

The Boy in the Dress: queering Mantle of the Expert

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In this paper I offer a queer analysis of several key moments during a Mantle of the Expert (MoE) project that resulted in Year 5 children creating performances and engaging with heightened versions of gendered femininity in their primary school. I will refer to theoretical notions of transvestism as a means of challenging the notions of binarism, and the categories of female and male and thus ask if MoE can indeed disrupt the notion of universal meanings often found within its form.

The children's novel, *The Boy In The Dress* by David Walliams (2008) was used as a pre- text (O'Neill 2006) for a MoE project that aimed to encourage children to explore the notion of the fluidity and the construction of their own gender, and in doing so become more aware of their own role within the regulation of gender conformity. DePalma and Atkinson's (2008) research findings evidence that primary schools continue to reinforce the construction and conflation of sex/gender/sexuality categories and police transgressions (127).

The Boy In The Dress Project was an ongoing gender-identity drama-in-education project for Year 5 and 6 children in primary schools, which began in the form of a student residency in 2011.¹ The use of MoE was developed following this residency, initially in consultation with a group of young people all of whom identified as transgender,² and has been further developed through its delivery at a number of primary schools by undergraduate students.³ Most recently the project was facilitated with a Year 5 class at a primary school in South East London,⁴ which forms the basis of this paper.

The Boy in the Dress Project began with the children in role as undercover police and reporters with expert experience and knowledge in cases involving runaway children. They were informed by the local police officer (myself as teacher-in-role (TiR)) that Dennis, an 11-

year-old 'ordinary boy who lives in an ordinary house in an ordinary street' (Walliams 2008, 11) and who is the best football player in the school football team, has run away and has been missing for three days. As the drama evolves, the children learn that Dennis privately wears dresses, which they discover could be, in some way, the catalyst for his disappearance. In and out of a number of roles, the children interrogate the binaristic notions of gender as the drama requires them to critically reflect upon their own understandings and experiences of gender identity.

The narrative used in the MoE project differs from the novel, as in the original text Dennis does not run away. However, by introducing his disappearance into the drama, the children are able to bring together and author Dennis's private and public experiences by re-enacting moments from Dennis's life as they imagine it to be.

Through metaphorical exploration, the children, in role as experts, grapple with and confront the heterosexual matrix from within the fictional drama (Butler 1990, 151). A significant moment emerges when the undercover police and reporters engage in a number of activities to establish that Dennis's ordinary home has rules: 'No talking about mum. No crying. And worst of all no hugging' (Walliams 2008, 17). This is followed by Dennis's Dad (played by a student facilitator) arriving with a bag full of fabrics, dresses, a CD of Madonna's *Vogue* and *Vogue*-style magazines, all belonging to Dennis. Dad awkwardly informs the police and reporters that he has confiscated these items from Dennis. The police, working in small groups, offer their analysis of the items, including a deconstruction of the images from the magazines. The children then switch roles and, as 'actors' especially brought in for the case, perform representations of Dennis in his bedroom.

In teams, the actors work quickly to re-create images from the magazines by sculpting one another's bodies, draping fabrics, and wearing dresses. They choreograph each other, counting and strutting to the *Vogue* music, bringing a serious creative playfulness to the task and creating carnivalesque repeated performative acts (Butler 1988). This 'liberating mockery through which official ideology and oppressive norms and taboos can be parodied and hence humanized' (Winston 1998, 127) enables the children to go beyond the institutionalised gender norms. The children's classroom is transformed as the pupils confidently perform their

routines with heightened versions of femininity and heightened campness.⁵ Gaber refers to transvestism not as a critique of gender roles, but as 'a critique of gender itself as a category' (1992, 9). Within this MoE project, all the children were required to imitate gender. Perhaps by doing so, the drag exposed the 'imitative structure of gender itself' (1992, 137).

When asked to reflect upon the project, some of the children shared:

I could be like I have never been at school in front of the class . . . We did it to understand how Dennis was feeling. It helped . . .

We got to try on dresses and every time I went round I put on different material and everyone was cheering in a good way. It felt great.

(Year 5 pupils from Edmund Waller School, March 2012)

Returning to Dennis's bedroom, the final group of five children (re)perform as Dennis, watched by the undercover police and reporters. Unexpectedly, the music abruptly ends, and Dennis's Dad appears in the bedroom staring at those children role-playing Dennis. He says, 'You are not my son'. As TiR, I then ask for a volunteer police officer to sculpt the first Dennis into a position that might reflect his response to his father's utterance. This child, in role, sculpts Dennis into a cowering position with his head and eyes lowered. The other four children also representing Dennis (without any cue) also position themselves in response to his Dad.

One of the children, in-role as Dennis, looked towards the father and said 'Will you never understand?'. Then, without any encouragement, other children who were watching spontaneously approached Dennis and physically linked up with him and created a wall, looking in defiance at Dennis's Dad. Winston quotes O'Neill:

Where the participants' sense of being both actors and audience is actively promoted, the dramatic world will be built on a powerful and effective combination of dramatic actions and active contemplation. (1998, 130)

The dramatic framing of this fictional enquiry helps the children to distance and perhaps become more conscious of their own learnt beliefs and behaviours surrounding gender identity. The children were constantly switching roles within the drama; sometimes roles allowed time for observation and more critical reflection, while other roles demanded more dialectic interactive role-play. As O'Neill states above, perhaps it is this combination of dramatic action and contemplation that enables the children to challenge these accepted 'universal meanings' (Bolton op cit) of gender with their classroom becoming a place of public empathy and activism.

Reflecting out of one role into another and another

Following on from the father-son confrontation, the children, all in-role as undercover police and reporters, were asked to discuss their findings of the case so far in relation to Dennis's gender-identity. As TiR, I took a low status, explaining that I did not understand the complexity of gender-identity in this case. My pedagogical intent was to place the children in role as experts in gender-identity and for them to reflect critically and emotionally upon their engagement with the story and with their own personal experiences. Initially in-role, the children shared their opinions about Dennis, which then rapidly developed into a child-led discussion on gender as a social construct. They listened to and built upon one another's contributions, sharing their ideas until there seemed to be some consensus surrounding their definition of gender and sex. The children volunteered (what appeared to be) their own personal gendered experiences in relation to their school, their family and friends.

At this point, I decided to come out of role and suggested we continue the discussion as ourselves and return to the fictional drama later on. The discussion continued; some struggled to find the words to express their opinions, but there was no laughter or ridicule. Instead, there were sounds of recognition. There was one boy in particular who disclosed that when he was younger he had performed in a tutu and he had wanted a doll's house and his dad had said no, and in this very moment in the classroom he was wearing pink pants. This boy brought Dennis's experiences and his own into the non-fictional present, outside of any 'protected' (Bolton 1984, 128) role-play. If we return to Butler's heterosexual matrix, it appears that often gender and sexuality are read and interpreted as interrelated, as discussed by Charles (2010), who suggests that as the boys and girls in the primary school are 'doing gender, they are

simultaneously doing sexuality' (Charles 2010, 494). Perhaps this demonstrates the complexity of such a subject matter and how MoE can potentially offer institutions a pedagogy for undoing 'universal meanings' surrounding gender and in sexuality.

In summary, the impulse for creating The Boy In The Dress Project was really about trying to offer a pedagogical space for the children to be able to hold in their minds that Dennis could be any one of them in the classroom, so that they could start to transcend the binary values and dare to step outside of the heteronormative matrix if they chose to, without fear of recrimination.

Research in Drama Education 195 Keywords: Mantle of the Expert; queering; drag; universal meanings; gender-identity; heterosexual matrix

Notes

1. The residency was facilitated by second year undergraduates (BA Drama Applied Theatre Education) from the Central School of Speech & Drama with Year 5 children at Somerhill School, Brighton.
2. All members of the Gendered Intelligence Youth Group (www.genderedintelligence.co.uk).
3. First year BA Drama Applied Theatre Education students at the Central School of Speech & Drama.
4. I would like to thank Matthew Velada-Billson and his Year 5 class at Edmund Waller Primary School.
5. Camp referring to Susan Sontag's definitions: 'no. 9 . . . Camp responds to the markedly attenuated and strongly exaggerated...and 10....Camp ... is to understand Being-as- Playing-a-Role' (Cleto 1999, 56).

Notes on contributor

Liselle Terret is a lecturer at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama on the BA Drama, Applied Theatre, Education. She has particular interests in drama and theatre in education, with a focus on inclusive practices. She is currently working in partnership with Access All Areas developing a one-year Performance Making Diploma for Learning Disabled adults at

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