The resources and strategies that 10-11 year old boys use to construct masculinities in the school setting

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Abstract

The data in this paper comes from an ethnographic exploration into the construction of masculinities in three junior schools in the UK between 1998 and 1999. I argue that the construction and performance of masculinity is inextricably linked to the acquisition of status within the school peer group, and I delineate the specific series of resources and strategies that the boys draw on and use in each setting to achieve this. The different meanings and practices at each school, and the different array of resources available, means that there are a different set of options and/or opportunities within each school setting to *do* boy, and I classify these as being either open (possible), restricted (more difficult), or closed (almost impossible). The principal and most esteemed resource used by the boys was physicality and athleticism, and I highlight the link between masculinity and the body.

Introduction

Within the last ten years or so, the study of masculinity has become a rapidly growing field, and the school has become recognised as one of the salient sites where masculinities are constructed and formed. Although many of the explorations have concerned boys in secondary schooling, there have been an increasing number of studies and reviews set in the primary/junior school containing children aged 7-11 (see, for example, Thorne, 1993; Skelton, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2001; Renold, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001; Warren, 1997; Adler and Adler, 1998; Benjamin, 1998; Epstein, 1998, 2001; Francis, 1998, 2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Swain, 2000, 2002a, 2000b). These texts show how masculinities suffuse school regimes, and have established that there is diversity not just *between* settings, but also *within* settings.

The main proposition in this paper is that different masculinities are produced through performances that draw on the different cultural resources that are available in each setting. I argue that the construction of masculinity is inextricably linked to the acquisition of status within the peer group, and I outline the specific series of resources and strategies that the boys draw on and use in each setting to achieve this. Different meanings and practices create a series of 'storylines and repertoires of action' (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 51), and a different array of resources to draw on, and while some of these may be similar at each school, others will be unique to each setting. The result of this means that there are a different set of options and/or opportunities within each setting to *do* boy, and I have classified these as being either open (possible), restricted (more difficult), or closed (almost impossible). The objective of this paper is to contribute to the growing understanding of emerging masculinities. Although writers such as Connell (1998, p.5) write that masculinities 'are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given milieu', there is little existing work on the delineation of the specific resources that boys draw on in the school setting. Although the terms 'resource' and 'strategy' tend to be conflated, I am referring to resources as the type of capital, or stock, that the boys are able to draw on, and strategies as the processes that the boys use to apply them. In other words, resources are about the 'what' and strategies about the 'how.

Background and methodology

The findings and analysis in this paper are based on my doctoral research (Swain, 2001) which explored the construction of masculinity in the junior school. This was an empirical study set in three co-educational junior schools which were differentiated on the basis of the social characteristics of their intake (see Table 1). The schools were situated in or around Greater London, and the research took place between September 1998 and July 1999. All the names of people and places have been changed

TABLE I GOES ABOUT HERE

2

The ethos, or atmosphere, of each school was very different. Highwoods marketed itself on the twin pillars of academic achievement and excellent sporting facilities; there was a highly competitive atmosphere and the pupils were tightly regulated and controlled. Petersfield also promoted high academic achievement (as measured by the SAT results) and had astringent control and regulation, although there was a deliberate policy of non-competitiveness. Westmoor Abbey was very different: although all schools would like to be able to state that their primary objective is the promotion of academic excellence, Westmoor Abbey's main concern seemed to consist of being able to cope with, and contain, pupil (mis)behaviour as best it could. This was a survivalist school (Hargreaves, 1995) where the ethos was more insecure, and social relations were generally poorer.

During my fieldwork I followed a rolling programme spending about a month each term in each school. In the two LEA (state) schools I concentrated on one Year 6 class (10-11 year olds), although at Highwoods I spent time with two classes as the pupils were organised by academic attainment and I wanted to investigate the widest possible range of masculinities. Highwoods also differed from the other two schools in that pupils were taught by individual subject teachers. My descriptions and interpretations below are based on two major sources of data: firstly, my non-participant observations of the boys and girls during lessons, and around the school environs; and secondly, on a series of 104 loosely-structured interviews (62 involving only boys; 39 involving only girls; and 3 mixed) based on nominated friendship groups of between 2-3 pupils.

Theories of embodied masculinity
The ongoing construction of boys' nascent identities is essentially an issue about masculinity. Many recent theoretical conceptualisations about masculinity have been coherently summarised by Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) and, along with Connell (1987, 1995, 1996, 2000), they affirm a number of key points from recent feminist and feminist-inspired work: masculinity is a relational construct occupying a place in gender relations;

3

there are multiple masculinities; there are hierarchies of masculinities; masculinity is a precarious and ongoing performance; and it is generally a collective social enterprise. Within the hierarchies of masculinity, each setting (such as a school) will generally have its own dominant, or hegemonic, form which utilises the main resources available. Although these may differ in each school, the hegemonic form gains ascendancy over and above others, becomes 'culturally exalted' (Connell, 1995, p. 77), and exemplifies what it means to be a 'real' boy. The hegemonic masculine form is not necessarily the most common type on view and may be contested; although it is often underwritten by the threat of violence, it has the capacity to portray itself as the natural order of things, and many boys find that they have to fit into, and conform to, its demands. Thus, essentially, hegemony works by consent. Recent research (see, for example, Pattman *et al*., 1998; Swain, 2001; Frosh *et al*., 2002) has begun to suggest that there may be a number of 'softer' or more 'personalised' types of masculinities which do not aspire to emulate the leading form, but there will always be other patterns that will be marginalised, or victimised and subordinated.

Masculinity refers to the body, and as boys' identities are defined and generally described in terms of what they do with/to their bodies, I have embraced the concept of embodiment (Turner, 2000). Although there are a number of ways of defining embodiment, it needs to be understood as a social process (Elias, 1978). Although bodies are located in particular social, historical structures and spaces, the boys in this paper are viewed as embodied social agents, for they do not merely have a passive body which is inscribed and acted upon (Crossley, 1996; Connell, 2000), but they are actively involved in the development of their bodies, using it as a resource throughout their school life (and indeed for their entire life-span). Drawing on work by Bourdieu (1986), Shilling (1991, 1993) argues that it is possible to view the body as having a 'physical capital', the production of which refers to the ways bodies are recognised as possessing value in various social settings. They may have power, status and/or an array of distinctive symbolic forms which are used as resources of agency and influence. The part played by the body in the formation of masculine identity is beginning to be recognised in sociological literature (Kehily, 2001; Swain, 2001), although there remains a conspicuous

4

absence of empirical studies about the bodies of children. This paper argues that the hegemonic form of masculinity is inextricably linked to, and organised around, the body and to the resource of physicality and athleticism; consequently, subordinate types of masculinity will often be represented by boys who are not only different from the norm, but who are also deficient in, or lack, a number of key resources linked and/or associated with the body.

The school setting

In order to understand the range of processes and practices which are involved in the ways that boys are able to construct their masculine identities, some researchers such as Connell *et al*. (1982), Pollard (1985), and Gordon *et al.* (2000) have identified and differentiated between the *official/formal* and the *unofficial/informal* cultures of schooling, although they define them in slightly different ways. Broadly speaking though, the formal culture refers to the teaching and learning, policy/organisational and administrative structures, and the informal culture to the relations and interactions between the pupils, and between pupils and teachers outside of the instructional relationship.

Schools are inevitably hierarchical and create and sustain relations of domination and subordination; each orders certain practices in terms of power and prestige as it defines its own *gender regime* (Kessler *et al*., 1985). They are also located in, and shaped by, specific socio-cultural, politico-economic and historical conditions. However, a main argument in this paper is that individual personnel, reproduced rules, routines and expectations, and the school's own utilisation of resources and space, will all have a profound impact, and can make a substantive difference, to the way young boys (and girls) experience their lives at school. This means that there are different options and opportunities to perform different types of masculinity is each school; in other words there are different alternatives, or possibilities, of *doing boy* which are contingent to each school setting using the meanings and practices available, although some are more obvious and conspicuous than others. Between them, Connell (1996) and Gilbert &

Gilbert (1998) site four key areas of 'masculinising practices': management and policy/organisational practices, including discipline; teacher and pupil relations; the curriculum; and sport/games. Thus we can see that the school's role in the formation of masculinity needs to be understood in two ways, for as well as providing the setting and physical space in which the embodied actions and agencies of pupils and adults takes place, its own structures and practices are also involved as an *institutional agent* which produce these 'masculinising practices'.

The power of the peer group and the need to gain status

To this list of masculinising practices we also need to add pupil-to-pupil relations for pupils are also agents of masculinity. The closed cultural circle of the peer group has become increasingly recognised as a key area of influence in masculinity making, and there are constant pressures on individuals to perform and behave to the expected group norms (see, for example, Pollard, 1985; Woods, 1990; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Kenwa*y et al.,* 1997; Adler & Adler, 1998; Connolly, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Harris, 1998; Connell, 2000). Each peer group has its own cultural identity which can be said to refer to a 'way of life' (Dubbs & Whitney, 1980, p. 27) with shared values and interests, furnishing boys with a series of collective meanings of what it is to be a boy. Harris (1998) argues that the peer group actually has more influence on children than their parents in the formation of their identity, of who they are now, and who they will become, and is the main conduit by which cultures are passed from one generation to another. Thus, the construction of masculinity is primarily a collective enterprise, and it is the peer group, rather than individual boys, which are the main bearers of gender definitions (Connell, 2000; Lesko, 2000).

For many pupils, the safest position to aim for in the formal school culture is to be 'average', while in the informal pupil culture it is to be the 'same as the others' for this provides a certain protection from teasing and, perhaps, even subordination (Gordon *et al.,* 2000). In fact, it is a paradox that while pupils attempt to construct their own 'individual' identity, no-one aspires to be, or can afford to be, too different, and they are

conscious that they need to be 'normal' and 'ordinary' within the codes set by their own peer group. One of the most urgent dimensions of school life for boys is the need to gain popularity and, in particular, status (see, Weber, 1946, 1963; Corsaro, 1979; Adler & Adler, 1998): indeed, the search to achieve status is also the search to achieve an acceptable form of masculinity. The boys' notion of status comes from having a certain position within the peer group hierarchy which becomes relevant when it is seen in relation to others. It is not something that is given, but is often the outcome of intricate and intense manoeuvring, and has to be earned through negotiation and sustained through performance, sometimes on an almost daily basis.

The resources and strategies used

Ultimately, the boys' position in the peer group is determined by the array of social, cultural, physical, intellectual and economic resources that each boy is able to draw on and accumulate. Although some may be intellectual (general academic capability and achievement); economic (money); social and linguistic (interpersonal); or cultural (in touch with the latest fashions, music, TV programmes, computer expertise etc), the most esteemed and cherished resource across all three schools was connected with an embodied form of physicality and athleticism (sporty, tough, etc). Of course, ultimately, these resources are all symbolic in that their power and influence derives from their effect, and from what they are perceived to mean and stand for. These resources will also always exist within determinate historical and spatial conditions, so that the resources available will vary within different settings, and some may be easier to draw on than others at particular times and in particular places. This means that the boys who use a set of resources and interactional skills to establish high status in the dominant pupil hierarchy in one school will not necessarily be able to sustain this position in another. In this next section I present and discuss the embodied resources that the boys employed, which include being sporty and athletic, acting tough/hard, using humour and wit (including cussing), wearing fashionable clothes/training shoes, and possessing culturally-acclaimed knowledge. Finally, I also consider the status of having a girlfriend, although this type of relationship was largely anomalous in my study.

Physicality/athleticism

The major factor affecting a boy's position of peer group status and popularity was his athletic ability and physical prowess, and many aspects were exhibited and performed at school in various spaces at different times. Masculinity is instituted in the body and is expressed through physical practices, but rather than viewing these physical practices as expressions of an already existing masculinity, I am arguing that masculinity was brought into being through these practices. For much of the time the boys defined their masculinity through action, and their bodies/identities became signified either as 'skilful', 'fast', 'forceful' and so on, but also, of course, as 'awkward', 'slow' or 'weak'. Whilst some forms, such as sporting prowess, may be validated by both the formal and informal cultures, others, such as fighting, may bring sanctions from the formal regime but kudos in the informal peer group, although this will depend on the school where it happens. For instance, at Westmoor Abbey, although the victor of a fight may have been penalised or chastised by the adult authority, these boys usually gained more status than the defeated who would generally lose an appreciable amount of respect and credibility, and even friendship, amongst their peers.

The importance of sport in the formation of masculinities has been recognised by a number of writers (see, for example, Kessler *et al.*,1985; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Whitson, 1990; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000; Parker, 1996a, 1996b; Bromley, 1997; Renold, 1997; Fitzclarence & Hickey, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Lingard & Douglas, 1999; Martino, 1999; Skelton, 2000; Swain, 2000). Sport is a major signifier of masculinity in many schools and provides a way of measuring a boy's masculine accomplishment against other boys, and also against the wider world of men. The top sporty boys also tend to have a higher status in the cultural life of the school, and this was particularly true at Highwoods where sporting achievement was celebrated and honoured by the formal regime. However, despite playing a wide range of sports, it was football that was, by far, the most valorised game amongst the boys' own peer-groups, and it was the boys who were the most accomplished players who were the most popular and who held the highest status. Although it was also possible in this school to gain a

8

limited amount of status through work and academic achievement, sport, and particularly football, took precedence.

Calvin:	If you're not good at football you're not friends with anybody who's good at football, all the people who are good at football are the best people, like the most/
Josh:	Popular
Calvin:	Yeah, popular
JS:	[*To Josh and Patrick*] True?
Josh:	Very true!
Patrick:	Yeah
Josh:	We're sporty people
Calvin:	And the sporty people are much preferred than the people who are much more brainy

Football plays a central part in the production of (heterosexual) masculinities, and establishing oneself as a good footballer goes a long way in helping to establish one as a 'real' boy (see, for example, Renold 1997; Skelton 1997, 2000, 2001; Benjamin, 1998, 2001; Connolly, 1998; Swain 2000; Epstein *et al.,* 2001). At Petersfield, all ball games in the playground using the feet were prohibited, and it soon became clear through the interviews that the whole topic of football had been effectively marginalised in the peer group culture. The headteacher, Mrs Flowers, felt football was associated with, and attracted, the 'wrong' forms of masculinity. However, its attempted elimination (for much of the year) did not mean that the more conventional and competitive macho types of embodied masculinity disappeared, but rather that they appeared in other forms; they compelled the boys to find and invent a range of alternative activities during their breaktimes, and these were based particularly on the physical resources of speed and strength, and this was also the case at Westmoor Abbey.

The ability to run fast was a particularly valorised resource and all the boys that I interviewed could tell me who was the fastest boy in the class. There were frequent tests

of speed in the playground, sometimes involving a direct head-to-head confrontation. At Petersfield and Westmoor Abbey, some of the playground games (such as the chase-game, Bulldog, at Petersfield, and Runouts at Westmoor Abbey) had been deliberately created around a competitive test of speed, for being a fast runner meant that you were more often a winner, and losers risked subordination and exclusion. The following exchange comes from two boys at Petersfield:

Jameil: If you're a slow coach, you won't be able to catch with us...'cos the main fastest kids are like, me, CT, Benjamin and [...] Hussein

JS: They're the fastest, and is that quite important for the games you play...if you're a real slow coach you get caught?

Jameil: As we're the fastest we can get to the other side easily

Matthew: And then when we play with Rod, he always gets caught first, but we don't let him be 'it' [*in Bulldog*] because he's always going to be caught

Being fast also meant that a boy could excel in a greater range of sports, especially in football. The relationship between sport and popularity/status is also affirmed in this extract from Westmoor Abbey.

JS: How important is it to be good at sport?

Chris: Quite important because if you're good at sport, it means that you're a fast runner, you can get away quickly, you're good at games/

Ryan: If you're good at games, and you're a fast runner, you can get past people/

Chris: You get pretty popular if you're good at sport

Bodily strength was also another important resource and was a prerequisite in physical games that were deliberately designed by the boys to test toughness and stamina. As was the case with the fastest runners, the boys were also able to name the strongest boy in the

class. One of the favourite games at Westmoor Abbey was called Predator and the object was to catch an opponent and then hold them down for a period of 10 seconds. Wrestling-type games also occurred at Petersfield, although here they needed to be a covert activity as they had also been banned by Mrs Flowers.

Acting tough and 'hard'

The attribute of physicality also appeared in other forms apart from games and sport. For instance, there were some boys who deliberately cultivated aggressive, 'macho' forms of behaviour, which they saw as a way of establishing their masculine authority. Toughness seemed to characterise much of their attitude and relations towards other boys, though this was scarcely ever directed at girls. Most of the data in this section comes from Westmoor Abbey, as this was the school where acting tough and/or 'hard' (including fighting) was one of the main ways of procuring status, and a strategy very much open to any boy who had the physical resources to back it up. Even threatening behaviour, such as intentional pushing/shoving, was a limited option at the other two schools, especially at Highwoods where a boy would be more likely to damage his reputation rather than enhance it if he had to resort to using physical coercion. Although still a limited option at Petersfield, one of the leading boys known as CT had established his status in the group by acting tough. His authority was underwritten and backed up with displays of violence and intimidation, and although this did not bring him popularity, it earned him a certain amount of wary respect, and few boys were prepared to take the chance of being left on the 'outside'. Moreover, there were also a few other boys in the peer group who set out to invoke the strategy of fighting in an attempt to gain peer group acceptance and to prove their 'macho' credentials. Connell's (1995, 1996) research into aggressive behaviour suggests that fighting is predominantly carried out by boys of poorer academic performance. However, while this may have applied to CT (and some of the boys at Westmoor Abbey), other boys at Petersfield were high academic achievers which suggests that there is no simple correlation.

Although the vast majority of the tough boys were to be found at Westmoor Abbey where, it could be argued, there was a relation to working class patterns of cultural

behaviour (Canaan, 1991). Although Skelton (2001) reminds us that it is important to emphasise that violent forms of masculinity are not the 'preserve' of working class males, some of these boys almost certainly imitated actions seen, and learnt, within their families and from other members in the local community. It was a necessary requirement of the informal culture for all the boys to appear tough, and one of the boys told me that 'you can't afford to be nice 'cos people will think that you're soft inside'. Acts of daring and displays of courage could also bring admiration and status, and some of these happened outside school. Inside school, reputations of being tough were continuously being made and lost, and in the following conversation I am asking two of the leading boys, Dan and Luke, about the standing of another boy in a parallel class:

JS: Isn't it true that last year Elvin was quite a tough kid?

Dan/Luke: No!

Dan: Everyone thought he was but now he's come to these fights and he's getting caned, and so everyone knows he's a weed; everyone used to think he was but not now

Luke: The only reason anyone likes me/

JS: But he used to win his fights?

Dan: No, he never used to have fights

Luke: The only reason that people started to like me is because I beat him

JS: Oh you beat Elvin did you?

Luke: Yeah yeah, in Year 3...because everyone didn't know me, and they was thinking I was a weed, but then I punched him and beat him, and then everyone felt proud of me

This exchange points to the essential insecurity of the dominant masculinity in this school because there is an almost daily need to sustain and defend it against challengers (Pattman *et al.,* 1998). If a boy bases his status on toughness and fighting, he needs to be ever-attentive to potential rivals; he is only going to be as good as his last fight, and if beaten his status will rapidly diminish. It also shows how Luke uses the tactic of fighting to ingratiate himself with the peer group when he arrived from another school in the early

part of his junior career, but it is also important to make the point that Luke's use violence is connected to power and status, and is not the result of any inherent individual pathology in his masculine makeup (Moon, 1992).

However, the majority of the boys tried to keep away from fighting. Although a boy could also show how tough he was by publicly defying adult authority, showing an insouciant 'couldn't-care-less' attitude, and/or by challenging the rules and receiving more disciplinary actions than others, many boys were negotiating their way between the two school cultures, and did not want to run the risk of getting into serious trouble. However, sometimes their options became constricted, and few boys were prepared to chance peer ridicule by ducking out of a direct challenge. This was particularly true if it came from a boy in a younger age group.

> *Tom:*   You have to have a fight with someone, you can't walk away
>   otherwise you'll be taken the micky out of

If a boy wanted to maintain his position of status in the peer group he had to learn to stand up and look after himself in the face of verbal threats and physical intimidation. In fact, not standing up for oneself was seen as a social sin and a matter of individual honour, and many boys told me that their parents had told them to 'sort things out for themselves' by hitting back, rather than by telling a teacher. At one point in the following conversation, Chris asks me to confirm the practice of standing up for yourself and hitting back, a point which I studiously choose to ignore. Although using the help of an elder sibling or relative was not nearly as bad as telling a teacher, and may have been an effective short term tactic, a boy would usually pay the price for this in the long run.

> *Robert:*   Ryan needs to toughen up a bit
> *JS:*   Ryan does?
> *Tom:*   He lets himself get pushed around and then he don't fight back
> *Robert:*   He got pushed into a bush by a Year 5, right it was Sam, and he
>   goes, 'Stop it' 'cos Sam was starting calling him names, and then

	we go, 'Just hit him,' and he goes, 'I will if he hits me or pushes me' and he started pushing him around and he didn't do nothing; he got pushed into a bush and he walked off and he was crying
Chris:	Eric and all us said we wouldn't join in, just you two have the fight but he wouldn't, but if that was someone else, if someone pushes you or punches you, you'd just hit them back wouldn't you?
JS:	So you've got to be quite a good fighter and look after yourself, stand up for yourself?
Robert:	Some people like Simon go, 'Oh I'll get my sister's boyfriend on you and Tim O'Neil' [*an unknown person*] but he won't touch me 'cos my brother's older than him and my brother's left school and my brother/
Chris:	That's what Dan used to do, Dan used to get his brother but when you get your brother, that shows that you're really not that strong, you have to get someone fighting [...] you can't fight for yourself

Humour, including the use of cussing.

Another resource the boys drew on was humour which was an integral and indispensable part of everyday school life, and its practice was a particularly prevalent part of the peer group culture at Petersfield and Westmoor Abbey. Although it took different forms in each school, humour played an important part in affirming and reaffirming the collective identities of the boys' (and girls') peer groups and the relations between them: indeed, in many ways, humour was actually 'constitutive' of identities (Kehily & Nayak 1997, p. 70). Woods (1976) emphasises the therapeutic qualities of laugher, and describes it as an 'antidote to schooling', which is used by the boys as a form of coping with, and escaping from, the daily realities of the repeated routines, regulations and demands of authority. Sometimes humour was employed by pupils as a confrontational device against teachers, for misbehaviour in the classroom (and around the school) could also enhance status. Indeed, challenging and testing the boundaries of school's (and in particular, the specific teacher's) authority by trying to generate a laugh was a key constituent of the pupils' peer culture, and was used as a strategy to foster and confirm camaraderie (Francis, 1998,

2000; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Although writers such as Connell (2000) make the point that boys are more likely to turn to rule-breaking when they have a deficit of other resources to form their masculinity, I wish to argue that the boys who were the most confrontational in this study used rule-breaking alongside, or as part of, a number of other resources. They did not turn to rule-breaking because they had nothing else; it was just one dimension in the performance of their masculine identity. Sometimes humour was also used as a calculated strategy to divert attention. In the extract below (which comes from Highwoods) I am trying to find out if a group of boys have any ideas why Rex, who is academically bright, misbehaves in certain classes, and Travis's theory is that Rex deliberately attempts to avert the masculine peer group gaze away from his bodily size.

> *Travis:*   Rex is too fat and he wants to [*inaudible; much laughter*]
>
> *JS:*   'Cos of his weight? You mean 'cos he's fat? Why does that make him not work hard?
>
> *Travis:*   If he doesn't make people think he's funny they might go on about his weight
>
> *JS:*   Oh I see, so if he doesn't play the class clown people would tease him?
>
> *Travis:*   Yeah

However, using this strategy of messing around also brought its own risks and it was also easy to fail in this very public arena where reputations could not only be made but also be broken. While this option was virtually closed in the strict regime of Mr Hughes (the teacher of the class I studied at Petersfield), it was a limited option at Highwoods (depending on the teacher) but a more open possibility at Westmoor Abbey although even here it brought its own risks. Sometimes a teacher would 'triumph' and a boy could be humiliated with withering sarcasm, and it also depended on who you were as to whether you could get away with it amongst the peer group. A boy had to judge the 'right moment', and while some always seemed to have peer support (from both boys and girls), others attracted deprecation for trying too hard. However, humour was also used

as a source for developing and reinforcing teacher-pupil relationships and many of the laughs were *with* teachers rather than *against* them.

In all three schools the amount of specific joke telling was negligible, but although some groups told me that they never told jokes, they were still a device that could be used to affect a performance, and as Paddy told me at Highwoods, 'if you have jokes, that means you have got a bit of a bonus'. However, humour had much more to do with acting and *being* funny. Luke was generally regarded as being the funniest boy in the class at Westmoor Abbey, and like many at this school, he used humour to relieve boredom and to gain himself attention, but also on other occasions, as a means of trying to cover up and deflect attention away from the fact that he was experiencing frustration and having difficulties with his work.

At Petersfield, there was also a particular type of humour called cussing (Swain,2002a). Although the term was virtually unheard off at the other two schools, at Petersfield it was a ubiquitous phenomenon amongst the upper school boys, and a major device of gaining status/prestige, and positioning others in the masculine peer group hierarchy. It was used at the school as a generic term for a kind of face-to-face verbal interaction covering anything from friendly playing and teasing, to highly personalised attacks. The cussing at Petersfield took many different forms: it could be of a short or protracted duration, involve friendly teasing or hostile persecution, be a private affair between two individuals, or be a public exhibition involving whole groups. Essentially, it was a verbal face-to-face interaction of name-calling based on displays of wit.

Cusses were supposed to be exemplars of wit which appeared to abrogate the need to be able to tell good jokes. People were certainly admired for cussing within the peer group, and the ability to 'hold your own' in a slanging match was seen as an important way of gaining and maintaining status. Cusses often lasted for about half-a-dozen exchanges before one party either got bored or ran out of cusses to say; in some senses they were rather like a tennis match with each 'player' taking turns to make a 'hit'. Although most cussing 'matches' lasted no more than a minute, and were often enjoyed by both the

16

cusser and the cussee, some developed into nastier, protracted affairs which extended over a period of days. Although some pupils were able to 'laugh it off', some of these cusses were calculatingly and gratuitously designed to hurt and provoke a reaction; they have a direct link to bullying (Olweus, 1993; Sharp & Smith, 1994) and it was these types which sometimes ended up in a fight.

In their study into racism in the secondary school, Kelly & Cohn (1988) found that the single worst form of name calling concerned 'the family', or more accurately, 'the mother'. This was the same at Peterfield, and although I did not come across a single example of racist cussing, most of the serious cusses had misogynist undertones and began with: 'Your mum....' which was a highly personalised attack on identity. Two girls told me that CT's favourite expression was, 'Your mum…' , and although it could still be a more straightforward type of direct insult such as: 'Your mum's belt is the size of the equator,' many invariably, concerned sexual mores/appetites; for example: 'Your mum has felt more knobs than the gasman.' Kehily & Nayak (1997, p. 73) argue that the reference to a boy's mother exploits 'the contradictory "private" emotions of maternal affection and the public disavowal of the "feminine",' where males are positioned as some kind of moral guardians of their mother's (and girlfriends and sisters) sexual reputations.

Image/fashion

Another resource that some pupils were able to use to achieve peer group prestige/status was the wearing of fashionable clothes and trainers displaying their signifying logos and brand names (Swain, 2002b). Many of these opportunities depend upon both the official approach and policies on school uniform in each school and the amount of parental support, and while this was one of the top ways of gaining recognition at Westmoor Abbey, this option was restricted at Petersfield and almost totally closed at Highwoods. Being an independent school, Highwoods was associated with the long, historical public-school tradition of wearing school uniform. The policy was rigorously and stringently applied, and pupils were consistently under surveillance and picked up on the most trivial transgression such as having a top button undone. At Petersfield, although the wearing of

school uniform was a little more relaxed it was also strictly controlled. In common with the majority of LEA schools, Petersfield had taken the decision to wear 'colours' rather than a 'uniform', although it was it still a uniform in everything but name. This situation was diametrically different at Westmoor Abbey, where a loose enforcement of school uniform created a space for pupils to use clothing as a means of gaining recognition and status, of generating common bonds, and of sharing interests and intimacy within the peer-group cultures. Indeed, clothing and footwear were used as an important constitutive component in the construction and performance of the boys' masculinity. Certain items and brand-names acquired a specific, symbolic value, acting as a powerful signifier of the pupils worth as people, and pupils who attempted to dress and conform to the school rules and regulations ran a high risk of being stigmatised and subordinated.

Enforcement of school uniform also depends on the level of parental corroboration, and what made this situation so difficult for Westmoor Abbey to confront was that the pupils' style of clothing was worn in collusion with their parents. Perhaps the preoccupation with clothing was so highly valued because the boys and girls had fewer alternatives of demonstrating material status compared to pupils from a different social class, or having their value (as people) legitimised by other means, such as working hard and achieving academically.

Within the context of clothing there was an inextricable link to sport with its associations of athleticism, strength, power and cultural status (Parker, 1996a); nearly all the pupils in the class that I studied wore tracksuit bottoms (in varying colours), and only 3 girls usually wore skirts. One of the most controversial parts of school uniform often concerns the type of footwear, and whereas training shoes were banned at Highwoods, and restricted at Petersfield, they were *de rigueur* at Westmoor Abbey. Indeed it was the training shoe that had the greatest currency in terms of status, with their signifiers of wealth, choice, freedom, equality, sportiness, casualness, anti-school, and of collective belonging (Maguire, 1999). As with the tracksuit tops, T-shirts and jackets, there was a hierarchy of brand names. Two of the lowest ranking were 'Ascot' and 'Gola', and during one interview two pupils highlighted its aesthetic style, but also the associated

high price, and the ability to afford it: *real* training shoes were bought in *real* sports shops with their higher associated symbolic value. We can also see Ollie's recognition of the transient nature of fashion.

JS:	Why are Gola so bad then?
Leanne:	'Cos they're just a terrible make...there's no fashion in [*them*] whatsoever
Ollie:	That's the sort of thing you'd buy off a market, Gola/
Leanne:	Yeah, I know, they're so out of fashion
Ollie:	[…] You wouldn't get a pair of Gola in 'Compton's Sports'
Leanne:	They're too terrible
JS:	What are the best ones then?
Leanne:	Erm, Reeboks, they've got classic/
Ollie:	Reebok, Adidas, Puma
JS:	Is that just 'cos of the name, or it is because they/
Ollie:	The style
Leanne:	Yeah
Ollie:	The fashion. It's just fashion at the moment ain't they? It's just like saying, 'Why do women like make-up...they like to look beautiful'
JS:	All part of the look?
Ollie:	Yeah

It was 'the look', style, and expense of clothing that seemed to come before considerations of practicability and/or comfort. Those who did not conform to the right 'look' at Westmoor Abbey were categorised as 'other', and this could lead to rejection and/or peer-group ostracism. It was the whole look, the whole package, that was required, and put simply, there was a cultural need to *conform* and *perform* to the masculine boundaries in play. This was policed by the boys from the dominant groups: if a Year 6 boy wore anything associated with the regulation school uniform, apart from the sweat shirt, they would often be called either 'boff' or 'gay', and they were used on an

interchangeable basis. A boy could have a boff shirt, boff trousers or boff shoes, which usually meant that anything 'smart' was equated with conforming to the school's values and authority. 'Gay' basically connoted 'naff' or awful, and this even included his choice of shoe:

> *Jimmy:*   Some people say that Tom has got gay trainers because they're old
>
> *Tom:*   These are old but I'm getting new ones.

Cultural knowledge

In contrast to recent research by Renold (2001) set in the junior school, and Frosh *et al*. (2002) in the secondary school, it was perfectly possible at Highwoods and Petersfield to be visibly seen working hard and achieving high grades without being victimised. However, although some boys were admired for their intellectual abilities, this did not bring them any significant amount of veneration within the peer group. But whereas it had a neutral effect on status at Petersfield and Highwoods, it often had an adverse effect at Westmoor Abbey where learning in general was feminised and associated with conforming to the formal school culture. It was being able to talk knowledgeably about culturally celebrated topics such as football (the teams, the star players, the scores, specific matches, the rules and so on), being familiar with the latest computer games (such as *PlayStation*), and having knowledge of computer programming, that brought prestige and popularity within the peer group hierarchy. Pollard (1985) argues that competence is one of the most effective ways off achieving status, and this cultural knowledge added up to a kind of *savoir faire*, which Adler & Adler (1998, p. 42) refer to as a pupil's 'sophistication in social and interpersonal skills'. The corollary of this was that a deficiency of knowledge, either in the latest culturally-hot topics, or about, say the technical language of football, could render a boy silent and be used as a marker of difference. For example, Sam at Westmoor Abbey was derogated because he did not understand the off-side rule in football, and neither he nor his friend Simon knew the names or descriptions of some of the main characters in *South Park*, a popular cartoon programme on television at the time. By the end of the junior school, many boys are in the process of disengaging from their childhood past (Harris, 1998). It is therefore also

important for (some) boys to be able to show a commitment to adolescent future by being 'in the know' regarding the meaning of certain swear words and matters of sexuality.

> *Robert:*   Me and Luke, in Year 5, we used to ask Sam about bodily parts which were rude and that, and ask him if/
> *Ryan:*   We'd ask Sam now about body parts
> *Robert:*   Yeah, and ask if he knows [*much laughter, I can't hear everything that is being said*]
> *Chris:*   He used to say when your nose goes stiff
> *Ryan:*   Like we asked him things like that
> *Robert:*   We asked Sam what something was, I can't remember what it was, and I think he said something like 'your tongue' or something

Having a girlfriend

There has recently been a growing number of studies considering the heterosexual positions of boyfriend and girlfriend, particularly at the upper end of the primary school (see, for example, Thorne & Luria, 1986; Thorne, 1993; Epstein, 1997; Adler & Adler, 1998; Renold, 2000), although Connolly (1998) found that infant boys were also able to gain a significant level of status by having a girlfriend. Some researchers like Renold have found that 'having a girlfriend' was a common occurrence amongst the boys' peer group culture (they were also 10-11 year olds), and created an 'acceptable and assumptive' status (Renold, 2000, p. 319) which emanated from the need to reinforce dominant versions of heterosexual masculinities. However, I found little evidence of these relationships in my three schools, and even the few short term associations usually only lasted a number of days or even hours. Indeed, despite the connotations of activity invoked by the phrase 'going out', it was ironic that the two or three couples that actually did exist in the three schools did not actually seem to go anywhere, and 'going out' was a particular 'storyline' which signified, and gave the pupils access to, the positions of boyfriend/girlfriend from the social world of the adolescent or adult. In the vast majority of cases, the boys wanted to do little more than to *possess* a girl, to use as a status

symbol, and it was the ability to be able to *claim* the relationship that was the main objective.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that the construction and performance of masculinity is inextricably linked to the acquisition of status within the school peer group, and I have delineated the specific series of resources and strategies that the boys draw on and use in each setting to achieve this. The resources that the boys employed were many and varied, and the values accorded to these resources vary in each setting. The boys defined themselves through bodily practices. They could be seen being shaped (literally) by manifestations of their physical prowess, and this paper finds that the single most honoured and extensively used resource, connected with the hegemonic form of masculinity, was physicality and athleticism as expressed by the body. However, it was articulated in slightly different ways within each school context: for example, at Highwoods it was more sporty, at Westmoor Abbey more macho and violent, and at Petersfield it manifested itself through speed and strength. The paper has also considered a variety of other embodied resources and strategies such as acting tough/hard; using humour and wit (including cussing); the wearing of fashionable clothes/trainers; the possession of culturally-valued knowledge; and the 'possession' of a girlfriend. Table 2 below summarises the options available, and shows how the resources were distributed across the three schools:

TABLE 2 GOES ABOUT HERE

Pupils live their lives at school within the particular contexts of their society, and these structures and pressures influence an individual school's policies and organisations, and create a different 'set of storylines' and 'repertoires of action' (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p.51). While some of these may be similar at each school, others are distinct to each setting: this means that there are a different set of resources to draw on, and therefore a different set of options and/or opportunities within each school to *do* boy. For instance, while some schools (like Highwoods) will place a higher emphasis on sporting excellence than others, these same achievements that are affirmed and celebrated at one school will go unrecognised, or be marginalised, in others (like Petersfield); and while the wearing of fashionable clothes can bring high acclaim and status in the pupil culture at some schools (like Westmoor Abbey), strict uniform policies can virtually close down this option in others (like Highwoods). So, we can see that these ways of performing masculinity are not simple personal choices which come from a range of independent options, for some opportunities are more open, accessible and easy to achieve than others, some are more limited or restricted, while others are practically closed and almost impossible to achieve. Some resources will be already made and established in the formal school culture (such as the sporting ethos at Highwoods), others will needed to be created by the pupils themselves (such as the playground games at Petersfield and Westmoor Abbey), and they may either co-exist, or be in opposition to the formal school culture.

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Key to transcripts

[*text*]   Background information;

[…]   extracts edited out of transcript for sake of clarity;

...   pause;

/   moment when interruption begins;

Notes

[1] In order to further disguise the school's identity the number of pupils on roll have been rounded to the nearest 25

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Name of school	Type of school	No. on roll [1]	Social characteristics of intake
Highwoods	Private, fee-paying	350	Upper-middle class

Independent			
Petersfield Junior	LEA	425	Middle class
Westmoor Abbey Junior	LEA	300	Working class

Table 1: School type, size, and the social characteristics of their intake

	HIGHWOODS	PETERSFIELD	WESTMOOR ABBEY
Those options which were OPEN and available to use	(i) physicality/ athleticism (ii) showing sporting prowess (on games field and in playground) (iii) having culturally-valued knowledge (iv) working hard (v) seeking academic achievement (vi) humour	(i) physicality/ athleticism (ii) having culturally-valued knowledge (iii) working hard (v) seeking academic achievement (vi) humour, particularly cussing	(i) physicality/ athleticism (ii) showing sporting prowess (on games field and in playground) (iii) having culturally-valued knowledge (iv) wearing fashion clothes and trainers (v) exhibiting bad behaviour in class/around

			school (vi) being tough/hard (vii) humour
Those options which were more RESTRICTED	(i) being tough/hard (ii) exhibiting bad behaviour in class/around school	(i) showing sporting prowess (in the playground only) (ii) exhibiting bad behaviour around school (iii) wearing trainers (iv) being tough/hard	(i) working hard (ii) seeking academic achievement
Those options which were practically CLOSED	(i) wearing fashion clothes and trainers	(i) exhibiting bad behaviour in class (ii) wearing fashion clothes	

Table 2: The resources available affecting the various options and
opportunities for gaining peer group status at each school