Little Boys: tomorrow’s macho lads
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Little Boys: tomorrow's macho lads

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ABSTRACT This paper presents elements of an ethnographic case study of a group of five male friends between the ages of six and eight years. The study sought to examine the ways in which the group's social dynamics interacted to define, regulate and maintain collective understandings of masculinity. Dominant peer culture was found to be particularly potent in championing a hegemonic masculinity embodying and cultivating physical domination, aggression and violence underpinned by constructions of females and femininity as the negative 'other'. These restrictive understandings were interpreted as normalised through the philosophies and practices of the boys' teachers and their principal. Here the naturalist assumptions underpinning dominant early childhood pedagogy constituted the boys as 'gender innocent' and were implicated in understandings of developmentally appropriate practice. Through illuminating clear parallels to associated research, this paper presents further warrant for abandoning these naturalist assumptions which continue to mitigate against gender equity in early childhood (MacNaughton, Rethinking Gender in Early Childhood Education, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 2000). In this regard, the paper signifies the importance of maintaining a focus on addressing issues of collective masculinity in early childhood.

Introduction

Adam: Ah well, first of all, guess who I bashed the crap out of?
Matthew: I know, Brian—fishface dork!
Justin: He's an arsehole.
Matthew: Yep, he's a bitch.
Justin: Yeah and a bitch.
Adam: A son of a bitch, I go, 'Hey Brian, y'no good arsehole.'
Justin: ...and I go, 'You're a dickhead.' I hate his guts!

Adam, Justin and Matthew (all pseudonyms) are aged between seven and eight years. You could call them your 'average' little boys: they attend the local primary school (situated in a middle class socioeconomic area in a large provincial city in Tasmania, Australia), have loving parents and relatively stable home lives, love sport and physical activity, particularly football, and want to be accepted by their peers. As part of my
research into masculinities and peer culture I came to know these boys, and their friends Ravi (aged eight) and Jack (aged six), well.

The boys were part of an ethnographic case study that orientated around an interrogation of peer group ‘meanings’ through exploring collective understandings of masculinities within the context of intensive ‘affinity group’ sessions over a six-month period (Keddie, 2001). This method of grouping individuals of similar interests promoted group cohesion, discussion and the identification of shared and contradicting stories, ideas and meanings (Mackay, 1993). Through a specific activity designed to reveal preferred peer friendships, Adam, Matthew, Justin, Jack and Ravi constituted the affinity group of boys for the study (see Keddie, in press). A variety of age-appropriate stimulus prompts, such as photos and toys, and activities such as drawing and construction, were used during the twice-weekly affinity sessions to foreground the dominant and collective dynamics and understandings of the group (Keddie, 2000). Additionally, to further explore perceptions and understandings of the boys, and within the context of intensive daily observations, data were gathered through discussions with the boys’ teachers (Mrs W., the class teacher, and Mr A., the physical education teacher) and the principal of the boys’ school (Mr T.). While not represented in this paper, an affinity group of girls was also consulted.

The study adopted the principles of ethnography within the theoretical lenses of feminist poststructuralism as core interpretive tools. The key theoretical and methodological foci were directed towards examining language, power and meaning in the collective production of ‘schoolboy masculinities’. My interpretation acknowledged that the boys’ social interactions were shaped and governed by dominant understandings enmeshed within particular practices which made more possible some ways of being, and not others (Davies, 1993). To this end, the social beliefs, practices and emotional and bodily investments that constituted the boys’ collective patterns of desire and conditioned their understandings of masculinity, were of key importance (MacNaughton, 2000).

I found the context of peer culture to be particularly potent in shaping the boys’ understandings of themselves and others. Consistent with significant research in the area of masculinities and schooling, peer culture was also primary in regulating and amplifying the boys’ dominant behaviours to involve various forms of self-legitimation and bravado mobilised around the ‘restrictive masculinities’ of physical domination, violence and aggression and the denigration of females and the feminine (Connell, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1999; Mills, 2001; Renold, 2002). The opening dialogue provides a snapshot of this aggressive bravado and actually preceded a violent group attack on Brian (who was the focus of the boys’ belittlement and aggression) during one lunchtime play. It was this sort of group dynamic that was seen as perpetuating and normalising particularly limited and restrictive understandings of masculinity. Also normalising and perpetuating limited understandings of masculinity, and consistent with research in an early childhood context, were particular ‘developmentally appropriate’ perceptions that the boys’ teachers and the school principal possessed (Alloway, 1995a; Clark, 1993; MacNaughton, 2000). These perceptions were seen as informed by the naturalist assumptions underpinning dominant early childhood pedagogy.

Boys’ destructive group behaviours have predominantly been the focus of research within the sphere of adolescence (Browne, 1995; Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1997; 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Mills, 1997; 2001; Walker, 1988). This paper adds to the growing body of work which highlights the importance of examining and addressing issues of masculinity within the peer cultures of early primary school/early childhood (Connolly, 1995; Danby & Baker, 2001; Jordan, 1995; Jordan &
Cowan, 1995; Keddie, 2003). The malleability of gender identities and understandings in the initial years of schooling (Jordan, 1995) point to an opportune time to begin work with peer groups in exploring behaviours and emotions and reworking dominant storylines and restrictive notions of gender. The paper aims to further illuminate the grave limitations inherent in the naturalistic philosophies of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) that continue to be implicated in the normalisation of restrictive masculinities within early childhood.

The Potency of Peer Culture in Shaping and Regulating Understandings of Masculinity


The Group’s Social Dynamics of Self-Legitimation and Hierarchical Positionings

Given that the boys were aged between six and eight, it is perhaps surprising that their sense of collective identity shared striking similarities with the dominant peer masculinities described within research in secondary schools. It could be argued that they were ‘shaping up nicely’, to use Kamler et al.’s phrase (1994), to become the next generation’s ‘macho lads’ (Mac an Ghaill 1994), ‘party animals’ (Martino, 1999) or ‘cool guys’ (Connell, 1989). Masculinity as ‘performance’ in relation to the need to prove oneself in pursuit of self-legitimation, status and prestige within the peer group’s ‘pecking order’, central in defining masculinities in the secondary sphere, was strikingly characteristic of the boys’ interactions (Connell, 1989; 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Mills, 2001). Consistent with the opening snapshot, the bravado, toughness and boasting of Mac an Ghaill’s ‘macho lads’, for example, typified much of the boys’ talk.

A.K.: So Adam, the other day I heard you had a little trouble with Brian.
Justin: Yep.
Adam: Yep.
Justin: Fishface, we bashed him, we hate him.
Adam: Yeah we hate his guts. We bashed the crap out of him.
Justin: Yeah he got me down on the ground …
Adam: Yeah, and hey, Justin, tell Ms Keddie how I beat Brian.
Justin: Um he, Brian got me down on the ground and hurt me head, so Adam got
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up ... he got him like this [demonstrates a headlock action] and went and got him in the head and went 'puew'.

Adam: I jus' bashed da shit out of 'im. I shoved sand in 'is mouth. Yeah an' I punched de crap outta him, 'cos 'e had Justin, an' I said, 'You're not my frien', so come an' get me an' I'll show ya who's gonna be hurt.'

Justin: I've bashed someone up. I just bash their bum.

Adam: Oh bull, Justin, you come over to me and let me bash 'em up.

During another part of the research which detailed the boys' love of football, bravado and toughness were also apparent when the boys were asked why they liked football. Consistent with the work of Epstein, the boys seemed to regard football ability as a 'major signifier of successful masculinity' (1998, p. 7) which provided a vehicle through which displays of competitive bravado were enacted through bodily expressions of masculinity (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Resonating with research in the primary school, the boys could be seen as drawing on the discourses of football to perform and validate their 'desired' masculinity (Keddie, 2002; Skelton, 1997; 2000; Swain, 2000; Renold, 1997).

Adam: I'm a really good footballer.

Justin: I'm a good footballer. I can kick 50 metres.

Adam: Get real.

Jack: I'm a good footballer.

Justin: I am, I'm the best footballer in the class.

Jack: I'm a good footballer.

Adam: Oh, come on Justin ya couldn' beat me at runnin'.

Justin: Adam, you're only a little fella.

Adam: Oh shut up and do us all a favour!

A.K.: Why do you like football?

Adam: I know why, 'cos I can bash de shit out of people ... well, another thing in football, it's really good an' it's a man's sport and it's somethin' ta play and get muddy and come into de classroom and ya sweatin' like hell and yeah, boys like dat sorta stuff.

Justin: We're the best, skilful players, me and Jack in this class.

Adam: No ya not, ya're hopeless, I am.

Jack: I'm better than you, Adam.

Adam: Oh bull!

A.K.: So why do you like football, Matthew?

Matthew: Because you can hurt people.

Jack: Yeah, y'can hurt people like and make blood go on them.

Justin: I love football 'cos y'can tackle and y'get blood rules.

Within an early childhood sphere, these observations are consistent with Lowe (1998) and, in particular, Danby's (1998) work detailing the establishment of boys' peer hierarchies through displays of 'toughness' designed to differentiate and mark prestige. Certainly, we can detect how the hierarchy operates to promote a particular version of hegemonic masculinity and is used as a strategy for the exclusion of other boys—clear elements of Danby's work. In analysing the relations of power in the boys' meaning making through feminist poststructural lenses, we can begin to interpret the boys' collective investments in 'doing masculinity' as discursively produced. Here, in examining how the social dynamics and language practices position the boys hierarchically, we can
see the group’s patterns of desire discursively mobilise around violence, aggression and physical prowess. We can, also begin to see how the boys’ desires to belong and be accepted or admired by the group intensify and legitimate these group patterns (MacNaughton, 2000). In this sense, we can see how these restrictive ways of being in the group might be seen as more possible than other ways of being (Davies, 1993).

The Group’s Social Dynamics of Self-Legitimation

Performances of self-legitimation, often at the expense of others, which Mac an Ghaill (1994) describes as ‘amplified’, ‘ritualistic’ and ‘obsessive’, were familiar elements of the boys’ talk. These descriptors were apparent in the boys’ continual and escalatory attempts to ‘go one better’ or ‘outdo’ each other. The following excerpt (which occurred directly after the opening vignette) illustrates how the boys’ ritual-like group legitimation is strengthened and amplified. In the opening dialogue, Brian graduates from being an ‘arschole’, ‘bitch’ and ‘son of a bitch’ to a ‘no good arsehole … and a dickhead’. In the following dialogue we can see the group’s social dynamics, led by Adam, further belittle Brian.

Adam: Brian showed all the girls dis big scar because um ‘e had to had his intenticles cut out.

A.K.: Appendix maybe?

Adam: Yeah.

Justin: Yuck!

Adam: He showed the girls to impress dem.

A.K.: Do you think he impressed them?

Adam: Well if y’ask me all de boys said, ‘What’s he got dat I haven’ got?’ An’ I said, ‘One scar, two dickhead, free dickhead, four dickhead, five dickhead, six dickhead …’

Jack: A million, a million dickheads!

Adam: ‘… seven dickhead, eight dickhead …’

Matthew: And one bitch.

Justin: Yeah an’ one bitch, yeah an’ six thousan’ dickheads!

Jack: He’s two million dickheads actually.

Justin: Yeah! He’s a dork!

Matthew: He’s a really big jerk.

Jack: How ‘bout he’s a girl or something.

Justin: Yeah, a girl.

Adam: I hate his guts! ‘E better watch out ‘cos I go ta boxin’, I know how to hold a punch.

Matthew: Sometimes I just go up and punch ‘im in the guts.

Justin: I just go punch him in the nuts and punch him in the eye ball. We hate his guts!

Practices of self-legitimation at the expense of others, in the form of dispersing hierarchical power through policing masculinities are reported to be central strategies in marking difference and prestige (Connell, 2000; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Mills, 2001; Renold, 2002). Here we can see the boys attempting to prove their masculinity through a ‘regime of abusive practices’ in the form of the verbal belittlement and humiliation of Brian, who is designated as ‘other’ (Martino, 1999, p. 243). The policing of masculinities within an early childhood context, in the form of self-legitimation at the
expense of others, is often conceptualised within the frame of 'gender borderwork' (Thorne, 1993; Boyle et al., 2003). Within a feminist poststructural frame we can see the boys’ assertion of collective power—their gender borderwork as a dynamic and contingent social production (Lowe, 1998). The dialogue foregrounds how the group’s power relations interact in the discursive intensification and legitimation of restrictive understandings of ‘appropriate’ or ‘desirable’ gender behaviour—their collective 'gender borderwork' actively excluding Brian through associating him with the feminine.

**Reinforcing the Male/Female Binary**

Consistent with Epstein’s (1999, p. 103) comment, ‘in the primary school context, the worst thing a boy can be called is a “girl”, even worse than being called a “gay boy”, “poof” or “sissy”, the boys in the study’s peer group consistently subordinated and drew individual and collective power in this regard. Their ‘enemy’ Brian, for example, was continually ridiculed and effectively excluded through being labelled a ‘girl’ and defined as ‘girl-like’. As evident in the earlier dialogue, the group’s escalatory dynamics seem to be shaped by Adam’s restrictive understandings.

Adam: Brian? He’s as weak as water.
Matthew: Yep, he can’t even ...
Adam: He’s always annoying, ‘e always acts like a chicken, an’ um ‘e always screams like a girl and ‘e thinks ‘e’s so good.
Jack: Yeah, he screams like a girl.
Adam: Yeah, he screams like a girl, like he shows off ‘n’ that ...
Justin: I seen him scream like a girl.
Adam: Yeah and for ‘chasies’ he goes, ‘Arhnhh, don’t get me, I’m running!’ Arsehole!

Another time, Ravi (a boy in the affinity group), was ridiculed as girl-like after he explained that he didn’t like the violence of football—that he preferred soccer.

Adam: Soccer’s a girls’ game! Don’t talk about soccer.
Jack: Soccer’s silly!
Ravi: No, it’s not!
Adam: Yes it is!
A.K.: Why is it a girl’s game?
Adam: Well, because when someone kicks ‘em in de leg they go, ‘Ah ha my leg’ ... [Adam stands up from his chair and dramatically holds his leg while yelling in pretend pain]
A.K.: Ravi, you like soccer don’t you?
Ravi: Yeah.
Justin: He’s a girl then!
Ravi: I’m not, um football has got one bad thing. Sometimes ... 
Adam: Hey Lucy, what’s ya name again? Oh yeah, dat’s right, Rowena!
A.K.: So if your friends were going to call you a girl or a sissy for playing soccer, would that worry you?
Ravi: Nuh.
A.K.: Doesn’t matter?
Adam: You’re a sissy, you’re a girl ha, ha, ha. You play soccer!
Ravi: Once I saw um one of the Fremantles um he was runnin’ ‘round with the ball and he put his hand out like that and he went like this to one of the Bulldogs ...
and um grabbed ‘em by the head an’ slammed ‘im down an’ um and they’re always hurting people.

A.K.: What do you think about that?
Ravi: Oh, it’s very bad.

The tenor of these last two data excerpts constitutes an ‘all too familiar’ element of significant gender research within an early childhood/primary sphere (Alloway, 1995a; Clark, 1993; Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1999; Jordan & Cowan, 1995; Kamler et al., 1994; Lowe, 1998; Renold, 2000; 2002). We can understand the boys’ exclusion and subordination of girls and their denigration of Brian and Ravi as ‘girl-like’ as informed by their investments in maintaining their position in the more ‘powerful’ half of the gender divide—a discourse of exclusion and subordination readily available for the boys to draw on. As Mac an Ghaill tells us, these discourses are ‘crucial … in setting the parameters of prescriptive and proscriptive’ schoolboy performance masculinities (1994, p. 92). Here we can see the boys variously attempting to maintain their power and worth through highlighting their perceived superior position within the dualistic notion of gender, thereby amplifying gender as difference and opposition. Through feminist poststructural lenses we can also see how the boys’ desire to belong and be accepted by the group are strongly implicated in their construction of, and investments in, these patterns of desire (MacNaughton, 2000). The potential social and emotional consequences should they resist taking up these patterns of desire are clear in the form of exclusion from the group. As we can see with Ravi, his resistance means rejection and ridicule.

Positioning a Patriarchal Heterosexuality as Central

It is not only gender identities which are involved when ‘boys will be boys’, but also sexual ones. The policing of masculinities and femininities assumes the inevitability of heterosexual relations. (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, p. 205)

Consistent with significant work in the area of masculinities and sexualities (in particular Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Mills, 1999; 2001; Martino, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Renold, 2000; 2002), the boys were seen as legitimising and regulating their gendered understandings through positioning a patriarchal heterosexuality as central. Distinct parallels were drawn from Mac an Ghaill’s (1994) research in relation to the boys’ use of (hetero)sexual power. Fuelled by the group’s social dynamics and Adam’s dominant position, male heroic sexual conquests within ‘categorical imperatives to act like heterosexual men’ (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, p. 91) seemed to resonate with much of the boys’ talk about girls. The boys’ perceptions of females as property to fight over, possess or collect and evaluate were applicable in this regard.

Adam: What really pisses me off always with Brian is he’s always got my girl, ah Zara. Yeah an’ another fing too, last year ‘e got Jessica Kenny.

A.K.: Was she your girlfriend?
Adam: Yeah, I almost had ‘er, I got really pissed off, ‘cos Brian shows off to the girls all the time. All the girls like ‘im ‘cos he shows off wiv his tricks ‘n’ that, he goes, ‘Watch me BABY!’

Another time, following Adam’s sexualised display of ‘pumping iron’ with some plastic bar bell weights he had made during a construction session, where he panted, ‘Oh, oh yeah, look at that girls, oh sex all day’, he engaged Matthew in violent competition over the possession of girlfriends.
Adam: Hey, rack off, man!
Matthew: Hey, you rack off, man.
Adam: Hey, get y’hands off my girlfriend or I’m gonna smash y’head in! [Adam begins to wrestle with Matthew]
Matthew: Who’s your girlfriend? Who’s your girlfriend, pal?
Jack: Who’s your girlfriend, Adam?
The group: Who’s your girlfriend?
Adam: Nah, I’m just saying it for the act.
Matthew: You took my girlfriend and you’re dead! You will regret it, mate.

The categorical imperative to act like heterosexual men could also be seen in the importance or status ascribed to acquiring or ‘collecting’ numerous girlfriends. Again Adam led the group’s social dynamics in placing a patriarchal heterosexuality as central. This can be seen to resonate with the misogynistic boasting in the style of Mac an Ghaill’s ‘macho lads’.

Adam: I like football, ‘cos y’can get really good chicks, ‘cos dey think your butt’s cute … ya get sexy women … dey watch ya and den you show off.
Justin: Y’have a cute butt and lots of girlfriends if you’re playing AFL [Australian Football League].
Adam: Jessica’s my girlfriend.
Justin: Yeah?
Adam: Oh yeah, an’ Zara Allan, she kissed me in kindergarten, oh an’ I’ve had a heap of girls who’ve kissed me … The ‘A’ man always gets the chicks.
Ravi: Yeah, and Matthew too. Matthew would say ‘e’s like got ten thousand’ girlfriends!
Justin: He can tell more whoppers evry day!
Adam: Yeah, and ‘e says, ‘I’ve got thirty two girlfriends’, an’ then ‘e goes nah, ‘I got this many’, an’ he shortens it one week and d’next week ten times it.

On a few occasions Matthew admitted that he performed daring tricks so that he could ‘get lotsa girlfriends’ and then boasted of the number of girlfriends he had.

Jack: You don’t even have a girlfriend.
Matthew: Yeah I do. I have three.
Adam: Oh, dream on, Matthew.
Justin: Yeah dream on! Dream to Dream World!
Matthew: I got Charmaine, Jamie and Portia.

Within their investments in a patriarchal heterosexuality in relation to the power derived from the discourse of positioning girls as acquisitions and possessions, the boys also seemed to form group solidarity in objectifying girls and women by evaluating their physical appearance.

Adam: Britney Spears isn’t too bad. She’s okay.
Justin: Yeah.
A.K.: So, which girls are okay and which girls aren’t okay?
Adam: Chubba chubs, cross out.
A.K.: Chubba chubs? What are they?
Adam Oogga chucka oogg chucka. [Adam bends his arms and blows out his cheeks while stomping on the spot]
Justin: Really fat people.
Adam: Fat girls.
A.K.: So which girls do you like?
Justin: Thin.
Adam: Sexy legs.
Justin: Yeah.

In (hetero)sexualising girls in these ways, the boys can be seen as constituting them as objects to be controlled and dominated (Davies, 1993). These understandings can be seen as resonating with work in the early childhood/primary sphere (Connolly, 1995; Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Reid, 1999; Renold, 2000; 2002); in particular, Connolly's (1995) study which exemplifies the explicit sexualised behaviour and knowledge of a group of five- to six-year-old boys. He describes the boys’ derogatory and sexualised talk of females, in the context of girlfriend acquisition and rejection, as definitive in their emphasis on power and domination but also violence. While it is clear that (hetero)sexualising discourses are pervasive within broader societal contexts, analysis of the boys’ dialogue through feminist poststructural lenses illuminates the potency of the group’s power relations in the discursive production and legitimation of this discourse (Davies, 1989; MacNaughton, 2000). Here the social dynamics of the group reinforce this discourse as not only legitimate but also as gratifying.

Dominant Assumptions of Early Childhood Pedagogy

The naturalist assumptions implicated in the philosophies of DAP were paralleled with the study in distinct ways in relation to the teachers’ and the school principal’s understandings of the boys’ behaviours. Principally, the philosophies of DAP, informed by the discourses of developmental psychology and seen as powerful in regulating the work of early childhood teachers, were helpful in explaining the teachers’ and principal’s construction of the boys as innocent and their aggressive behaviour as unremarkable or natural (MacNaughton, 2000). Reflecting broader Western discourses of cherished ‘childhood innocence’, notions of the ‘developing child’ constitute children as distinct from adults in how they know, what they know and how they express their knowledge (Kamler et al., 1994; MacNaughton, 2000). This constitution is said to justify the withholding of particular ‘unsafe’ knowledges from children because they are positioned as unable to understand such knowledges and as such should be protected from accessing such knowledges (MacNaughton, 2000). Pedagogically, these notions have tended to endorse minimal intervention in the facilitation of the ‘normal’ development of children (Alloway, 1995a; Clark, 1993; Weedon, 1997).

MacNaughton (2000) illuminates how these philosophies restrict work for gender equity and the articulation and practice of feminist pedagogies because they place boundaries on what educators see as possible or developmentally appropriate in their interactions with children. Within this frame, she argues that children tend to be positioned as gender innocent and their gendered behaviour is invariably constituted as a naturally occurring part of their development along a pre-determined pathway. Running in tandem with the educational reform strategies underpinned by liberal feminism, these assumptions have been criticised as reinforcing masculinist perspectives of ‘natural’ sex differences as apparently objective (MacNaughton, 2000; Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998). In this regard they are seen as perpetuating and normalising gender dualisms through discarding the prominence of existing gender subjectivities and the micro and macro social frames within which they develop. Against this backdrop, we can see that, when one constructs and perpetuates the view of childhood as a period of
innocence, the highly gendered and inequitable worlds of young children are overlooked. Issues of social justice are thus subjugated or ignored because gendered relations of power are left unquestioned, naturalised and by implication validated (Adams & Walkerdine, 1986; Alloway, 1995a; Clark, 1993; Danby, 1998; Davies, 1989; 1993; Kamler et al., 1994; Lowe, 1998; MacNaughton, 2000; Renold, 2002; Weedon, 1997).

Teacher and Principal Understandings of the Boys' Behaviour

The teachers' understandings of the boys appeared to be informed by these assumptions. Despite their acknowledgment of the boys' problematic behaviour, their understandings seemed framed within a discourse of childhood as innocence. Thus, the boys' aggressive behaviour tended to be constituted as an unremarkable and normal part of their development.

Acknowledgment of the Boys' Problematic Behaviour

My discussions with the boys' teachers, Mrs W. and Mr A., pointed to a shared acknowledgment of, and concern for, the boys', but particularly Adam's, disruptive behaviour.

Mrs W.: Adam is a physical little boy and often needs reminders about using his language rather than giving someone a flick or a kick or something like that. Yeah, I think Adam's behaviour will deteriorate as he goes through.

Mr A.: I think Adam will be one child who later on if teachers choose to confront him in the yard and make it a confrontation—they'll come off second best. Because Adam will be the one who will quickly give them a mouthful of abuse and walk off. Someone will wear that aggression shortly, I reckon.

Further, Mrs W. expressed concern about Adam's impact on the other children in her class: 'Those in the class who are quieter kids just steer clear of Adam because he's quite active, loud and bossy.' More specifically, Mrs W. and Mr A. expressed concern about Adam's impact on shaping Justin's but particularly Matthew's behaviour:

Mrs W.: They seek Adam's approval y'know, Justin and Matthew especially. Matthew just aspires to be like Adam.

Mr A.: I notice that big time—he just follows whatever Adam says.

Mrs W.: It's really sad the influence Adam's had over Matthew this year. Adam has knocked Matthew's confidence … Matthew is so keen to please Adam … Yeah, he doesn't really want to be doing the things that Adam and co. are doing in the yard—going round bullying people and pushing people around. Matthew's not really that sort of kid but because he wants to be popular with the 'in' crowd he's doing it. He's following along and it's upsetting him.

The teachers also recognised the peer group context as encouraging disruptive behaviour:

Mr A.: They [Adam, Matthew and Justin] seem to feed off each other.

Mrs W.: Well as far as in the classroom goes they don't work together. I've kept them separated since a couple of weeks into first term …

Mr A.: No, I don't always let them work together.
Mrs W.: ... because they fought a bit and they're boisterous when they're together.
Yeah, they all want to be the dominant figure.

As these excerpts suggest, the teachers expressed some concern about the boys' disruptive behaviours. However, apart from a comment Mrs W. made to me concerning Adam on another occasion—

At the beginning of the year I don't think Adam was terribly respected by the girls because he is very anti-female. His dad is so anti-woman in general. I've never seen dad by the way, dad has never been into this classroom. Twice he has contacted the school or been contacted by Mr A. but he has not communicated with any female staff this year.

—neither the teachers nor the principal expressed any opinion or knowledge of the boys' negative and destructive understandings of girls and femininity. To be sure, the informal dialogue presented in this paper was confidential and was obtained through my relationship of trust with the boys, nevertheless within the context of the early childhood/primary gender research cited above (Alloway, 1995a; Connolly, 1995; Davies, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Renold, 2000; 2002), this absence of knowledge or concern is crucial, particularly given the observations that follow.

Childhood as Innocence: 'they're only little kids'

Despite this acknowledgment of the boys' disruptive group behaviour and in particular Adam's negative 'influence' on Justin and Matthew and his 'bullying' and 'pushing people around', the principal and the group of teachers did not appear to consider the boys' behaviour to be particularly remarkable or problematic.

Mrs W.: They're not actually 'out of control' kids though.
Mr A.: No, no.
Mrs W.: I mean they're not what I would consider 'behaviour problems'.
Mr A.: I mean all I need to do is basically yell across the room, 'Boys!' and they look and that's about it. I haven't needed to manage much behavioural issues at all.
Mrs W.: No, look, they're of the age where you don't need to be too heavy with them. They respond readily and I mean they want to please me. I'm their teacher, they're only little kids and they want to please me.
Mr A.: Yeah, they're still little boys and because of that I would find it very hard to be too coarse with them. I don't think I'd be too hard on them. With Adam you assume that he's being forced to grow up probably quicker than he really probably wanted to. He's still a little boy and still has emotional needs. He's around with the men and he still wants cuddles from his mum.

Similarly, the principal, Mr T., after the incident involving the boys' group violence against Brian (mentioned earlier) stated that Adam, Matthew and Justin were not 'in the general run of things huge problems', and in this sense he did not regard the school's specific intervention programmes on 'anger management' or 'social skills' to be necessary for these particular boys.

In analysing the dialogue above we can see elements of DAP framing the teachers' perceptions of the boys' behaviour as unremarkable and readily responsive to a taken-for-granted adult authority. Certainly the teachers' general acceptance, rather than problematising, of the boys' disruptive behaviour implies naturalist or biological thinking about gender. Additionally, in tending to sentimentalise the boys within a discourse of
childhood as a period of natural innocence both teachers can be seen as constituting the boys' behaviour as relatively harmless and easily 'fixed' (MacNaughton, 2000). Within this framework, the teachers and principal can be seen as interpreting minimal intervention as DAP. The philosophies of DAP can also help further explain this lack of intervention as the teachers attempting to protect the boys from having to confront and explore 'unsafe' knowledges to do with the power relations of violence and aggression. Similarly, the teachers' and principal's lack of recognition of the boys' destructive understandings of girls and femininity might be seen as attempts to dismiss or limit and control the boys' access to what they 'should' know or be able to understand about gender and sexuality as 'innocent children' (MacNaughton, 2000). Against this backdrop, however, the boys' voices are silenced—through the teachers' and principal's privileging of their own observations and knowledges about child development, boundaries are placed around what is sayable and unsayable. To this end, in resonance with MacNaughton's work, it appears that the teachers and principal think it developmentally inappropriate to address issues of masculinity with the boys. Thus the boys are constituted as gender innocent—their dominant constructions of masculinities are preserved and validated because they are left unquestioned and unproblematised. In terms of the disturbing understandings of masculinity presented in this paper, we might well see this as an abrogation of moral, ethical and political responsibility on the teachers' and principal's part (Adams & Walkerdine, 1986; Alloway, 1995a; Clark, 1993; MacNaughton, 2000).

Further analysis of the principal's commentary supports these arguments. Here elements of DAP can be seen in Mr T.'s presentation of the boys' aggression as a relatively harmless phase—as a natural and predetermined or biologically inevitable part of their development. Indeed, his comments indicate that he expects such aggressive behaviour in boys.

Mr T.: Yes, the physical violence side of things is the boys' domain ... a lot of their games are physical. They're heading into that really boisterous stage ... Of course they're physical as well and they revolve around your play fighting and your kung fu [and] pretending to shoot each other. Whatever it happens to be and of course that leads to conflict too 'cos somebody can get hurt. Somebody got hit a little bit harder than he thinks he's been hitting the other ... The thing is we're stuck with the boys at that age. For about two years they go through this period where everything is really physical and the strong dominate and the born leaders start to come through.

**Concluding Remarks**

In drawing parallels to related research within the secondary and early childhood sphere, the research detailed in this paper provides further warrant for examining the dominant peer masculinities of early childhood. The paper illuminates how the social dynamics of peer culture are potent in constructing and regulating restrictive understandings of masculinity mobilised around aggression, violence and physical domination and underpinned by the constitution of females and femininity as the negative 'other'. The paper also illuminates how the dominant assumptions of educators within early childhood education continue to position boys' gendered behaviours as innocent, harmless, natural and inevitable parts of their development. Most critically, it is argued that these
assumptions are inherently implicated in validating restrictive masculinities through leaving them unquestioned and unproblematised.

In terms of addressing issues of masculinity these observations are significant for two key reasons. First, facilitating boys' questioning and problematising of restrictive masculinities, through connecting with their personal experiences of what it means to be masculine, is seen as the key to enhancing boys' social outcomes through broadening understandings of masculinity (Davies, 1993; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Mills, 2001; Lingard et al., 2002; MacNaughton, 2000; Martino & Mellor, 1995; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995). And, second, as early childhood research repeatedly tells us, and in strong resonance with the data presented in this paper, young children's understandings and behaviours are far from innocent, harmless, natural or inevitable (Alloway, 1995a; Davies, 1993; Grieshaber, 1998; Jordan, 1995; MacNaughton, 2000; Renold, 2000; 2002). Indeed they are highly gendered and inequitable on the one hand, as well as particularly dynamic and socially contingent on the other. Against this backdrop, Alloway's assertion (1995b, p. 19) 'eight's too late, to begin thinking about issues of gender' is pertinent. The malleability of gender identities and subjectivities in the early childhood years (read ages four to five) points to an opportune time to begin work with children in exploring, questioning and problematising taken-for-granted and restrictive notions of gender. As Jordan explains, 'children [at this early age] are still very far from having a fixed notion of what [gender] positioning implies socially' and 'have only a very hazy impression of what sort of behaviour that [gender] membership demands of them' (1995, pp. 72–73). Given that dominant assumptions of educators within early childhood (such as those described in this paper) continue to 'mitigate against gender equity', the importance of maintaining a focus on addressing issues of masculinity in early childhood is clear (MacNaughton, 2000, p. 235).

With regard to enhancing boys' social outcomes to be more inclusive of difference and diversity, this paper has illuminated the importance of boys' personal experiences of what it means to be masculine within peer culture (Connell, 2000; Keddie, 2003; Hickey & Fitzclarence, 2000; Lingard et al., 2002; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1997; 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). As the data in this paper affirm, boys' self-categorisations and their potent desire for self-legitimation and belonging are pivotal in the construction of their sense of masculine 'identity'. Located and shaped within the context of broader gendered discourses, these patterns of desire form and reform—strengthen and amplify through the competitive social dynamics and power relations of the group. Investing in these desires and participating in the restrictive discourses and practices of the group bring the pleasure of belonging and acceptance. Hickey and Fitzclarence (2000) talk of the need for education to recognise the centrality of affinity groups in shaping essentialist peer masculinities. They urge educators to rethink their pedagogies to engage with rather than in opposition to the stories of young males from within their peer cultures. A pedagogical refocus that acknowledges, analyses and challenges these power relations and pleasures is seen as critical in providing boys with the necessary framework for exploring, deconstructing and rebuilding the meanings and commitments they attach to dominant storylines and particular ways of being.

It is within the peer context that educators can meaningfully help facilitate the development of personal resources that young males may draw on to position themselves in ways that explore alternatives to dominance (Hickey & Fitzclarence, 2000; Keddie, 2003). This paper conceptualises the peer group's disciplining force as not only self-limiting and productive of hierarchies but also as enabling and productive of social collectivities, moral bonds and political agency (Seidman, 1993). One can view this
context as a generative space for identifying and exploring affirmative alternatives to dominant modes of being masculine. As Browne asserts, ‘because such unacceptable behaviours are learned in groups or, at the very least, maintained and refined in groups, it is important that they are unlearned in groups’ (1995, p. 181).

In connecting with boys’ peer cultures, generative possibilities for reworking restrictive masculinities in contextually meaningful ways can be identified (Davies, 1993). Central to the ‘opening up of a different kind of agency’ (Davies, 1993, p. 199), research in this area illuminates boys’ willingness to explore their personal experiences—their pleasures, emotions, ‘irrationalities’, investments and competencies within their social worlds (Keddie, 2003; Martino, 1997; 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001). Davies’s (1989; 1993) work with young children, for example, on the critical analysis of dominant understandings or storylines offers valuable insight into the ways children can problematise, disrupt and rework restrictive notions of gender. Here Davies works from children’s personal experiences to examine, question and reconceptualise dominant or ‘taken-for-granted’ social, political and cultural knowledges concerning gender. She advocates making the higher-order thinking skills of critical deconstruction within a feminist poststructural framework accessible to children through connections with their lived and imagined experiences. By engaging with these skills, she argues, gender(ed) knowledge is positioned as socially constructed and thus partial, contextual, fluid and often problematic. Through the problematising of knowledge in this way children can recognise the historical and cultural specificities of language and meaning and thus make visible the ‘constitutive force of what is said and what might be’ (Davies, 1993, p. 200). Through catching ‘discourse in the act of shaping subjectivities’, her empirical work demonstrates that children can identify the constructed nature of cultural patterns and engage in ‘a collective process of re-naming, re-writing [and] re-positioning themselves in relation to coercive structures’ (1993, p. 200).

In connecting with boys’ personal experiences in these ways research in this sphere talks about boys’ capacities to recognise diversity and identify with multiple versions of masculinity (Davies, 1993; Keddie, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000). As Reid argues, ‘the recognition of different standpoints and different ways of seeing increases the potential for different ways of enacting’ (1999, p. 170). The aim here is to facilitate boys’ explorations of the self and enhance their understandings of the multiple ways masculinity is constructed, performed, negotiated and navigated in different contexts and how all this impacts variously on their lives (Alloway et al., 2002). This exploration is seen as critical if boys are to value non-dominant cultural knowledges about masculinity and to take up alternative and less restrictive masculinities.

In generatively connecting with boys in their exploration and adoption of alternative and less destructive ways of expressing their collective masculinities, the report Addressing the Educational Needs of Boys talks of the importance of teachers possessing particular requisite knowledges regarding boys, gender and masculinities (Lingard et al., 2002). In moving beyond common-sense—‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches, which are invariably informed by essentialist understandings of gender, Lingard et al. (2002) point out that effectively challenging social justice issues and improving the social outcomes of boys necessitates that teacher pedagogies be informed by sophisticated research-based understandings about gender. Within an early childhood sphere MacNaughton’s work (2000) looks at how teachers can reconceptualise traditional (read, dominant) early childhood pedagogies to be more reflective of social justice (and in particular gender justice) principles. Her work provides valuable insight into the kinds of requisite knowledges to which Lingard et al. (2002) refer.
Like Davies (1993), MacNaughton's work (2000) in acknowledging the complexity of creating gender equity with young children, emphasises the importance of children extending their storylines and broadening their discursive practices through teachers facilitating their critical awareness of how gender shapes their lifeworlds. Here she talks about children engaging in 'embryonic' deconstruction in learning to recognise and examine inequitable power relations or the 'gender-fairness of particular desires, understandings and actions' (2000, p. 240). In making this critical analysis possible MacNaughton calls for a reconceptualisation and broadening of early childhood pedagogy to reflect understandings of inequity from a feminist poststructural perspective.

Within feminist poststructural understandings of gender, as constructed through the power relations of social interaction and as such amenable to reconstruction, MacNaughton argues that teachers can reconceptualise the assumptions and beliefs that inform their understandings of the child and their enactment of pedagogy. The critical first step in this reconceptualisation, she stresses, is redefining children as 'gender knowing' rather than 'gender innocent'. Through accessing and analysing the social dynamics and patterns of desire implicated in how children understand and 'do' gender, she presents this lens as enabling teachers to understand, question and rework the gendered myths and discourses implicated in their everyday teaching decisions (MacNaughton, 2000). For the teachers and principal of Banrock Primary, we can see that the gender reflexivity of this lens has the potential to facilitate their development of the gender knowledges necessary if they are to reconceptualise their understandings of the boys' behaviour within a framework of gender justice (MacNaughton, 2000). For example, in examining the sociopolitical power relations of the peer group, through informally accessing the boys' talk, this lens illuminates how the boys discursively produce and re-produce the group's patterns of desire mobilised around restrictive and destructive masculinities. Within an understanding of gender as constructed through the social, this lens also illuminates how the boys' masculinities are multi-faceted, complex, contingent and changeable rather than unitary or inevitable and fixed. In this regard, most critically the teachers' and principal's DAP of minimal intervention informed by the truths and assumptions of child development as predetermined, natural and innocent is positioned as implicated in normalising and perpetuating gender injustice. In this sense, problematising the boys' restrictive masculinities along the lines of disrupting binary thinking and illuminating the positive attributes of femininity become not only possible but obligatory (MacNaughton, 2000).

Through boys' intellectually engaging with identity issues and in particular challenging restrictive constructions of masculinity in connected and meaningful ways, research with young children looks at the potential of affirmative (group) identities (Davies, 1993; Keddie, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000). While acknowledging that developing alternative gender meanings and discourses is far from a simple task, MacNaughton (2000) talks here of teachers privileging children's subjectivities so that they can recognise the ways children either reinforce or resist patriarchal gendering through their silences and actions. Through examining the possibilities within subjectivities of resistance, and in particular how these subjectivities might be seen as either enabling or constraining gender justice, affirmative (read, socially just) spaces from which to begin challenging gendered behaviour and 'invent what might be' can be identified (Davies, 1993, p. 200). To refer to the data presented in this paper, we can see how the social dynamics of resistant competition within the group work in ways that constrain gender justice through the amplification of restrictive masculinities. However, if we look at Ravi's subjectivities we can see affirmative or liberatory spaces in his resistance of the other boys' restrictive
subjectivities concerning football—here Ravi maintains his dislike of football’s violence even in the face of the other boys’ belittlement and ridicule. This sort of disruption or resistance can be seen as a legitimate avenue through which to explore alternative and less oppressive ways of being, most significantly because it is connected to boys’ lifeworlds. In this sense, as the *Boys, Literacy and Schooling* document points out learning is enhanced because boys’ interests, opinions, emotions and sense of self are engaged (Alloway et al., 2002). This is central in the identification and legitimation of convincing alternative subject positions and in encouraging boys to resist familiar, and perhaps more convincing, dominant and dominating modes of being (Davies, 1993).

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