 26).

Zac obviously associates his father closely with swimming, surfing and sports. He mentions his father as president and past champion of the surf club, a lifeguard (p. 5) and as regularly placing approximately fifth in the annual Ironman challenge (p.10). He laments that he is not more like his father with regards to these sports (p. 22), but recalls the instruction his father has given him in relation to technique (p. 14).

Comparing the relationships between these boys and their mothers with the boys and their respective father figures suggests that father figures are of greater importance to boys. The progression of these relationships alongside the development of new physical skill indicates that achieving success in physical activities is how to gain the approval of a powerful, dominant male figure. The assistance that mothers provide is entirely overlooked, and they easily fall into stereotypes of 'nags' or 'work-obsessed career-woman'. Mothers not understanding or appreciating the significance of problems boys experienced was a motif found in several books with male protagonists (*Bowled Over!*, *Scamp*, *The Beast*, *Boys Don't Dance*, *The Man Who Sat in the Park*, and *Needing a Friend*). Books with female protagonists did not feature lack of understanding from anyone in relation to their problem.

*Being Billy* and *Boys Don't Dance!* were two books that had female authority figures in the form of single mothers. Both mothers encouraged their sons to pursue their talents, despite teasing from other boys. Luke's mother in *Boys Don't Dance* advises him not to worry too much about what other people think (p. 29) and helps him to explore his new interest by providing him with videos showing examples of male dancers and a supportive home environment where he can feel safe to experiment and dance. All the supportive characters in this text are females, although there are a boy and an androgynous character included in illustrations on pages 10, 11 and 14. As a woman, I cannot say certainly that Luke's female family, dance

teacher or myself, can fully understand the pressures he is under to conform. Future research would benefit from the perspective of men who had lived experiences of such situations.

In several stories, boys are dubious about expressing affection in front of other boys or men. This falls in line with the patterns of emotion schools impress on their pupils through their gender regimes (Connell, 1996, p. 213). In *Bowled Over!* both characters begin by signing their emails “Love, [name of writer]”. Although the hegemonically masculine grandfather is steadfast in his use of this expression of affection, Callum’s use of the expression wavers throughout. In moments when he lacks confidence, he reverts to signing his name without any affection attached. It requires extra confidence to behave in a way he knows could be construed by some as feminine. It is risky behaviour because it threatens his place in the hierarchy of masculinities.

In *The Beast*, Bryn refuses to admit his affection for the bull even to himself. Noticing that the animal has not been near the fence for a few days and having bought a packet of peppermints which he knows the animal enjoys, he must “quickly remind” himself that they “weren’t for Drago” (p. 23). At the end of the story, the protagonist leads a successful rescue of the animal from danger, with tears streaming down his muddy cheeks (p. 31). But even such an experience will not allow him to vocally admit his fondness for the animal, “But this still doesn’t mean we’re friends!” (p. 32). Bryn, too, chooses not to display affection in order to preserve the appearance of a ‘hard’ masculinity.

The difficulty of expressing affection and friendship in acceptable ways is also brought to the fore in *Being Billy*. Before Andrew goes to high school, he is happy to let Billy play with him and his friend, and warmly encourages his brother (p. 4-5). This offers readers an example of a very caring and inclusive relationship. Age differences of one or two years can have social significance for children, but that is disregarded in this relationship. Andrew and his friend do not care that Billy has Down's syndrome. After he begins attending high school and making new friends, however, their relationship changes dramatically. Andrew is reluctant to spend time with Billy, invite him places and does little to prevent his new friends from making Billy feel uncomfortable. Captured in a small vignette is the stinging moment when Andrew physically pulls away from Billy, refusing to hold his hand in the supermarket (p.7). We are led to believe that this was a common practice in the past. Billy's ways of expressing himself do not conform to Andrew's new understanding of how he should behave. Later, Billy acquires social capital through a job working on a television programme. It is only after this that Andrew can bring himself to apologise for his behaviour and to express his love for his brother again, albeit in a modified form.

By showing children in schools multiple examples of boys encouraged to subdue their emotions and affections, or only express them in a specific way, schools create communities where this is the norm. Communal norms have large impact on the way people view and express themselves. For this reason, schools, through their



gender regimes and gendered practices, can be said to make masculinities (Connell, 1996).

Male/male friendships were central to seven of the eight books with male protagonists. Alternative ways of expressing affection that were acceptable in dominantly masculine relationships included engaging in sports and competing against each other, sharing property, playing together (examples were stereotypically masculine if not sports) and giving each other a “friendly push” (*Needing a Friend*, McMillan, 2003, p.4). Only one contained a male/female friendship. But the male in this relationship was not part of the hegemonic or complicit masculinity groups. He was a dwarf whose small stature was repeatedly referenced, as well as how ill prepared he was to engage in the war he was keen to participate in. In conjunction with the idea that masculinities are constructed in opposition to femininities, which many of these books suggest, the emphasis on Shale’s appearance and attempts at action imply that his masculinity is lesser than those of other males in the story. His aggressive language and desire to join the fighting function as regular reminders of his masculinity.

Combative language, aggressive behaviour, a focus on competitiveness and disassociation with women and all things feminine were features that defined hegemonic masculinities in this sample. Disassociation from all things feminine included policing of masculinities that did not conform to their definitions of masculinity. Involvement with domestic work like cooking and childcare threatened some expressions of masculinity. This is unsurprising, as both

activities were exclusively associated with women in all the books studied. Policing also entailed demeaning others who engaged in such activities. This regularly took the form of name-calling, laughing and exclusion. The concept of policing involves one party having vested power over another party. Hegemonic masculinities defended their position of social authority and power by demeaning others. When this behaviour was criticized, it was always by an adult authority and never a peer. It would have been beneficial to see an example of the power of peer support, rather than relying on higher positions of authority.

One of the books, *Boys Don't Dance*, directly addresses the pressure on young boys to conform to imposed gender norms. Unlike music, which it is closely related to, dance is culturally gendered. The reactions of the protagonist, Luke, and the bully who taunts him about his interest in dance, indicate that this is a prevalent belief for boys their age. The dance teacher's statement that they "need some more boys" confirms that the belief is wide-spread, and the lack of boys in the school supports the notion that dance is something only girls are interested in. This creates a cycle that feeds itself.

The text's allusions to dance films provided by Luke's mother to support her insistence that "Lots of men dance" (p. 19) are very vague. One would have to be aware of the Fred Astaire's dance routine in *Royal Wedding* (Freed, 1951) to know that dances referred to in the text are real. Although reading the book can provoke thought and conversation, as Rice's (2002) study shows, reading books is not enough. Witnessing the skill attached to dancing and watching men

“without the tights” (p. 27) dancing is what convinces Luke to change his mind about the gendering of dance. A note at the end of the book mentioning artists like Astaire could guide children wanting to know more, and aid parents and teachers trying to open the conversation into a more meaningful learning experience that engages multiple intelligences.

Although inclusion of a story that addresses and challenges perceptions of masculinity in the series shows steps towards broadening definitions of masculinities, it is disappointing that the story finishes as Luke decides to attend the class. The text is unspecific about the ominous fate that awaits Luke if anyone at school discovered his interest in dance. He endures name-calling and humiliation tactics before there is even evidence of his activities. While it is a triumphant moment when Luke tells the bully that he will dance, it would be of benefit to show the aftermath of this incident. Evidence in the story indicates that he will suffer as a result of his decision. I believe that it would have been possible and valuable for the book to show both the negative and positive reactions from Luke’s peers to his decision. I initially wondered if the low level of the book restricted the author from doing this, as they may have been limited in the number of pages or chapters they could include. However, after revisiting *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979), I was reminded of how possible it is to succinctly and effectively convey the positive and supportive views of peers.

With a high focus on adventure and activity, the majority of the books studied did not celebrate non-hegemonic masculinities. Rather they encouraged conforming with society's expectations and norms, particularly in regard to gender regimes cultivated through schools and sports activities. Even non-hegemonically masculine characters viewed in a positive light often had some aspect of their personhood highlighted and distained. Frequently, this aspect related to their appearance or physical ability. Although I do not think these representations are not problematic in themselves, when they occur in abundance or exclusively I do. "Gender role identity is important to children's self-perception" (Tsao, 2008, p. 108) and to constantly portray someone as lesser because of the way they "do" gender could have detrimental affects on their sense of self and self-worth.

### Conclusion

The texts examined indicate that traditional expressions of the gender binary are most highly valued. Non-hegemonic masculinities are presented as acceptable provided they make efforts to practice some hegemonically masculine behaviours. Protagonists were not typically part of the dominant group, and their desire to fulfill society's perceived expectations of them was often central to the plot and character development. This speaks to children's innate need to belong to a group, but also encourages them to conform. Bullies were defeated only by 'proving' possession of an 'acceptable' masculinity through successful participation in sports. Marginalised individuals were accepted when they displayed talent in an 'approved' area. Protagonists performing complicit masculinities ceased to engage in 'feminine' activities before the close of the book. Overall, non-hegemonic masculinities were not lauded in this sample.

Name-calling and humiliation were strategies most frequently used to police masculinities. In these instances, attention was drawn to the differences between the two male characters (who are expected to perform masculinity in a particular way), and the similarities between the subordinated or marginalised male and girls or perceived feminine behaviour. Non-hegemonic behaviours included expressing affection, not taking interest in sports, and engaging in activities that the dominant group considered feminine, such as the arts and domestic activities. Masculinities were often constructed in opposition with femininities. The negative connotations attached to femininities implies that women

are inherently inferior to men. Hegemonically masculine boys rarely had female friends. Secondary female characters regularly had weak characterisations and were closely associated with the domestic realm.

The combination of negative sentiments linked to femininities and the acceptance of non-hegemonic masculinities only when they publicly engaged with hegemonically masculine behaviour confirms and agrees with a system of gender relations featuring a hierarchy of masculinities within a patriarchy. A society where anyone benefits over others because of the way they perform their gender is not gender equal. Therefore, these books do not profess gender equality. However, female protagonists were not portrayed stereotypically and their stories were the most adventurous. I attribute this to the heightened awareness around gender equality and the necessity to portray girls in non-stereotypical roles to comply with gender-proofing standards. Positive messages about gender equality should not be reserved for books with female protagonists. In future, more effort should be made by writers, illustrators and editors of levelled text sets to ensure that gender equality is exhibited in their books, regardless of the gender of the protagonist.

I do not believe that producers of materials such as those analysed intended to disparage women or promote the value of hegemonic masculinities above other performances of gender. The results of this study may not be very generalisable because of the small sample size. However, given that the findings were consistent with previous studies of children's literature and textbooks, (Crisp & Hiller,

2011; Blumberg, 2014; Lee, 2014) the attitudes presented in the books may reflect the society in which they were written and published, and some may agree that they reflect the practices of society in Ireland. Like Talburt's parvenue (2001), gender equality is not yet accepted in a practical way that reflects the idealised way we talk about it. If we believe that gender equality is truly possible within our lifetime, and I hope it is, we should include such a reality in the realistic fiction we provide to children.

“Everything we read... constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men” (Fox, 1993, p. 152). The books that we provide children with should empower them to express themselves freely and portray the gender equality we wish to see in the world.

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