

Broken promises – A novel's impact on shaping youth identity

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In many emerging economies worldwide, and in South Africa in particular, sizeable investments have been made in education with the hope of increasing literacy rates and hence producing a workforce that will fit into the job market. Thus it is important to understand the context and literacy materials within South African classrooms and their impact. This article looks at the novel *Broken promises* by Roz Haden, which is read in many South African classrooms. From a post-structural feminist theory and functional language theory, we analyse how the portrayal of characters and storyline can have an impact on young readers' identity construction in relation to the novel's predominant discourses. The findings show that men are still portrayed as dominant in their own right within society whereas women are defined in relation to men. Unchallenged, this portrayal can continue to perpetuate gendered stereotypes, which would affect young people's functionality in society. We therefore argue that while novels are good for improving literacy among young people, the messages they contain should be deconstructed and challenged so that young people can make informed decisions regarding their gender identities.

Introduction

In this article we focus on the gender constructions of girls and boys in contemporary youth literature from a South African context. Novels that youths read in schools are often read without any discussion. In such cases, students' knowledge of the relationship between gender and language can be limited or even absent; in addition, their awareness of how the connection between the social and linguistic construction of gender is implicated in daily life, where it is negotiated and visible through beliefs, speech and actions, can also be poorly developed.

This paper draws from a study about teachers' development of their literacy practice over a two-year period in two secondary schools in the Eastern Cape. The teachers found it frustrating when students in Grade 8 could not read at a satisfactory level. The teachers realised that the students needed to read much more, not only for obtaining good marks, but also for the joy of reading and for their own satisfaction. Therefore the teachers started reading projects in their classrooms through the assistance of the researchers (Lundgren, Scheckle & Zinn 2015).

A starting-point for those teachers was to find donors of books for their school: private individuals, publishers and other organisations. One of the donors was FunDza, Cover2cover, which gives out free books to many partner schools in South Africa. This publisher mostly distributes ten copies of each title from the Harmony Series. *Broken promises* by Roz Haden, which is set in a fictional township, is the first of five books in the Harmony Series. The series follows a group of teenagers at a fictional high school, Harmony High.

During an informal meeting with teachers at one of the schools, we also met some students. Through discussions with teachers and students we realised that the students liked the novels from the Harmony Series very much because they could relate to the content as it was about their real world and real-life situations, the same as they experienced daily in the townships. Furthermore, the students argued that they have learnt from the novels, for example, not to trust easily or believe everything they are told. They have also learnt to have more confidence in themselves. Therefore we decided to examine the novels more closely from a gender perspective.

We emphasise the importance of making classroom literacy practice visible and offering examples of fiction literature that challenge the status quo. This study hopes to contribute to a wider understanding of the impact that language and the content of fiction literature can have on students' identity-shaping. The aim of this article, therefore, is to provide a gendered analysis of the novel *Broken promises*. This analysis is guided by three questions: In what ways are gender and power presented in relation to women and men? What language is used to

describe women, men and the power relations between them? What gendered messages do students receive from reading the book and how can these be understood and deconstructed?

Reading in South Africa

Firstly, to understand why it is extremely important for the teachers to find books for the students we contextualise youth and reading in South Africa.

Studies have shown that the higher the socio-economic index for a country, the higher the reading and writing competency among its inhabitants (Konstantopoulos & Borman 2011). For South Africa to improve its economy, therefore, there is a need to empower its citizens with skills in order to enhance their economic contribution (UNESCO 2012). South African youth experience emotional distress in many situations because of factors such as poverty and parental absence (Eddy 2009). In the area of Port Elizabeth where the novel was read, more than 50% of the youths were living without their parents, according to Holborn and Eddy (2011). Furthermore, young people might feel hopeless when they do not know where their fathers are while at the same time they are expected to respect adult male authority. Within the area of the study community violence against women is common, making young people vulnerable in the context of absent fathers and dysfunctional families (Nduna & Jewkes 2012). Dawson (2007) found in a South African high school study that boys thought that girls valued them only because they would buy things for them, whereas the girls saw boys as providers.

Reading competence is crucial in any economy; accordingly, countries generally invest in education to promote effective reading and writing and to develop human resources. The closure of libraries and the provision of fewer reading materials such as novels in schools does not promote the creation of a reading community in South Africa (Scheckle 2015). The fact that many students in Grade 8 in South Africa have not read a children's book in primary school also creates challenges for the development of reading competence. For many students, Grade 8 could be the first time that they ever read a complete book (Bertram 2006; Scheckle 2015) because many students in South Africa come from environments where school-level literacy and reading habits are not integral to daily life (Bertram 2006; Janks 2010; Lundgren 2010; Scheckle 2015).

It is therefore important for South African teachers to consider how they can find contemporary youth literature that will enable dialogic engagement between learners and their immediate environments so that inclusive economic growth and gender equality can be achieved. Furthermore, it is important for teachers to be aware of what their students are reading, as well as of the social groupings within which the students belong, in order for them to understand the influences of such identifiers on students' reading habits and competence.

The important context

The theoretical framework for the article is hermeneutic with a sociocultural and socio-constructivist view of identity, where language is situated in the social milieu and is the medium for expressing feelings, identity and development (Barton 2007; Moje *et al.* 2009). Studies that have been conducted on identity-shaping have most often been based on *otherness*, an 'us' and 'them' perspective, where some criteria that are characteristic of a group contribute to separating people and creating different identities (Goffman 1990). Also, Gee (2001) argues that language usage usually means building understanding in relation to others and ourselves. This may come about through solidarity or affiliation markers, on the one hand, and dissociation, on the other (Goffman 1990). Youths' identity can be interpreted from the language they use when they talk about what they do. Students create and communicate their identity in and through the various tools that they use to communicate, such as mobile phones, cameras, laptops and pens (Wilson & Boatridge 2011:273).

Gender constructions

This section describes the theories used in making meaning of the text and discourse in *Broken promises*. First, post-structural feminism is presented. This is followed by a section problematising discourse, text and text reading. This section concludes with a consideration of the power of language in discourses.

Post-structural feminism

The post-structural feminist theory observes that individual experiences are situated within a society where language, social structures and power produce contrasting ways of allocating meaning (Jackson 2001). Therefore, as individuals interact with different discursive fields, certain values become deeply held through contact with others. As a result, individuals become bound by norms and ways of doing that exist within a particular context.

The post-structural feminist perspective also posits that people are neither passive recipients of socialisation nor are these values biologically fixed or psychologically predetermined. Instead, people actively construct the world and shape their lives and those of others (Weedon 1997). Based on the idea that every relationship is fluid, one can argue that the problematic constructions of masculinity and femininity can be troubled. The fluidity of power and gender relations is evidence of the fact that the borders between femininity and masculinity are permeable and fragile, allowing for slip-ups and the performance of alternative scripts (Butler 1990). What is deemed right and normal is socially interpreted and reproduced in discourse. Therefore identities are actively constructed and reconstructed, produced and reproduced through interaction with the society, and are therefore not produced in rigid linear ways (Butler 1990). Post-structural thinking looks at discourse in terms of how it functions, where it is found and how it becomes produced and regulated

(Weedon 1997). Based on these arguments, we take the stance that power is not owned or possessed but is exercised in ways that produce and reproduce inequalities.

One important factor in the construction of gender is language. An analysis of language use can therefore be helpful in interpreting the complexity of phenomena such as gender constructions in a social context (Martin & Rose 2008). Language influences society and inversely society influences language – they are dialectically connected to each other. Social activities are described, interpreted and also constructed through language and linguistic features. Language has, for example, the power to refer to people's feelings and opinions. Janks (2010:24) points out the power of language as every language choice '... foregrounds what was selected and hides, silences or backgrounds what was not selected'.

The gender discourse

In this section the concepts *discourse* and *text* are presented as the novel: the text we discuss is written within frames of a special discourse. According to Burman (1994), a discourse is a socially constructed framework that defines the limits of what can be said and done. The implication therefore is that once a discourse becomes normalised, it becomes a rule and therefore limits what can be said and done. In this way, the discourse positions individuals to become, for example, boys and girls. Martin and Rose (2008) also emphasise that discourse interfaces with grammar and social activity. Making sense of a discourse requires the integration of language knowledge and use within the social context.

The normalisation of discourse accordingly enables certain groups of people to wield power in ways that disadvantage others. Best and Kellner (1991:26) argue that this is because discourses are '... viewpoints and positions from which people speak and the power relations that these allow and presuppose'. Thus, whereas individuals may be positioned as powerless in one situation, they could be powerful in others. Foucault (1978:94) argues that power cannot be '... acquired, seized or shared and is not something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points ...'. It is through discourse that individuals can be subjected to power or can exercise power over others (Foucault 1978). In addition, Guerrero (1999) argues that the politicised nature of interpretations and meaning making is a product of power because interpretations that are powerful gain their status from societal interactions. The standpoint in this study is that discourse is rooted in power because of its ability to construct people in particular ways or dictate certain ways of being normal, often expressed through the language medium.

The concept *text*, on the other hand, can, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976:1), be defined as language in use. Halliday and Hasan also add that a '... text is best regarded

as a SEMANTIC unit: a unit not of form but of meaning' (1976:2) whereas, according to Kress (2010:148), a '... text is a multimodal semiotic entity ...' produced on social occasions. A text is positioned and shaped by the author's beliefs, values and attitudes. Furthermore, a text is shaped by its place in the world and the author's own experiences.

For this study it is important to realise that novels read by young students are also interpreted interactively between the author's language, values and norms, the reader and the text (Barton 2007). Within this constructivist perspective the reader is actively engaging with texts to make meanings out of it (Barton 2007). In this way, readers pay attention not only to the words but also to the contextual information transferred through language use (Luke & Freebody 1999). The text may guide readers in constructing their gender identity as well as influence their language use; and both might correspond to the norms and values represented in the society. When readers rely on earlier knowledge and experience to interpret a text, they may supply meanings that do not always appear in the text itself. These meanings influence their identity (Holland & Leander 2004). Therefore, we cannot only make meaning of the text without also making meaning of the society and culture in which the text is contextualised (Martin & Rose 2008), and vice versa. All this has to be challenged by teachers in order to realise the power of the word and the impact all texts have on the reader (Janks *et al.* 2013).

Gender perspective in books

Many studies about novels, their content and language have been carried out, with only a few of them focusing on a gendered analysis of the text. Lalbakhsh and Wan Yahya's (2011) study shows that Doris Lessing's *The golden notebook* (1962) depicts a world that is highly unfavourable to women where male domination is obvious. Men determine the values and norms for women. The study also points out that the women in the novel are oppressed in a society dominated by males and are also seen as a subordinate class. Furthermore, the study shows that women have to deal with the pressure put on them by the norms and values of society as portrayed in the novel. Ueno (2006), who analyses women's gender identity in Manga (Japanese comics), agrees. Women in Manga are objects for men's pleasure and are defined in relation to men.

However, other young adult fiction challenges normative assumptions about sexuality and deals with liberal gender views (Wickens 2011). According to Wickens (2011), in early texts and novels lesbians were isolated in society and doomed to dreary lives – but this has changed. In contemporary novels characters assume different sexualities and plots challenge and undermine established structures. Also Bean and Moni (2003), in a study of the novel *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* by Zusak (2000), found that readers have to evaluate, analyse and discuss the language of the text in order to obtain a transparent representation of society.

Methodology

The novel *Broken promises* by Roz Haden was analysed from a gender perspective, that is, how gender relations are represented through language use. Critical discourse analysis was employed to understand how the language used portrayed the actors and situations in the novel. Critical discourse analysis primarily studies the ways in which social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and reinforced by text and talk in the social and political context (Diamond 1996; Fairclough 1995; Wodak 1997). Crucial to critical discourse analysis is the explicit awareness of the role of language in society. Continuing a tradition that rejects the possibility of a 'value-free' science, it can be argued that science and especially scholarly discourse are inherently part of and influenced by social structure produced in social interaction (Van Dijk 1996). This article aligns itself with Van Dijk's view by acknowledging the relationship between the reader and society and posits that such relationships should be studied and accounted for in their own right.

The analysis involved close readings of the novel, paying attention to female-male and male-female interactions and dialogues. Furthermore, the analysis of the language is informed by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics/ Language model (SFL) with the focus on ideation and appraisal (Martin & Rose 2008) as well as critical language analysis (Fairclough 1995; Janks 2010). The SFL theory and critical language analysis offer a method for analysing social conditions such as the unequal power relations between females and males as manifested in the printed language text. Martin and Rose (2008) organise the meaning-making of a written text according to six key concepts: appraisal, ideation, conjunction, identification, periodicity and negotiation. In this article the concepts *appraisal* and *ideation* are used to explore how gender is expressed through language use in a written text.

According to Martin and Rose (2008), *ideation* is about how experiences can be interpreted in discourse. *Appraisal* is 'concerned with evaluation – the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned' (Martin & Rose 2008:25). Furthermore, appraisal is about negotiating attitudes and the ways in which they are amplified, including the reason for the appraisal.

Attitudes can be explored first through *affect*, that is, how individuals express their feelings. Secondly, they can be explored through *judgement*, that is, how a person's character can be judged, and thirdly, through how people *appreciate* things and how they feel about other people, their actions and behaviour (Martin & Rose 2008). Negotiation is concerned with relationships and interactions in dialogues and the roles of the participants. From that perspective a dialogue can be between people but also internal within a person. Roles and experiences can be interpreted to show how a social world of gender discourse is illustrated through

language use. Experiences exist in processes illustrating what is going on and their subjective effect (Martin & Rose 2008). Without understanding how language is constructed to represent social life and cultural norms, reading can reinforce inequality in relationships between men and women (Janks 2010).

Findings

This article considers how the characters in the novel represent a particular kind of gender power. As language use is not neutral, it is important to deconstruct the socio-semantic ways in which characters can be represented to establish gender roles. The novel was analysed using the following concepts: 'affirmation', 'gender power' and 'constructions of masculinity and femininity'. The findings are illustrated with quotations from the novel. The quotations chosen for this article are some of many where positions of femininity and masculinity were manifested through language use. Firstly, however, a short summary of the content in the novel is presented.

The novel – *Broken promises*

The novel describes how Ntombi deals with her life at school and in society generally after her parents' separation. Ntombi is committed to keeping her family together despite difficult circumstances caused by the absence of solid role models for the youth in their community. Ntombi and her sister, Zinzi, are raised by their mother who, after becoming involved with a man called Zakes, starts neglecting her children. Ntombi tries in vain to get her mother to see Zakes' true character, and eventually she finds herself having a relationship with Mzi, the 'hottest' boy at her school. Ntombi's social world comprises her friends, her sister and Mzi's friends. Through her interaction with a boy from her school, Olwethu, Ntombi learns about Zakes' illicit business deals and Mzi's involvement in them. After a party at Thabiso's Tavern, Ntombi sees Mzi's true colours. Ntombi then starts investigating Mzi and Zakes' relationship and finds out that they deal in stolen cars. Ntombi and Olwethu plan to have the two men arrested, but Mzi finds out and tries to rape Ntombi as revenge. Ntombi manages to escape from Mzi with Olwethu's assistance. Mzi and Zakes are finally arrested and Ntombi's mother at last understands why Ntombi never liked Zakes.

Affirmation of gender

In this first section quotations are used to highlight the affirmation of gender. Through interpreting Ntombi's experiences as expressed through language use, her social world can be explored:

Quotation 1: She could not believe they were moving out the way for her, Ntombi, who had never drawn the attention of any of them before. Now she felt really proud to be sitting next to Mzi. (Haden 2010:47)

Quotation 2: Here she was, being driven by the hottest boy in matric out on a date. It felt unreal. (Haden 2010:47)

These quotations, from a context where Ntombi has fallen in love with a boy from the same school as her, show how Ntombi feels more appreciated because of Mzi. While she was on her own she had no social standing, but with a popular man by her side she has gained status. She was proud to be someone's girl, as if being her own girl was not good enough. This is a social construction of femininity and womanhood as manifested in many communities where a woman's worth depends on the man she is attached to (cf. Lalbakhsh & Wan Yaha 2011). Her social standing has improved because of being with the hottest boy in matric (cf. Ueno 2006).

The social construction of femininity described above is achieved through language use in the text. To construct femininity special vocabulary, clauses and grammar are used. A functional language approach shows that the participants in the process have different roles. The core participant in the novel is Ntombi. In quotations 1 and 2, Ntombi is represented through the pronoun *she*. She has the subject position, is the doer and performs the actions or events in the process (Martin & Rose 2008). Illustrative phrases are: *could not believe*, *had never drawn the attention of*, *felt really proud to be sitting* and *felt unreal*. Mzi is the agent where he drives the car and Ntombi is the passenger, thus Ntombi is the object for this activity. Mzi's friends, represented by the pronoun *they* in quotation 1, are active in the subject position when 'they are moving out the way for her'. The verbs reflect situations in which a woman needs affirmation to shape her identity (Holland & Leander 2004). Ntombi expresses her feelings in the situation thus:

Quotation 3: Suddenly the world looked rosier, because Mzi wanted to take her, shy Ntombi who had never had a proper boyfriend, to the party. (Haden 2010:32)

Quotation 4: He called her 'gorgeous'; he 'couldn't wait to spend time with her'. No guy had ever said that to her before. (Haden 2010:43)

These quotations show the mindset of Ntombi as a woman needing male affirmation to make her feel valued. In Quotations 3 and 4 Mzi is mostly in a subject position followed by phrases such as 'wanted to take her', 'he called her' and 'he couldn't wait to spend time with her'. This creates a process where Ntombi is not in charge of her own life. She needs a male who can affirm her existence. It is made even more obvious by the use of evaluating appraisals like 'rosier', 'proper' and 'gorgeous' (Martin & Rose 2008). These appraisals by Mzi, a young man, elevate Ntombi as a person.

The words and phrases used in the quotations put her in a subordinate position even if Ntombi is at times the subject of the sentence. The reader's background determines how his or her acceptance of the text is influenced by the different use of verbs for male and female characters. Mostly when there is an event where girls or women are related to men, verbs are used to put them in a position where the men decide what they have to do and that what matters is what men think of them. In this way, language constructs the power relationship between women and men.

Gender and power

In this section the presented quotations illustrate the relationship between gender and power. The following quotations are taken from a situation in which Mzi has taken Ntombi away from a club in a car to a dark place between tall trees. There Ntombi feels anxious. Mzi is hugging and kissing Ntombi and roughly trying to push his hands under her bra.

Quotation 5: 'Mzi,' she tried to push away.

'Mzi, stop!' she said louder. 'Stop ... stop or ...'

'Or what? You'll scream? Nobody will hear you. Besides, I know that trick. Girls always say 'no, no, no' when they really mean "yes"'. (Haden 2010:80)

Quotation 6: 'Okay, so maybe tonight wasn't the right time' He took her hand and kissed it. 'But I hope you're not going to hold out on me for too long, because those kind of girls get really boring after a very short time. Those girls don't deserve boyfriends like me. Do you get what I'm saying?' (Haden 2010:81-82)

Here we see gender power at play. Ntombi is trapped in an environment and a situation in which she is alone with Mzi far away from friends. The discourse positions Mzi as powerful while Ntombi is at his mercy as there is no one who can rescue her from Mzi's domination. According to Connell (2002), men are constructed as decision-makers and powerful, with the freedom to do as they please with girls and women. This construction is also visible in Mzi and Ntombi's interactions. The verbs portray Ntombi as a subject in the following fragment: 'she tried to push away, almost screaming "stop ... stop or ..."'. Quotation 5 is an internal interaction within Ntombi where the roles become clear through her screaming and how her actions are related to Mzi. No matter how capable she is in school, her identity is defined here by the man, Mzi.

'I know that trick. Girls always say "no, no, no" when they really mean "yes"'. These sentences are central to the process of creating an event where Ntombi is without power. The negotiation in Quotation 5 shows that she questions Mzi's behaviour, while accepting the power relationship between men and women. The appraisal shows that being a woman can be a challenge: the feeling and appreciation of being valued by Mzi (Quotation 3) in contrast to the wish of not wanting to get on intimate terms with him. It also shows how the two words, 'no' and 'yes' can silence Ntombi and limit her activities against Mzi. There is considerable pressure on Ntombi to stand up to Mzi's opinion that women are not able to make their own decisions. The quotations strongly polarise Ntombi's struggling to be free, on the one hand, and the man's power, on the other. Mzi judges Ntombi as being boring and prudish. He tries to negotiate Ntombi's role.

Quotation 7: 'Taken,' thought Ntombi to herself. 'As if I was something they could own ...' (Haden 2010:118)

The quotation shows that males look at women as something they can possess. It is a situation in which men traditionally feel entitled to women's bodies (Benninger-Budel 2000). Men

feel that they own their women. Here Ntombi is questioning that sense of ownership that men have regarding women and girls. She is interacting with herself and is questioning the power men have over women by using the verb *taken* and relating it to *could own*. What has happened is that Ntombi has started to question her relationship with Mzi, a development that can be seen in the progression of the novel over time. She has started to judge a discourse where women are oppressed.

Femininity and masculinity

In this last section some characteristic assumptions of femininity and masculinity, made visible in the novel, are presented. Quotations 8–9 illustrate the role Zakes has as a man, according to Ntombi and her mother:

Quotation 8: Every time he went out with her mother he bought her something. (Haden 2010:5)

Quotation 9: He is my boyfriend and you must respect him. His word is law. (Haden 2010:6)

From an ideation perspective, he (Zakes) is the medium in both quotations. The events reflect the expectation of male domination in the use of the fragments 'he bought her something' and particularly 'His word is law'. The implication is that Ntombi's mother is expecting her to also abide by society's expectations and beliefs of male domination within the home.

Quotation 8 echoes the social construction of men as providers. Dawson (2007) also found in her study that boys thought girls expected them to be providers. Quotation 9 shows the construction of men as decision-makers and leaders in the family. It can also be linked to issues of gendered power, where men are constructed as being more powerful than women in heading families and knowing what is best for everyone (cf. Connell 1995):

Quotation 10: 'Why bother entering the competition,' he said. 'These days you have to have the whole package: the looks, the sex appeal and the voice ...'. (Haden 2010:17)

Ntombi wants to participate in a singing competition but does not have the time to practise; neither does she have high self-esteem. Zakes is taunting her regarding the competition and reiterates the stereotypical construction of femininity as 'the whole package'. This quotation therefore highlights the societal constructions of beauty and how women and girls find themselves wanting to conform to stereotypical constructions of feminine beauty. The description of an attractive woman ('the looks, the sex appeal and the voice') might be peripheral in the sentence, but as the source or medium is Zakes, it supports the gender-based expectation that women should be good-looking:

Quotation 11: Why couldn't he be content to kiss her? Why did guys always want more? (Haden 2010:84)

Quotation 12: A woman alone? Already some guys who were chatting to each other at a nearby table looked up at her and whistled. (Haden 2010:118)

Quotation 11 is from a scene in which Ntombi lies in her bed considering what had happened earlier in the evening in Mzi's car. Boys and men are believed to have a stronger sexual drive that requires being satisfied more urgently than that of women and girls (Kimmel 2004). This creates a situation in which young boys grow up wanting to show that they are real men by engaging in sexual intercourse at an early age just to prove that they are not effeminate. This stereotype has so much currency that girls and women also believe that a man's sexual urges cannot be controlled and therefore they have to give in to their demands for sex. What is deemed as normal here is rooted in unequal power dynamics, where everything masculine is better or more powerful than anything feminine (Skeggs 2005; Steinberg, Epstein & Johnson 1997).

Quotation 12 also shows how a woman who is seen in public alone is regarded as available for any man who wants her. If Ntombi had been with a man, then the men in the bar would not have whistled at her. Alone, however, she is fair game. The implication is that, without a man, a woman has no value. She can be taken by anyone (see Kimmel 2004).

The ideation in Quotations 11 and 12 shows how Ntombi's experiences are processes involving people (Mzi), places (the bar) and things or individuals (a kiss, sexual activities and a woman). Ntombi and Mzi are directly involved in the process, while the place is more peripheral. In the interpretation of what is going on ('a kiss'), a female as a 'thing' and 'a whistle' are central. The expressions 'be content', 'want more' and 'whistled' create a process in which Ntombi is deeply involved, as she is questioning the role of males.

Conclusions

What does the present study of *Broken promises* offer as a social and cultural commentary on questions of gender and language use? The purpose of the analysis was to establish the gendered messages that students receive from reading the book and how these can be understood and deconstructed. Two questions have been asked: In what ways are gender and power presented in relation to women and men? What language is used to describe women, men and the power relationships between them? There is no definitive answer; however, the results support a need for careful critical analysis and discussion, by teachers and students, of youth novels regarding gendered power dynamics.

Ntombi tries to recognise and challenge the hidden power in relationships, but it is not easy to undo the embedded feminine gender roles that are accepted in society. Thus the activities and cultural norms portrayed in the novel give the reader the images, the lines and the language to use in constructing gender identities. Language is also used to justify unequal power relationships between boys and girls and the patriarchal gender order. Furthermore, the novel tends to pursue hetero-normative gendered stereotypes, with the characters following gendered and accepted norms and values which might have an influence on the readers.

It is a major concern and challenge worldwide to promote equality between the genders.

The novel illustrates societal perceptions of men's power and women's inferiority, described and placed in a fictional society. Plausible activities happen in the fictional society, but they resonate with the township settings in which the students reading the novel are living. The people who inhabit the novel, who live their lives in a fictional society, might be recognised as normal human beings by those who read it. The characters are trapped within 'invisible' borders, assuming their identities by following expected norms and values. Violence, anger and danger are encountered and used by men in the novel. The men are portrayed as being able to protect women, those who are thought to be weaker within the society. The characters are subjects and objects within varying power relationships that control and decide the direction of their lives.

Language is concerned with different kinds of attitude that are negotiated in the text and also with different activities. As the selected passages show, the appraisal can be seen in concepts and words describing affect, judgement and appreciation. Through language it is possible to desire what we believe to be normal and become a part of a gendered discourse. Gendered roles, activities and hierarchies are dominant discourses across *Broken promises*. Females are typically portrayed in a language that creates inferiority and dependence whereas men are portrayed in a language that creates power and leadership.

In many ways, however, both females and males transcend conservative gender roles. Therefore it is important to put the spotlight on gender transformation but also on critical language and literacy competence. Reading competence is a fundamental foundation for all learning, and a vital ingredient for economic growth.

Apart from improving the students' language use, therefore, reading these novels can also influence their identity construction, because social identities, which include gendered identities, are constructed through the use of language in line with the hegemonic discourses prevailing within a society.

Implications for the classroom

This article ends with a short discussion of the question: Is it worth reading novels of this kind in schools – novels that might reinforce gender stereotypes?

In South Africa, with its emerging economy, it is important that its knowledge, equality and information economy are on par with those of the rest of the world. This article established the need to promote gender equality as a vehicle of inclusive growth. This renders reading competence important because it creates awareness of the structures in society such as gender roles and poverty, and also creates opportunities for change in society and could even lead to economic equality.

Broken promises, the first in the Harmony High series, has encouraged reading in a South African township classroom. A recurrent comment about the Harmony Series books mentioned in the introduction to this article was that the books are based on life in the readers' own environment, the township. We therefore submit an affirmative response, because young readers need books in which they can identify with the characters and settings. But the underlying values portrayed in this kind of book always have to be questioned and discussed.

According to Janks (2010), the invisible structures in society can be challenged through, for example, book talks. Therefore, an understanding of the message in a text can be achieved only through engaging with the text. Gender and power can be discussed where the students have the opportunity to consider their own gendered identities, the environment and society's opinion about femininity and masculinity. Reading novels can give students a chance to discuss how they and others relate to their own situations and daily lives.

Janks (2010) also argues that teachers have to be aware of the power in the texts they use in school. An analysis of a text using concepts such as design, access, diversity and power can help the students to challenge the purpose of a text according to who has written it and what effect it might have on the reader. In a multimodal world this is important knowledge.

For young students in the process of shaping a gender identity it is important to discuss how gender is constructed. For example, men whose masculine identity and sense of self are predicated on exerting dominance and control over others express these characteristics even in their sexual interactions (Jewkes, Levin & Penn-Kekana 2002; Wood, Maforah & Jewkes 1998).

We would like to conclude this article with some reflections emerging from the findings. Reading competence is important for all young students. Therefore they need books set in South Africa in which they can identify with the plot, characters and environment described in the books. Novels such as *Broken promises* have the potential to create a joy of reading, but that is not enough from a gender perspective. Teachers need to create space for discussion about gender. It is also important for teachers to look at their own gendered identities in relation to how they conceptualise girls and boys and interact with them. In addition, it is recommended that authors of books written for a young audience should be sensitive to gender constructions.

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Authors' contributions

Both B.L. (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) and M.K. (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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