
DIANE REAY, King’s College London, UK

ABSTRACT The past decade has seen a growing political and academic concern with boys’ underachievement. Drawing on the case study of a London primary classroom, this article argues that contemporary gendered power relations are more complicated and contradictory than the new orthodoxy that girls are doing better than boys suggests. The girls in this case study took up very varied positions in relation to traditional femininities. Yet, despite widely differentiated practices, all the girls at various times acted in ways which bolstered boys’ power at the expense of their own. While peer group discourses constructed girls as harder working, more mature and more socially skilled, still the boys and a significant number of the girls adhered to the view that it is better being a boy. The article concludes that in this particular primary school, girls and boys still learned many of the old lessons of gender relations which work against gender equity.

Introduction

This article attempts to demonstrate that contemporary gendered power relations are more complicated and contradictory than any simplistic binary discourse of ‘the girls versus the boys’ suggests (Heath, 1999). Although prevailing dominant discourses identify girls as ‘the success story of the 1990s’ (Wilkinson, 1994), this small-scale study of a group of 7 year-old girls attending an inner London primary school suggests that, particularly when the focus is on the construction of heterosexual femininities, it is perhaps premature always to assume that ‘girls are doing better than boys’. While girls may be doing better than boys in examinations, this article indicates that their learning in the classroom is much broader than the National Curriculum and includes aspects that are less favourable in relation to gender equity. Although masculinities are touched on in this article, this is only in as far as they relate to girls. This deliberate bias is an attempt to refocus on femininities at a time when masculinities appear to be an ever-growing preoccupation within education.

However, although the subjects of this research are 14 girls, the position the article takes is that femininities can only be understood relationally. There is a co-dependence
between femininities and masculinities which means that neither can be fully understood in isolation from the other. The article therefore explores how a particular group of primary-aged girls is positioned, primarily in relation to dominant discourses of femininity but also in relation to those of masculinity. There is also an attempt to map out their relationships to transgressive but less prevalent discourses of femininity, which in a variety of ways construct girls as powerful. The findings from such a small-scale study are necessarily tentative and no generalised assertions are made about girls as a group. Rather, the aim is to use the girls' narratives and their experiences in school and, to a lesser extent, those of the boys, to indicate some ways in which the new orthodoxy, namely that girls are doing better than boys, does not tell us the whole story about gender relations in primary classrooms.

The last decade has seen a growing popular and academic obsession with boys' underachievement both in the UK and abroad (Katz, 1999; Smithers, 1999). However, as Lyn Yates points out, much of the ‘underachieving boys’ discourse fails either to deal adequately with power or to see femininity and masculinity as relational phenomena (Yates, 1997). For instance, within the explosion of concern with masculinities in academia, there has been little focus on the consequences for girls of ‘boys behaving badly’. As Gaby Weiner and her colleagues argue:

new educational discourses have silenced demands for increased social justice for girls and women characterised by increasing resistance to policies and practices focusing specifically on them. (Weiner et al., 1997, p. 15)

Jill Blackmore describes attempts by some male academics in Australia to develop programmes for boys which seek to depict boys as powerless in the face of the progress and success of feminism and girls, and, indeed, as victims of their own male psychology (Blackmore, 1999). Jane Kenway writes more broadly of ‘the lads’ movement’ in Australia; a general resurgence of concern that boys and men are getting an unfair deal (Kenway, 1995). In Britain, there has been a growing alarm about ‘boys doing badly’ that preoccupies both mainstream and feminist academics alike (Epstein et al., 1998). What gets missed out in these current concerns is the specificity of the ‘failing boy’ and the ways in which other groups of males continue to maintain their social advantage and hold on to their social power (Arnot et al., 1999; Lucey & Walkerdine, 1999). It is within this context of contemporary preoccupation with boys that this article attempts to problematise issues surrounding gender equity and, in particular, to challenge the view that in millennial Britain it is boys rather than girls who are relatively disadvantaged.

The Research Study

The article is based on data from a 1-year study, conducted over the academic year 1997/98, of children in a Year 3 class in an inner-city primary school. 3R comprised 26 children, 14 girls and 12 boys. There were five middle-class children, three girls and two boys, all white apart from Amrit who was Indian. The 21 working-class children were more ethnically mixed. As well as one Somalian and two boys of mixed parentage, there were four Bengali children, three boys and one girl. The social class attribution of the children was based on parental occupations but was also confirmed by information provided by the class teacher. Fifteen of the children were entitled to free school meals. The school is surrounded by 1960s and 1970s public housing estates from which most of its intake is drawn, and indeed, 14 of the children in 3R lived on one of these five estates.
I spent one day a week over the course of the year engaged in participant observation in both the classroom and the playground, amassing over 200 pages of field notes. Additionally, I interviewed all the children, both individually and in focus groups. I also carried out group work activities in which children both wrote and drew on a range of topics from playground games to best friends. As James et al. point out:

Talking with children about the meanings they themselves attribute to their paintings or asking them to write a story allows children to engage more productively with our research questions using the talents which they possess. (James et al., 1998, p. 189)

The unequal relationship between researcher and researched is compounded when the researcher is an adult and the researched a child. In order to mitigate at least some of the power differentials I organised workshops for the children in which I taught simple questionnaire design and interviewing techniques. The children then compiled their own questionnaires so that they could interview each other. These interviews, as well as those I conducted, 84 overall, were tape-recorded and transcribed. The class teacher and I also collected sociogram data, which enabled us to map out the children’s friendship networks and work relationships.

Gender Discourses

Many writers on education have attempted to provide a variety of conceptual tools in order to understand educational contexts and processes (Ball, 1994; Maclure, 1994). A key debate amongst educational researchers has been between structuralist and post-structuralist approaches. Although often these two conceptual approaches are seen as opposing perspectives, in this article, I use and combine what I perceive to be the strengths of both positions to illuminate the ways in which girls both construct themselves, and are constructed, as feminine (see also, Walkerdine, 1991, 1997; Williams, 1997; Walkerdine et al., 2000 for similar approaches). As Davies et al. (1997) assert, power is both located in the structural advantage of individuals and also exercised partly through the construction of discourses.

Multiple discourses contribute not only to how researchers appreciate the conditions of childhood but also to how children come to view themselves (James et al., 1998). Post-structuralist feminists have explored extensively the ways in which different discourses can position girls (Davies, 1993; Hey, 1997; Walkerdine, 1997). It is important to recognise that there are many competing gender discourses, some of which have more power and potency than others for particular groups of girls (Francis, 1998). Such processes of discursive recognition, of feeling a better fit within one discourse than another (Francis, 1999), are influenced by social class. Similarly, gender discourses are taken up differentially by different ethnic groupings. It is also important to stress that girls can position themselves differently in relation to gender discourses according to the peer group context they find themselves in. For example, it soon became evident in my research that girls assume different positions depending on whether they are in single- or mixed-sex contexts. As Gee and his colleagues assert:

There are innumerable discourses in modern societies: different sorts of street gangs, elementary schools and classrooms, academic disciplines and their sub-specialities, police, birdwatchers, ethnic groups, genders, executives, feminists, social classes and sub-classes, and so on and so-forth. Each is composed of some set of related social practices and social identities (or positions). Each
discourse contracts complex relations of complicity, tension and opposition with other discourses. (Gee et al., 1996, p. 10)

I found similar ‘complex relations of complicity, tension and opposition’ in relation to the nexus of gender discourses that these girls draw on. Yet, any local discursive nexus is framed by a wider social context within which, as Valerie Hey (1997) points out, there is a lack of powerful public discourses for girls, leaving them caught between schooling which denies difference and compulsory heterosexuality which is fundamentally invested in producing it. If this gives the impression of a fluid situation in relation to how contemporary girls position themselves as female, there is also substantial evidence of continuities in which, at least for the girls in this research, conformist discourses continue to exert more power than transgressive or transformative ones.

**Masculinities in the Classroom: setting the context**

Although the main focus of this article is how gender discourses position girls at school, in order to understand femininities in this primary classroom, the ways in which masculinities are being played out cannot be ignored. I want to start with two short excerpts from boys. Josh and David, two white, middle-class, 7 year-old boys, interviewed each other about what they like most and least about being a boy:

J: David, what do you like most about being a boy?
D: Well, it must be that it’s much easier to do things than being a girl, that’s what I think. You get to do much better things.
J: So you think you find being a boy more interesting than being a girl? Is that what you’re saying?
D: Yes because it’s boring being a girl.
J: OK, and what do you like least about being a boy?
D: Well, I don’t know, I can’t think of anything.
J: Well, can’t you think really—there must be something.
D: I’ll think [long pause]. Well, it’s easier to hurt yourself.

D: OK What do you like most about being a boy?
J: I’d probably say that it’s better being a boy because they have more interesting things to do and it’s more exciting for them in life I find.
D: Yes, I see. What do you like least about being a boy?
J: Ohh I’d probably say not being so attractive as girls probably I’d say they’re much more attractive than boys.

Josh and David were the only middle-class boys in a Year 3 class of predominantly working-class children. Existing research has found that the culturally exalted form of masculinity varies from school to school and is informed by the local community (Skelton, 1997; Connolly, 1998). These two boys were adjusting to a predominantly working-class, inner-city peer group in which dominant local forms of masculinity were sometimes difficult for both to negotiate, but in particular, for David (for one thing, he did not like football). They both also found the low priority given to academic work among the other boys problematic. Even so, they were clear that it was still better being a boy.

Both boys, despite their social class positioning, were popular among the peer group. In particular, Josh commanded a position of power and status in the peer group which
was virtually unchallenged (see also Reay, 1990). Sociogram data collected from all the children in the class positioned him as the most popular child, not only with the working-class boys in the class but also with the girls. David’s positioning is more difficult to understand. His particular variant of middle-class masculinity was far less acceptable to his working-class peers than Josh’s. He was studious and hated games. In the exercise where children drew and described their favourite playground activity, David sketched a single figure with a bubble coming out of his head with ‘thoughts’ inside. He annotated it with ‘I usually like walking about by myself and I’m thinking’. However, within the confines of the classroom, for much of the time, he retained both status and power, paradoxically through a combination of being male and clever. When the girls were asked to nominate two boys and two girls they would most like to work with, David was the second most popular male choice after Josh. However, he was the most popular choice with the other boys. The complex issues as to why these two boys were popular when their masculinities did not fit the dominant one within the male peer group are beyond the brief of this article. Rather, what is salient is the relevance of their positioning within the peer group for the group of girls who are the article’s main protagonists.

Although the focus has been on ‘the others’ within masculinity, black and white working-class boys (Willis, 1977; Sewell, 1997), it is the association of normativity with white, middle-class masculinity that seems most difficult for girls to challenge effectively. Disruptive, failing boys’ behaviour has given girls an unexpected window of opportunity through which some variants of femininities can be valorised over specific pathologised masculinities, particularly within the arena of educational attainment. Both girls and boys were aware of discourses which position girls as more mature and educationally focused than boys and regularly drew on them to make sense of gender differences in the classroom (see also Pattman & Phoenix, 1999). What seems not to have changed is the almost unspoken acceptance of white, middle-class masculinity as the ideal that all those ‘others’—girls as well as black and white working-class boys—are expected to measure themselves against. Popular discourses position both masculinity and the middle classes as under siege, suggesting an erosion of both male and class power bases (Bennett, 1996; Coward, 1999). While there have been significant improvements in the direction of increasing equity, particularly in the area of gender, the popularity of Josh and David, combined with the uniform recognition among the rest of the peer group that they were the cleverest children in the class, suggests that popular discourses may mask the extent to which white, middle-class male advantages in both the sphere of education and beyond continue to be sustained.

However, 10 of the 12 boys in 3R were working class. The ‘failing boys’ compensatory culture of aggressive ‘laddism’ (Jackson, 1998) had already started to be played out at the micro-level of this primary classroom. The working-class, white and mixed race boys were more preoccupied with football than the academic curriculum (see also Skelton, 1999). When they were not playing football in the playground, they would often be surreptitiously exchanging football cards in the classroom. Alongside regular jockeying for position within the male peer group, which occasionally escalated into full-blown fights, there was routine, casual labelling of specific girls as stupid and dumb. The three Bengali boys at the bottom of this particular male peer group hierarchy compensated by demonising, in particular, the three middle-class girls. Their strategy echoes that of the subordinated youth in Wight’s (1996) study, where in order to gain the approval and acceptance of their dominant male peers, they endeavoured to become active subjects in a sexist discourse which objectified girls.
Sugar and Spice and All Things Nice?

3R had four identifiable groups of girls—‘the ‘nice girls’, the ‘girlies’, the ‘spice girls’ and the ‘tomboys’ (see Fig. 1).

The latter two groups had decided on both their own naming as well as those of the ‘girlies’ and the ‘nice girls’, descriptions which were generally seen as derogatory by both girls and boys. ‘Girlies’ and ‘nice girls’ encapsulate ‘the limited and limiting discourse of conventional femininity (Brown, 1998), and in this Year 3 class, although there was no simple class divide, the ‘nice girls’ were composed of Donna, Emma and Amrit, the only three middle-class girls in 3R, plus a fluctuating group of one to two working-class girls. The ‘nice girls’, seen by everyone, including themselves, as hard-working and well behaved, exemplify the constraints of a gendered and classed discourse which afforded them the benefits of culture, taste and cleverness but little freedom. Prevalent discourses which work with binaries of mature girls and immature boys and achieving girls and underachieving boys appear on the surface to be liberating for girls. However, the constraints were evident in the ‘nice girls’ self-surveillance, hypercritical attitudes to both their behaviour and their schoolwork; attitudes which were less apparent amongst other girls in the class. It would appear that this group of 7 year-old, predominantly middle-class girls had already begun to develop the intense preoccupation with academic success that other researchers describe in relation to middle-class, female, secondary school pupils (Walkerdine et al., 2000).

Contemporary work on how masculinities and femininities are enacted in educational contexts stresses the interactions of gender with class, race and sexuality (Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Hey, 1997; Connolly, 1998). Sexual harassment in 3R (a whole gamut of behaviour which included uninvited touching of girls and sexualised name-calling) was primarily directed at the ‘girlies’ and was invariably perpetuated by boys who were subordinated within the prevailing masculine hegemony either because of their race or social class. However, while sexual harassment was an infrequent occurrence, identifying the ‘nice girls’ as a contaminating presence was not. In the playground, the three working-class Bengali boys were positioned as subordinate to the white and Afro-Caribbean boys; for example, they were often excluded from the football games on the basis that they were not skilful enough. These three boys constructed the ‘nice girls’ as
a polluting, contagious ‘other’. They would regularly hold up crossed fingers whenever one of these girls came near them. As a direct result, the ‘nice girls’ began to use the classroom space differently, taking circuitous routes in order to keep as far away from these boys as possible. Barrie Thorne (1993) found similar gender practices in which girls were seen as ‘the ultimate source of contamination’. Like the girls in Thorne’s research, the ‘nice girls’ did not challenge the boys but rather developed avoidance strategies which further circumscribed their practices.

Being one of the ‘nice girls’ had derogatory connotations for working-class girls as well as working-class boys. Alice, in particular, was adamant that she could not contemplate them as friends because they were ‘too boring’, while in one of the focus group discussions, Jodie, Debbie and Carly all agreed that ‘no one wants to be a nice girl’. Their views reflect the findings of feminist research which position ‘being nice’ as specific to the formulation of white, middle-class femininity (Jones, 1993; Griffin, 1995; Kenway et al., 1999). For a majority of the working-class girls in the class, being a ‘nice girl’ signified an absence of the toughness and attitude that they were aspiring to.

This is not to construct the ‘nice girls’ as passive in relation to other groups in the class. They often collaborated with Josh and David on classwork and were vocal about the merits of their approach to schoolwork over those of other girls in the class:

Emma: The other girls often mess around and be silly, that’s why Alice and Lisa never get their work finished.
Donna: Yes we’re more sensible than they are.
Emma: And cleverer.

However, the dominant peer group culture in the classroom was working class and, while this had little impact on the popularity of Josh and David, it did have repercussions for the status and social standing of the ‘nice girls’ within the peer group.

‘The limited and limiting discourse of conventional femininity’ also had a powerful impact on the ‘girlies’, a group of three working-class girls (two white and one Bengali). Kenway et al., (1999) write about ‘the sorts of femininities which unwittingly underwrite hegemonic masculinity’ (p. 120). Certainly, the ‘girlies’, with their ‘emphasised femininity’ (Connell, 1987, p. 187), were heavily involved in gender work which even at the age of 7 inscribed traditional heterosexual relations. Paul Connolly (1998) describes the ways in which sexual orientation and relations defined through boyfriends and girlfriends seems to provide an important source of identity for young children. This was certainly the case for the ‘girlies’. These girls were intensely active in the work of maintaining conventional heterosexual relationships through the writing of love letters, flirting and engaging in regular discussions of who was going out with who. They were far more active in such maintenance work than the boys.

Both the ‘girlies’ and the ‘nice girls’ were subject to ‘discourses of denigration’ circulating among the wider peer group (Blackmore, 1999, p. 136). In individual interviews, many of the boys and a number of the other girls accounted for the ‘nice girls’ unpopularity by describing them as ‘boring’ and ‘not fun to be with’, while the ‘girlies’ were variously described by boys as ‘stupid’ and ‘dumb’. While the boys were drawing on a male peer group discourse which positioned the ‘girlies’ as less intelligent than they were, the ‘girlies’ were far from ‘stupid’ or ‘dumb’. Although not as scholarly as the ‘nice girls’, they were educationally productive and generally achieved more highly that their working-class male counterparts. Rather, the working class discourse of conventional femininity within which they were enmeshed operated to elide their academic achievement within the peer group.
Discourses of conventional femininity also seemed to have consequences for the two Asian girls in the class. Amrit, who was Indian, was from a middle-class background while Shamina was Bengali and working class. Yet, both girls, despite their class differences, shared a high degree of circumscription in relation to the range of femininities available to them in the school context. As Shamina explained, ‘the spice girls and the tomboys are naughty. I am a good girl’. In contrast to the other girls in the girls' focus group discussion, who all claimed to enjoy playing football, both Shamina and Amrit asserted that ‘football was a boys’ game’, and Amrit said, ‘It’s not worth bothering with football. It’s too boring. Me and my friends just sit on the benches and talk’.

Heidi Mirza (1992) argues that the cultural construction of femininity among African-Caribbean girls fundamentally differs from the forms of femininity found among their white peers. In the case of Amrit and Shamina, there were substantial areas of overlap rather than fundamental differences. However, neither managed to carve out spaces in which to escape gender subordination from the boys in the ways that the ‘spice girls’ and the ‘tomboys’, both all-white groups, did. Racism and its impact on subjectivities may well be an issue here. Although it is impossible to make generalisations on the basis of two children, ethnicity, as well as class, appears to be an important consideration in the possibilities and performance of different femininities.

Membership of the ‘spice girls’ revolved around two white, working-class girls, Carly and Debbie. Jenny, Rachel, Alice and Lisa were less consistently members of the group. Lisa and Alice would sometimes claim to be ‘tomboys’ while Jenny and Rachel, when playing and spending time with the ‘girlies’, and especially when Carly and Debbie were in trouble with adults in the school, would realign themselves as ‘girlies’. Very occasionally, when she had quarrelled both with Carly and Debbie, and with Jodie, the one consistent tomboy among the girls, Alice too would reinvent herself as a ‘girlie’.

Although there were many overlaps between both the practices and the membership of the ‘girlies’ and the ‘spice girls’, aspects of the ‘spice girls’ interaction with the boys appeared to transgress prevailing gender regimes, while the ‘girlies’ behaviour followed a far more conformist pattern. Yet, the ‘spice girls’ were, for much of the time, also active in constructing and maintaining traditional variants of heterosexuality. Their espousal of ‘girl power’ did not exclude enthusiastic partaking of the boyfriend/girlfriend games. There was much flirting, letter writing, falling in and out of love and talk of broken hearts. However, they also operated beyond the boundaries of the ‘girlies’ more conformist behaviour when it came to interaction with the boys. Debbie and Carly, the most stalwart members of the ‘spice girls’, both described the same activity—rating the boys—as their favourite playground game. As Carly explained, ‘you follow the boys around and give them a mark out of ten for how attractive they are’.

The ‘spice girls’ adherence to so-called girl power also allowed them to make bids for social power never contemplated by the ‘girlies’ or the ‘nice girls’. During a science lesson which involved experiments with different foodstuffs, including a bowl of treacle, Carly and Debbie jointly forced David’s hand into the bowl because, as Carly asserted, ‘he is always showing off, making out he knows all the answers’. This incident, which reduced David to tears and shocked the other children, served to confirm the class teacher in her view that the two girls ‘were a bad lot’. The ‘girls with attitude’ stance that Carly and Debbie so valued and their philosophy of ‘giving as good as they got’ were reinterpreted by adults in the school as both inappropriate and counterproductive to learning. Paul Connolly (1998) points out that girls’ assertive or disruptive behaviour tends to be interpreted more negatively than similar behaviour in boys, while Robin Lakoff (1975) has described how, when little girls ‘talk rough’ like the boys do, they will normally be
ostracised, scolded or made fun of. For the ‘spice girls’, ‘doing it for themselves’ in ways which ran counter to traditional forms of femininity resulted in them being labelled at various times by teachers in the staffroom as ‘real bitches’, ‘a bad influence’ and ‘little cows’. The tendency Clarricoates found in 1978 for girls’ misbehaviour to be ‘looked upon as a character defect, whilst boys’ misbehaviour is viewed as a desire to assert themselves’ was just as evident in teachers’ discourses more than 20 years later.

Debbie and Carly were doubly invidiously positioned in relation to the ‘girls as mature discourse’. They were perceived to be ‘too mature’, as ‘far too knowing sexually’ within adult discourses circulating in the school but they were also seen, unlike the boys and the majority of the girls in 3R, as ‘spiteful’ and ‘scheming little madams’ for indulging in behaviour typical of many of the boys. There were several incidents in the playground of sexual harassment of girls by a small group of boys. Most of the adults dismissed these as ‘boys mucking about’. However, Carly and Debbie’s attempts to invert regular processes of gender objectification, in which girls are routinely the objects of a male gaze, were interpreted by teachers as signs of ‘an unhealthy preoccupation with sex’. Their predicament exemplifies the dilemma for girls of ‘seeking out empowering places within regimes alternatively committed to denying subordination or celebrating it’ (Hey, 1997, p. 132). In this classroom, girls like Carly and Debbie seemed to tread a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable ‘girl power’ behaviour. Overt heterosexuality was just about on the acceptable side of the line but retaliatory behaviour towards the boys was not.

Valerie Walkerdine (1997) describes how playful and assertive girls come to be understood as overmature and too precocious. Girls like Debbie and Carly, no less than the girls in Walkerdine’s advertisements, occupy a space where girls have moved beyond being ‘nice’ or ‘girlie’. Rather, as sexual little women, they occupy a space where they can be bad. As Walkerdine points out, while it is certainly a space in which they can be exploited, it provides a space of power for little girls, although one which is also subject to discourses of denigration. The forms that denigration take are very different to those experienced by the ‘nice girls’ or the ‘girlies’ but become apparent in teachers’ judgements of the two girls’ behaviour.

‘It’s Better Being a Boy’—the Tomboys

The most intriguing case in my research was that of the ‘tomboys’. The ‘tomboys’ in Becky Francis’s research study were depicted by another girl in the class as traitors to girlhood:

Rather than rejecting the aspiration to maleness because it is ‘wrong’ or ‘unnatural’, Zoe argues that ‘girls are good enough’, implying that her girlfriends want to be boys because they see males as superior, and that she is defending girlhood against this sexist suggestion. (Francis, 1998, p. 36)

As I have touched on earlier in the article, in 3R, there was a general assumption among the boys that maleness, if not a superior subject positioning, was a more desirable one. While, in particular the ‘spice girls’, but also at various times both the ‘girlies’ and ‘nice girls’ defended girlhood against such claims, their stance was routinely undermined by the position adopted by the tomboys.

Jodie was the only girl in the class who was unwavering in her certainty that she was not a girl but a ‘tomboy’, although a couple of the other girls in the class for periods of time decided that they were also ‘tomboys’:

Jodie: Girls are crap, all the girls in this class act all stupid and girlie.
Diane: So does that include you?
Jodie: No, cos I'm not a girl, I'm a tomboy.

One the one hand, Jodie could be viewed as a budding ‘masculinised new woman at ease with male attributes’ (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 37). Yet, her rejection of all things feminine could also be seen to suggest a degree of shame and fear of femininity. Jodie even managed to persuade Wayne and Darren, two of the boys in the class, to confirm her male status. Both, at different times, sought me out to tell me Jodie was ‘really a boy’. It is difficult to know how to theorise such disruptions of normative gender positionings. Jodie’s stance combines elements of resistance with recognition. She clearly recognised and responded to prevailing gender hierarchies which situate being male with having more power and status. Jodie appears to operate at the boundaries where femininity meets masculinity. She is what Barrie Thorne calls ‘active at the edges’.

However, while Thorne reports that it was rarely used among her fourth and fifth graders, the term ‘tomboy’ is frequently used in 3M as a marker of respect by both boys and girls. Being a ‘tomboy’ seems to guarantee male friendship and male respect. Several of the working-class girls in the class, like Alice, appeared to move easily from taking up a position as a ‘tomboy’ through to assuming a ‘girls with attitude’ stance alongside Debbie and Carly to becoming a ‘girlie’ and back again. One week Alice would come to school in army fatigues with her hair scraped back, the next, in lycra with elaborately painted nails and carefully coiffured hair. However, Alice was unusual among the girls in ranging across a number of subject positions. For most of the girls, although they had choices, those choices seemed heavily circumscribed and provided little space for manoeuvre.

The regulatory aspects of the ‘girlies’ and the ‘nice girls’ self-production as feminine were very apparent, yet the conformity of the ‘tombboys’ to prevailing gender regimes was far more hidden. While it is important to recognise the transgressive qualities of identifying and rejecting traditional notions of femininity in Jodie’s behaviour, the empowering aspects of being a ‘tomboy’ also masked deeply reactionary features embedded in assuming such a gender position. Implicit in the concept of ‘tomboy’ is a devaluing of traditional notions of femininity, a railing against the perceived limitations of being female. This is particularly apparent in Jodie’s comments:

Jodie: I don’t really have any friends who are girls cos they don’t like doing the things I like doing. I like football and stuff like that.
Diane: Don’t girls like football?
Jodie: Yeah, some of them, but they’re no good at it.

Perhaps, in part, it is Jodie’s obsession with football that contributes to her contradictory gender positionings. As Christine Skelton (1999) points out, there is a close association between football and hegemonic masculinities and, therefore, if Jodie is to be seen as ‘a football star’, she needs to assume a male rather than a female subject positioning.

But there is another possible reading in which Jodie’s preoccupation with football facilitates, rather than is the cause of, her flight from femininity. Michelle Fine & Pat Macpherson define girls’ identification with football as ‘both a flight from femininity ... and an association of masculinity with fairness, honesty, integrity and strength (Fine & Macpherson, 1992, p. 197). The girls in their study would call each others boys as a compliment: ‘Girls can be good, bad or—best of all—they can be boys’ (p. 200) and this was definitely a viewpoint Jodie adhered to. Jodie’s individualised resistance can be set alongside Carly and Debbie’s joint efforts to disrupt prevailing gender orders among
the peer group. Yet, paradoxically, Jodie, no less than the ‘girlies’, seemed engaged in a process of accommodating the boys. The means of accommodation may differ but the compliance with existing gender regimes remains. Madeline Arnott (1982) writes of the ways in which boys maintain the hierarchy of social superiority of masculinity by devaluing the female world. In 3R, Jodie was also involved in this maintenance work. Although her practices are not rooted in subordination to the boys, she is still acquiescent in prevailing gender hierarchies. Her practices, no less than those of the ‘girlies’ and the ‘nice girls’, are confirmatory of male superiority.

Connell writes that ‘it is perfectly logical to talk about masculine women or masculinity in women’s lives, as well as men’s’ (Connell, 1995, p. 163). However, so-called ‘masculine’ girls do not seem to disrupt but rather appear to endorse existing gender hierarchies. All the girls at various times were acting in ways which bolstered the boys’ power at the expense of their own. Even Jodie’s performance of a surrogate masculinity works to cement rather than transform the gender divide. As a consequence, the radical aspects of transgressive femininities like those of Jodie’s are undermined by their implicit compliance with gender hierarchies. Being one of the boys seems to result in greater social power but it conscripts Jodie into processes Sharon Thompson (1994) identifies as ‘raging misogyny’. In my field notes, there are 16 examples of Jodie asserting that ‘boys are better than girls’. Jodie’s case is an extreme example of the ways in which girls’ ventriloquising of the dominant culture’s denigration of femininity and female relations can serve to disconnect them from other girls (Brown, 1998).

**Conclusion**

Performing gender is not straightforward; rather, it is confusing. The seduction of binaries such as male:female, boy:girl often prevents us from seeing the full range of diversity and differentiation existing within one gender as well as between categories of male and female. Both the girls and boys in 3R were actively involved in the production of gendered identities, constructing gender through a variety and range of social processes (Kerfoot & Knight, 1994). Yet, within this ‘gender work’, social and cultural differences generate the particular toolkit of cultural resources individual children have available to them. There is a multiplicity of femininities and masculinities available in this primary classroom. But this is not to suggest that these children have myriad choices of which variant of femininity and masculinity to assume. They do not. Class, ethnicity and emergent sexualities all play their part, and constrain as well as create options.

Pyke argues that:

Hierarchies of social class, race and sexuality provide additional layers of complication. They form the structural and cultural contexts in which gender is enacted in everyday life, thereby fragmenting gender into multiple masculinities and femininities. (Pyke, 1996, p. 531)

Yet, despite the multiple masculinities and femininities manifested in 3R, there is evidence of hegemonic masculinity in this classroom no less than outside in the wider social world. Within such a context, it makes sense for girls to seek to resist traditional discourses of subordinate femininity. Yet, attempting to take up powerful positions through articulation with, and investment in, dominant masculinities serves to reinforce rather than transform the gender divide. As a consequence, the prevailing gender order
is only occasionally disrupted, in particular by the spice girls through their sex play and
objectification of a number of the boys and also, paradoxically, through their working-
class status. Unlike the ‘nice girls’ whose activities are circumscribed through being
positioned by the boys as a contagious, polluting other, the ‘spice girls’ positioning as
‘rough’ in relation to sensitive middle-class boys allows them to take up a ‘polluting’
assignment (Douglas, 1966) and use it as a weapon to intimidate the boys.

The girls’ struggle to make meaning of themselves as female constitutes a struggle in
which gendered peer group hierarchies such as those in 3R position boys as ‘better’
despite a mass of evidence to show they are neither as academically successful nor as well
behaved as girls in the classroom. Peer group discourses constructed girls as harder
working, more mature and more socially skilled. Yet, all the boys and a significant
number of the girls, if not subscribing to the view that boys are better, adhered to the
view that it is better being a boy. There are clearly confusions within the gender work
in this classroom. To talk of dominant femininity is to generate a contradiction in terms
because it is dominant versions of femininity which subordinate the girls to the boys.
Rather, transgressive discourses and the deviant femininities they generate like Jodie’s
‘tomboy’ and Debbie and Carly’s espousal of ‘girl power’ accrue power in both the male
and female peer group, and provide spaces for girls to escape gender subordination by
the boys.

On the surface, gender relations in this classroom are continually churned up and
realigned in a constant process of recomposition. But beneath, at a more subterranean
level of knowing and making sense, both boys and girls seem to operate with entrenched
dispositions in which being a boy is still perceived to be the more preferable subject
positioning. Despite the contemporary focus, both within and without the classroom, on
‘girl power’ (Arlidge, 1999), as Jean Anyon (1983) found almost 20 years ago, it appears
that girls’ subversions and transgressions are nearly always contained within, and rarely
challenge, the existing structures. For much of the time, girls are ‘trapped in the very
contradictions they would transcend’. Girls’ contestation may muddy the surface water
of gender relations, but the evidence of this classroom indicates that the ripples only
occasionally reach the murky depths of the prevailing gender order. Within both the
localised and dominant discourses that these children draw on, being a boy is still seen
as best by all the boys and a significant number of the girls.

Children may both create and challenge gender structures and meanings. However,
for much of the time for a majority of the girls and boys in 3R, gender either operates
as opposition or hierarchy or most commonly both at the same time. As Janet Holland
and her colleagues found in relation to the adolescents in their study, the girls just as
much as the boys in this class were ‘drawn into making masculinity powerful’ (Holland
et al., 1998, p. 30). The contemporary orthodoxy that girls are doing better than boys
masks the complex messiness of gender relations in which, despite girls’ better educa-
tional attainment, within this peer group, the prevalent view is still that it’s better being
a boy.

Despite the all-pervading focus on narrow, easily measured, learning outcomes in
British state schooling, learning in classrooms is much wider than test results suggest.
While test results indicate that girls are more successful educationally than boys, it
appears that in this primary classroom girls and boys still learn many of the old lessons
of gender relations which work against gender equity. Sue Heath (1999, p. 293) argues
that there is a need for school-based work that sensitively addresses issues of gender
identity and masculinities within a pro-feminist framework. There is also an urgent need
for work that addresses the construction and performance of femininities.
REFERENCES


