The Call To Critique 'Common Sense' Understandings About Boys And Masculinity(Ies)

Leanne Dalley-Trim
James Cook University
leanne.dalley@jcu.edu.au

Abstract: This paper is founded upon the premise that 'common sense' understandings about boys persist within schools and, given this continuing circulation of such understandings, advocates the need to critique such conceptualising. It does so on the grounds that such understandings, and the essentialist discursive knowledges informing these, fail to take account of the complex and multifarious ways in which boys come to construct themselves as masculine subjects. In demonstrating the short-comings of such 'common sense' understandings, and indeed to need to call these into question, the paper examines the ways in which a group of boys took up positions of dominance within their classroom and, more specifically, focuses upon the ways in which they came to perform as embodied masculine subjects. In doing so, it explores the repertoire of practices, or range of performance techniques, mobilised by these boys – a repertoire constituted by, and constitutive of, hegemonic versions of masculinity.

Introduction

'Common sense' understandings about boys persist today – both within the broad public sphere and the school context. Such understandings have seemingly percolated public, and indeed educators', thinking about boys. More specifically, such understandings continue to be given 'air play' in school sites. That is, these common sense understandings of boys circulate in the talk of educators who, for example, speak of "boys just being boys" and suggest that "boys will be boys".

Such common sense understandings of boys have their naissance in discourses of biology – biology as destiny; boys as naturally or biologically 'wired' this way. Such discourses about boys, and indeed teachers' take-up of these, are, I suggest, fraught with 'danger'. Such discourses are dangerous in that they mask the complexities of what it means to 'be' a masculine subject and rather, offer narrow, essentialist and pre-deterministic views. Further, this biologising infers a tone of dismissal and ascribes to a uselessness of challenging the actions of boys, which are seen as pre-destined to be this way. They imply that we overlook the actions of boys, and that there is nothing to make a fuss about, or indeed, that it will prove futile to do so. Clearly, the implications of this are of significance to educators – and in particular classroom teachers as they go about their daily work in the complex, dynamic and discursively-constituted site that is the classroom.

With this is mind, it is argued here that the seemingly straightforward nature of such common sense understandings of boys – those typified in the expressions "It's just boys being boys" and "Boys will be boys" – and the discourses informing these understandings need to be examined and critiqued (see Allard, 2004). So, too, do the actions of boys, and particularly as they are played out in classroom and school sites, need to be scrutinised more closely.

In illustrating the need for such critique, this paper will examine a number of 'classroom snapshots', or what Tripp (1993, p. 24) refers to as "critical incidents" – that is, "commonplace events that occur in the everyday life of a classroom". Specifically, it will explore the ways in which a group of boys, who came to occupy a position of dominance in their classroom, engaged in the complex endeavour of performing in ways that enabled them to cultivate for themselves a recognisably masculine identity – as boys – within the context of the secondary school classroom. In doing this, the paper will highlight the fraught nature of common sense understandings about boys and the dangers, for teachers, of 'buying into' such limited/ing discursive knowledge sets as they relate to boys.

Methodological Theory And Practice

This paper draws upon data collected during the undertaking of a research project that was conducted in a State secondary school in a provincial North Queensland city – more specifically, four year nine English classrooms within the school. The school was geographically located in a position whereby it attracted students from the gamut of the socio-economic spectrum and comprised a population of approximately 600 students. In undertaking the study I operated within a qualitative research paradigm and drew upon three major theoretical frameworks: poststructuralism, critical discourse theory and feminism.

The first of these theoretical paradigms, poststructuralism, provided a useful framework for examining and making readings of subjectivity, language and discourse as evidenced in the research site. I was able to read the ways in which the boys endeavoured to position themselves and perform as embodied masculine subjects, to read the ways in which their performances served to position other class members, to read shifts in and struggles for power, and to read acts of resistance. Critical discourse theories served as a complementary tool to poststructuralist theory and provided ways of reading the discursive and social practices at play within the classroom site and, more specifically, within the emergent data. Similarly, feminist theory provided me with an interpretive lens through which to read the classroom contexts and the performances played out within them, as well as the other emergent data.

It was as a researcher positioned by and within this research paradigm and theoretical framework that I came to adopt a case study model. Furthermore, in accordance with the multiple constitution of qualitative frameworks and the research process, I engaged in observations and constructed *readings* of the research site – the four classrooms – on a daily basis over the period of a school semester, conducted interviews and administered questionnaires to participants. These participants included both male and female students and teachers. More specifically, all students completed an open-ended questionnaire at the commencement of the semester, and those students (the majority) who returned a "Permission to be Interviewed" form were involved in semi-structured focus groups interviews – one conducted mid-way through the semester and another at the conclusion of the semester. All four teachers were interviewed at both the commencement and end of the semester, and all completed an open-ended questionnaire at the conclusion of the semester.

Theorising Gender And Gendered Relations

This paper asserts that gender is a social construct constituted by and through the repetition of social, embodied and discursive practices (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Davies, 1989, 2000, 2003; Grosz, 1990, 1995; Paechter, 2006a). Gender is conceptualised as a

complex, dynamic, fluidic and multiple phenomena. The forming of gender identities is viewed as relational, multiple and processual (Renold, 2004). So, too, it is advocated here that gender is inescapably and elaborately connected to the body and the notion of performed embodiment. As Robinson (2005, p. 25) notes – drawing upon the work of Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon (2002) – "within the process of subjectification, in terms of gender identity, we become gendered subjects from our gender performances and the performances of others towards us". Furthermore, as Butler (1990, p. 33) argues, gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." That is, the 'realness' of doing gender lies in one's ability to compel belief in the performance (Butler, 1990).

Additionally, as Paechter (2006a) advocates, any attempt to understand masculinity and femininity, maleness and femaleness, while ignoring the physicality of bodies, is highly problematic. In light of this, she argues:

> We cannot construct gender as entirely separate from our
> bodies; to think that we can is a Cartesian delusion. Nor can we
> treat the body as neutral; gender is not written on a blank body,
> it is constructed partly from (and in some cases in opposition to)
> our embodiment (Paechter, 2006a, p. 130; see also Paechter,
> 2007).

Gender relations are constituted through and by the force of ideologically invested discursive practices. Masculinity and/or femininity are not, as Davies (1989, p. 13) argues, "inherent properties of individuals." As social beings located within space and time, we take up sets of discursive knowledges and practices which inform us of how to 'do' masculinity and/or femininity. In the context of schools, the negotiation of gender relations is, as Robinson (2005, p. 22) suggests, "a complicated and often contradictory experience that warrants individuals to take up certain performances of masculinities and femininities that are regulated and policed through the normalizing practices of compulsory heterosexuality" (see also Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980).

While gender is a complex phenomenon, and the possibilities of diversity within versions of masculinity and femininity are vast, it is largely the case that the culturally dominant forms are maintained. To choose to move beyond the boundaries of the "natural," culturally dominant forms is to risk socially-sanctioned ostracisation; is to engage in an act of resistance (Davies, 1993).

Theorising Masculinities

The notion of masculinity is no longer viewed as unproblematic – and traditional essentialist, rationalist and constructionist conceptualisations of masculinity have been challenged and disrupted. It is the case that recent work advocates an acknowledgment of the plurality, multiplicity, heterogeneity and complexity of masculinity(ies) (see Buchbinder, 1994; Connell, 1995, 2000; Frosh, 1995; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1995, 1998a, 1998b; Gutterman, 1994; Harris, 1995; Hearn & Collinson, 1994; Martino, 1995a, 1995b, 2008; Prain & Hickey, 1998).

It is, I argue, illusionary to view masculinity as innate and uniform, for there exists a range of masculinities – a range of ways in which to 'be' a masculine subject, a range of ways in which to 'do' or 'perform' masculinity (see Connell, 1989, 1995; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998b; Hearn, 2004; Hearn & Collinson, 1994, Kenway, 2000; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Kessler, Ashenden, Connell & Dowsett, 1985; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Sondergaard, 2002;

Webb & Singh, 1998). They operate as an "ebb and flow" and in "concert and contest" (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997, p. 120). As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998b, pp. 46-47) argue:

> Becoming a man is a matter of constructing oneself in and being constructed by the available ways of being male in a particular society. It is a matter of negotiating the various discourses of femininity and masculinity available in our culture, those powerful sets of meanings and practices which we must draw on to participate in our culture and to establish who we are.

Despite this diversity – given there is no singular, unified discourse of masculinity – masculinities are linked to each other and constitute a hierarchical relationship (Connell, 1995; Webb & Singh, 1998). Subsequently, some masculinities may be more 'at risk' than others, and many are "constantly on the offensive and the defensive and in need of regular maintenance, renewal, repair and adjustment" (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997, p. 120; Kenway, 1995). Nonetheless, each and all discourses of masculinity bring material consequences for those who take them up.

Positioned powerfully – although tenuously – at the summit of this hierarchy of discourse are what are commonly referred to as hegemonic versions of masculinity. These are those "dominant and dominating forms of masculinity which claim the highest status and exercise the greatest influence and authority" and which represent "the standard-bearer of what it means to be a 'real' man or boy" (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997, pp. 119-120; see also Connell, 1995, 2000; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kenway, 2000; Paechter, 2006b). Constructed along with, but in contrast to femininity, "hegemonic versions of masculinity operate as oppressive regimes within phallogocentric discourses" (Martino, 1994, p. 42; see also Connell, 1987, 1995; Martino, 2000a). These versions are characterised, furthermore, as inherently heterosexual (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson, 1998; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Kendall & Martino, 2006; Mac An Ghaill, 1994, 1996; Skelton, 2001). Represented as coherent, rational and obvious, hegemonic masculinity is the form of masculine identity frequently aspired to by many boys, and that comes to dominate classroom sites (see Connell, 1995; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998b; Haywood & Mac An Ghaill, 1996; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 2000b, 2000c; Robinson, 2005).

Masculinity(Ies), Performativity And The Classroom Context

Research on boys' performativity in the classroom site has demonstrated that boys – although not all boys – actively seek to engage with and play out these dominant versions of masculinity. The research has also shown that boys employ a number of performance techniques in order to take up these discourses. These techniques, as styled through and enacted on the body, enable boys to position themselves as clearly identifiable heterosexual masculine subjects.

A defining feature of this hegemonic masculine performance, with its endorsement of the heterosexual imperative, are practices of homophobia – a practice interconnected with that of misogyny (Epstein, 1997). This complex and insidious practice can take on many guises. Epstein (1996, p. 209) argues that "there is not one, univocal form of hetero/sexist harassment but, rather, that the forms of harassment experienced shape and are shaped by the particular social locations of those who are harassed and, indeed, their harassers." Furthermore, this practice is an example of the punishment inflicted upon those who deviate from heterosexual norms and disrupt the heterosexual imperative. It is the case that, within the highly sexualised sites of the school and the classroom, these practices – in their various guises – have material consequences for both the boys and girls upon whom they are enacted (see Chambers, van Loon & Ticknell, 2004; Eliasson, Isaksson & Laflamme, 2007; Martino,

1995c, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Messerschmidt, 2000a, 2000b; Meyer, 2006, 2008; Mills, 2001).

In relation to girls, these heterosexist language practices are frequently used as a 'weapon' of abuse (see Gilbert, 1996; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Kenway & Willis [with Blackmore & Rennie], 1998; Ohrn, 1993; Renold, 2000; Skeggs, 1991). As evidenced in numerous research undertakings, such practices – as employed by many boys – are commonplace in classrooms (see Australian Education Council, 1992; Gilbert, 1996; Gilbert, Gilbert & McGinty, 1994; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Larkin, 1994; Lees, 1993; Mahony, 1989; National Committee on Violence Against Women, 1991; Shilling, 1991; Skeggs, 1991; Yates, 1993). As Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997, p. 123) state, "teasing and taunting relating to sexuality or gender against girls and women is rife in schools" and "most boys either engage in this or comply with it." Essentially, boys, in employing these language practices, assert male power over girls. Girls are ridiculed, put down, humiliated and objectified (Bird, 1992; Gilbert, 1996; Gilbert et al., 1994; Kelly, 1992; Larkin, 1994; Lees, 1997; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Renold, 2000).

These practices, when used against boys, take on a different purpose. While they are used as a weapon against girls, they are employed as (hetero)masculinist 'policing tools' when used against boys. As Kenway and Willis (1998, p. 103) argue, "when girls are harassed, it is very often because they are girls, when boys are harassed it is not because they are boys but because they are the wrong sort of boys" (also see Frosh, Pheonix & Pattman, 2002; Kehler, Davison & Frank, 2005; Mahony, 1989). The boys subjected to verbal harassment are those who are seen by others to be 'unmanly,' 'non-macho,' or 'feminine.' They do not "conform to dominant heterosexual codes of masculinity" (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 70), nor are they perceived as "belonging to the ethos of 'top dog' masculinity" (Salisbury & Jackson, 1996, p. 167).

The homophobia expressed towards boys who do not 'measure up' to dominant forms of masculinity is frequently related to their similarity to girls, and commonly in terms derogatory to females (Epstein, 1997; Kenway & Willis, 1998; Lees, 1997). Drawing upon what Lees (1993) identifies as a "vocabulary of abuse," these boys are, for example, commonly labelled and referred to as: "sissies," "girls," "poofs." "poofters," "faggots," "fags," "bumboys," and "Nancyboys." Essentially, engagement with these homophobic practices – along with other normalising techniques of surveillance – are clearly used by boys to enhance their heterosexual masculine reputation, and to police the boundaries of acceptable male behaviour and identity as well as homosexual behaviour (see Jordan, 1995; Kessler et al., 1985; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Mahony, 1989; Martino, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1995d, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d; Martino & Frank, 2006; Nayak & Kehily, 1996, 1997; Redman & Mac An Ghaill, 1996; Skeggs, 1991; Stanley, 1986; Stanworth, 1983).

Clearly, to resist dominant codes of masculinity within the school site, and more specifically within the classroom, is a precarious business – it is to risk being labelled "gay." Given this, boys are, as Nayak & Kehily (1996) suggest, encouraged to "perform their gendered identities in particular ways to survive the prospect of homophobic abuse" (p. 216) and to cultivate a "hyper-heterosexual identity" (p. 212). As is later demonstrated in this paper, the use of heterosexist language practices serves as a tool in the achievement of this masculinist identity.

In addition to these verbal language practices, boys engage their bodies – body language – in order to enact or perform hegemonic versions of masculinities. They engage in an outward encoding of masculinity beyond the level of spoken language – a "macho posturing" (Measor & Woods, 1984). It is through body styling, performative and repeated acts, that boys ensure that heterosexual masculinities are naturalised and consolidated.

Essentially, the body is, and operates as, "a communicative site for the construction of masculinity" (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 221).

Research on boys' stylised embodied performativity demonstrates that boys' use of the body is both considerable and complex. A key feature of this bodywork is the exuding of "a hyper-masculinity through a range of exaggerated dramatisations and body styling forms" (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 225). Common practices played out on and through the body include: shouting and being loud, call out and interruptive behaviours, laughing, joking, misbehaving, acting tough, acting cool, play fighting and refusing to affirm the teacher's authority (see Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998b; Gilbert, Gilbert & McGinty, 1995; Jones, 1993; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Smith, 2007). Such bodywork serves to position boys as troublemakers and thus reinforce hegemonic discourses of masculinity. As Jordan (1995, p. 77), commenting on this phenomenon asserts, "getting into trouble" at school is a "touchstone for masculinity." Similarly, Connell (1996, p. 220) argues that this type of performance, as constituted by rule-breaking practices, becomes "central to the making of masculinity." Boys' employment of these various techniques – again, demonstrated in this paper – while serving multiple purposes, contributes ultimately to the construction of self as identifiable masculine subject.

Discussion

As indicated previously, this section details a series of 'classroom snapshots' – snapshots that illuminate the ways in which a group of boys constructed themselves and performed as embodied masculine subjects. These snapshots focus upon the performances of three boys – Matthew, Daniel and Jerry – who actively took up positions of dominance within their classroom, and who did so, primarily, by drawing upon and playing out discourses of gender and sexuality. More specifically, their performances were marked out by their mobilisation of (hetero)sexualised discourses, their desire to construct themselves as hegemonic masculinist subjects, and by their endeavours to be read as 'bad lads'. To this effect – and as evident in the snapshots presented – they employed a range of techniques, or tools, by which to construct themselves as 'lads' (as 'bad lads') and to cultivate what Nayak and Kehily (1996) refer to as a "hyper-heterosexual" identity. And while their individual performances were at times different, they were nonetheless constituted by and within these same discursive networks – networks that were inextricably interwoven.

In relation to these boys' performances, as constituted by and within the discourses of hegemonic masculinity, I advocate that they are recognisable as comprising of incidents, of acts, commonly associated with the notion of "boys just being boys" – that is, boys behaving badly, loudly, coolly and so on. That noted, it should be acknowledged that the snapshots presented here are by no means representative of *all* boys – or of all the boys whose performances were observed during the original study of the four classrooms. Rather, and indeed as expected and supported by research literature, the boys within and across the four classes performed their masculinity in various ways – albeit as largely constitutive of hegemonic versions of masculinity.

The snapshots presented here were selected with a view to provide the most powerful empirical evidence – that is, to most effectively illuminate the complexities of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities and the performance of these version(s) of masculinity, and to most lucidly demonstrate the oppressive effects of such masculinities as played out in classroom contexts.

Essentially, the performances of the three boys (the 'bad lads') can be read as being marked out in three key ways – as constitutive of three main sets of practices. That is, as a repertoire of practices – and one that highlights the complex and multiple ways in which boys come to 'do' masculinity. The first of these sets of practice involved their policing of masculinity(ies) via their employment of homophobic language practices. The second involved their intra-group engagement with masculinist vocabularies and body stylizations. The third saw them perform in ways which served to suppress and sexualise the girls of the class. Furthermore, each of these practice sets were underpinned by their trouble-making performances – for, as Jordan (1995, p. 77) argues, "getting into trouble" is a "touchstone for masculinity".

Policing Masculinity(Ies) Via Homophobia

The 'bad lads', in drawing upon the discourses of (hetero)sexuality and hegemonic masculinity were able to construct themselves as 'real' boys, as boys who occupied a 'proper' form of masculinity – one constitutive of, and constituted by, an implied heterosexuality (see Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997; Redman & Mac An Ghaill, 1996). Furthermore, the performances of these boys provided clear demonstrations of the ways that homophobia is used to "police the boundaries of acceptable heterosexual male behaviour and identity" (Redman & Mac An Ghaill, 1996, p. 247). In particular, their language practices, which were imbued with homophobic references and connotations, provide distinct examples.

While these boys frequently employed homophobic language practices in their interactions with each other, their key target was Kyle – (an)*other* boy in the class. Kyle was often referred to as a "poofter" and a "faggot," and subjected to threats of physical violence and acts of aggression – as evident in the following snapshots.

The boys' performances, and subsequent positioning of Kyle, illustrate the ways in which "the performativity of heterosexual masculinities [is] structured through the display of homophobia" (Nayak & Kehily, 1996, p. 213; see also Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Kessler et al., 1985; Lees, 1993; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Martino, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1995d, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c; Redman & Mac An Ghaill, 1996). The 'bad lads'' homophobic performances operated as a technique for the styling and enactment of a hyper-heterosexual masculinity. Their marking of Kyle as a homosexual allowed them to reiterate their own heterosexuality (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Furthermore, while Kyle was the primary target of the dominant boys, their performances nonetheless served to regulate the performance of all the boys in the class; served as a warning of the punishment that could be inflicted upon all of them.

The following snapshots exemplify the 'bad lads'' treatment of, and interactions with, Kyle. More generally, the incidents typify their embodied masculine performances as played out within this site.

Snapshot One

Jerry to Kyle: "I'll kill you, I'll kill you."
Jerry to David: "Kyle's a faggot."
Jerry to Tom: "Kyle's a faggot."
(Jerry clenches his fist to Kyle)
Jerry to Daniel: "Hey, I'm gonna punch him in the head."
Daniel: "Who?"
(Jerry nods to identify Kyle)

Snapshot Two

Kyle is trying to get on with, and be 'in' with the 'bad lads' by
speaking to them.
Daniel comments to Kyle: "You better watch what you say,
you're mouth'll get punched in."
Kyle attempts to speak to Matthew, who responds: "Don't talk
to me ... you better watch yourself. You're a faggot ... I'll hit
you."

Masculinist Vocabularies And Body Stylisations

The interactions between the 'bad lads' themselves – Daniel and Matthew in particular
– were marked by the "vocabulary of masculinity" (Mac An Ghaill, 1994, p. 56), and by
sexualised stylisations of the body. The following snapshots, for example, typify Nayak and
Kehily's (1996, p. 220) claim that "sex talk is only one style through which young men
perform their masculinity," and that "the role of bodily practices as a signifier of a person's
sexuality is significant [as they] provide [ ] a visual grammar of understanding." It is to be
noted here, too, that such exchanges between the 'bad lads', and Daniel and Matthew in
particular, were commonplace occurrences.

On one occasion, as illustrated in the following snapshot, Daniel and Matthew played
out and contested their masculinity through sexualised and embodied practices pertaining to
masturbation. In this instance, Daniel seeks to re-affirm his own virility, while questioning
and diminishing Matthew's.

Snapshot Three

Daniel to Matthew (stylising his bodily movements to indicate
the act of masturbation): "I think you're pullin' it. Stop pullin'
it."
Matthew: "Fuck you, cunt."
Daniel: "Least I'm not shootin' blanks."

On another occasion, Matthew and Daniel are discussing motorbikes – a typically
masculinist topic of conversation. Daniel seizes upon the opportunity, and manipulates this
conversation to once again question and diminish Matthew's masculinity.

Snapshot Four

Daniel to Matthew: "I know why you want a motorbike. To
stick your dick in the muffler. (Daniel gestures towards his
penis, and begins to gyrate his pelvis). That's the only blow job
you'd get, you stick your dick in the muffler. You stick your
dick in the muffler."

The Suppression And Sexualisation Of Girls

The girls in the 'bad lads'' class were under constant bombardment. It was the case that
Matthew, Daniel, and Jerry exhibited a "predatory attitude" (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler &
Dowsett, 1982, p. 114) and were frequently and openly disparaging towards the girls (see also
Swann, 1992). The embodied practices of these boys served to ridicule, silence, and exclude

the girls. Furthermore, the girls were positioned as sexual objects – the foci and subjects of the boys' gaze and harassment. The sexualised and misogynistic language practices used by these boys enabled them to objectify and humiliate the girls in the class, and "to assert male power and control over [the] girls" (Kelly, 1992, p. 30).

Within this classroom, the girls were constantly interrupted, 'shouted down,' and rendered silent by the bad lads. The 'bad lads' set and policed the rules of classroom interaction (Spender, 1982) – what was made possible and validated within this site. The girls' talk was clearly unwelcome and read as unworthy, trivial, and open to mockery. They were to "shut up" and be silent, as evident in Daniel's command to a group of girls: "Shut up loud mouth women ... Youse are real stupid you girls ... Youse suck." On another occasion, Daniel commented to the girls: "Little girlies' talk," thus trivialising their input and disparaging the girls.

Sexual harassment, too, was a prominent and disturbing feature in the lives of the girls in this class (Larkin, 1994; Lees, 1993; Robinson, 2005; Skelton, 1997). Matthew, Jerry, and Daniel frequently drew upon sexualised discursive knowledges and practices to position the girls as sexual objects, and to subsequently cultivate and maintain their own hyper-heterosexual (Kehily & Nayak, 1997) and dominant masculinist subjectivities. Their employment of sexualised language practices, and the potency with which such practices are invested, allowed them to exercise power over the girls (Lees, 1997; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Walkerdine, 1990). Positioned, and referred to as "sheilas" and "sluts," the girls were subjected to verbal harassment, taunting and teasing, and wolf-whistles. Furthermore, these boys, felt free to comment on the girls' bodies, and thus police their feminine sexuality.

Two particularly illuminating incidents, involving the taking up and playing out of sexualised discursive practices by these boys, are outlined in the snapshots below. While these particular examples pertain to the sexual harassment of Tiffany, she was by no means the only girl subjected to these practices. Furthermore, just as the 'bad lads'' treatment of Kyle served as a warning to all boys, so to did their treatment of Tiffany signal such to all girls. Essentially, the discourses of sexuality and the practice of sexual harassment were ubiquitous features of this classroom site. Clearly, the girls of the class were "not allowed to forget their sexual functions vis-a vis men" (Skeggs, 1991, p. 130).

Snapshot Five

Daniel and Matthew are discussing motorbikes, when Daniel comments to Matthew: "Tiffany wants to be a motorbike so Matthew can ride it."
Matthew responds to this comment: "You're a fucking dickhead."
The teacher then sends Matthew from the classroom.
Tiffany, who is sitting at their table, remains silent.

Snapshot Six

A mixed-sex group of students - two girls and three boys - are discussing and joking about the frequency of Matthew's swearing.
Tiffany, joining in this discussion, jokes that: "Matthew can't even finish a sentence without swearing."
Matthew, in response to this comment, replies: "Hey Tiffany, do you want to suck my penis?"

He then turned to the other girl in the group and comments:
"See, I didn't swear then."
Here, Tiffany seemingly has no weapon of resistance against this sexualised harassment or sexualised positioning of her. Rather, she is silenced. In the first instance, Daniel targets and uses Tiffany as a means of asserting his own masculinity. In the second incident, she is subject to Matthew's sexualised display – one in which he actively constructs himself as a masculine, and sexual, subject – and is again positioned as powerless.

Conclusion

As evident in the data presented here, there is nothing straightforward or simplistic about boys 'being' boys – about boys 'doing' masculinity. Rather, such an endeavour is complex, multifarious. In constructing themselves as identifiable masculine subjects, boys engage in a sophisticated repertoire of performance practices and draw upon a range of complex and often competing discourses of gender – and more specifically, masculinity.

In view of this, it is clear that teachers' take-up of 'common sense' understandings about boys – and the discourses informing such understandings – is fraught. Teachers', in engaging with such conceptualising, run the risk of 'buying into' the inherently simplistic and uni-dimensional view(s) of boys on offer. So, too, do they run the risk of ascribing to the notion that it is futile to challenge the actions of boys. And evidently, this has 'dangerous' implications.

As such, it is advocated that the seemingly uncomplicated nature of such 'common sense' understandings of boys – those typified in expressions such as "It's just boys being boys" and "Boys will be boys" – and the discourses informing these understandings needs to be examined and critiqued. So, too, do the actions of boys, particularly as they are played out in the context of the classroom and the school, need to be scrutinised more strongly.

And, rather than simply appropriating blame to educators for their lack of critique and action, I suggest that one must take on board the complexities of relations – in particular gendered relations – encountered by teachers as they transpire in classrooms. For one should not, I suggest, underestimate the power of populist discourses that circulate in and inform the lives of teachers and students. Nor should one take too lightly the weighty investment boys have in 'doing' their masculinity in particular and powerful ways – that is, in ways informed by and constitutive of hegemonic versions of masculinity. For, as Redman (1996, p. 170) points out, "there is no self-evident reason why boys [ ] should want to give up any of the power that their social position affords" – and it is the case that in occupying a hegemonic masculinist position, one is situated in a position of power.

Finally, I propose that it is upon consideration of the complexities highlighted here that educators can begin to call into question, and to unravel, the student performances played out in their classrooms. And, in taking on-board such complexities, educators will be better placed to avoid the dangerous trap of 'buying into' simplistic, 'common sense' understandings of masculinity(ies).

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