

# **THE RIGHT STUFF: FASHIONING AN IDENTITY THROUGH CLOTHING IN A JUNIOR SCHOOL**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the key role played by clothing as an expression of individual and collective identity amongst 10-11 year olds. The data arises from an ethnographically-based study of one junior school in the South-East of England between October 1998 and June 1999. The paper proposes that a relaxed enforcement of school uniform created a space for pupils to use clothing as a means of gaining recognition, of generating common bonds, and of sharing interests and intimacy within the peer-group cultures. There is a specific concentration on boys' cultures, and it is argued that clothing and footwear was used as an important component in the construction, negotiation and performance of masculinity. Certain items and brand-names acquired a specific, symbolic value, and pupils who attempted to dress and conform to the school rules and regulations ran a high risk of being stigmatised and subordinated. These pupils were also partly policed and controlled by homophobia.

## **Introduction**

There has been very little empirical research into pupils' clothing as an expression of identity, particularly in the junior school. Although clothing may be one of the surface facets of schooling, in certain circumstances it becomes intrinsically linked to the pupils' own self appraisals of identity, showing how they wish to present themselves to the world, and therefore, as an issue, is neither trivial nor inconsequential. Epstein & Johnson (1998) point out that the compulsory wearing of school uniform is a practice which is almost unknown in the state sector in countries outside the United Kingdom and some of

its ex-colonies. However, since the mid 1980s, there appears to have been an increase in both the implementation, and enforcement, of school uniform in both the secondary and the primary school sectors (Heron, *TES*, 20 April 1990; Lepkowska, *TES*, 24 October 1997) which needs to be explained in the context of devolution and the marketisation of schools (Meadmore & Symes, 1997). The 1986 Education Act (see, also, School Governor's Manual, 1999) advises that responsibility for uniforms should rest with school governors rather than with Local Authorities, and many headteachers, governors and parents seem to view a smart uniform as a ritualised symbol of order and discipline, community, tradition, and higher academic standards (Meadmore & Symes, 1996). Moreover, as schools have begun to operate in a competitive market, uniform has come to be used as a tactic of impression management in the projection of school identity (Davis & Ellison, 1991).

### **Background and Methodology**

The study is located at Westmoor Abbey Junior School [1] where I spent three separate periods of a month each, beginning in October 1998 and ending in June 1999. The research was part of a wider comparative project (my PhD thesis) [2] investigating the construction of masculinity amongst 10-11 year olds in three schools selected on the basis of social class. Westmoor Abbey was my designated working class school and was situated on the outskirts of a small town in Southern England. It is an average sized junior school with 11 classes, and less than 1% of the pupils came from homes where English was not the first language. Although 23% of pupils were stipulated as having Special Educational Needs, only 14% were eligible for free school meals, the standard measurement of social deprivation used by government and LEAs.

The main focus of this study is one class, 6M. This is where I spent the majority of my time, studying the peer-group culture, and pupil networks which consisted of 12 boys (one other had been permanently excluded) and 13 girls (a total of 25 pupils), a small number by state school standards. Most of the early research period was spent observing and getting to know the children in the playground, around the school, but mainly in the classroom, where I often helped and joined in with their work. Over the whole research period, I conducted a series of 27 loosely structured interviews with 6M, talking to the whole class in friendship groups of 2-3. All of these discussions took place during class time. Many pupils were interviewed a number of times, and I also observed, and carried out 10 further interviews with a number of pupils from the other two Year 6 classes (I also interviewed the class teacher of 6M and the headteacher). During the interviews, my role was chiefly one of facilitator, with the children being encouraged to express their views freely, and share their experiences, on a wide range of topics. However, I also used direct questioning to test out emerging theories, clarify issues, and as a means to cross-check data from other interviewees.

### **The school's location: surrounding structures and cultures**

Although there were quite a few privately-owned houses nearby, the school was essentially situated in the middle of a series of Local Authority housing estates, some of which had been used as 'dumping grounds' from inner-city areas in the 1970s. When the nearby large factory closed around the same time, there were widespread levels of unemployment, and high associated levels of crime. Although some alternative means of employment had emerged, levels of crime (particularly acts of vandalism against property) still presented an on-going problem. Mr Lane, the headteacher, told me during an interview that it was "a very difficult area to work in", and that there had been an

increase in the number of disadvantaged and dysfunctional families within the last 10 years in the surrounding area.

The school itself was surrounded by a 12 foot (3.66 m) high security fence, with a series of coded door-locks, a surveillance camera, an alarm system, and a number of prominently displayed signs around the site warning against the consequences of trespassing, and making it clear that the premises were protected by anti-vandal paint. These had been installed 4-5 years previously for pragmatic reasons in an attempt to reduce trespassing, as well as the occasional unannounced visit from potentially volatile parents. During the school day this meant that it was not only unwelcome callers who were locked out, but the pupils were also locked in. Any timing with the 1996 incident at Dunblane (and its social repercussions) was coincidental. Nevertheless, these security measures presented a powerful collective symbol of isolation and exclusion.

All schools are interconnected to wider, surrounding structures and cultures. For the pupils at Westmoor Abbey, their relations with their parents, older siblings, their friends, community figures from around the estates, along with incessant images from commercial popular culture, were profound sources of influence in the cultural production of their masculinities and femininities. Within the working class culture on the estates, the wearing of clothes played a significant role in the projection of one's identity which is an on-going moveable and contested construction. Indeed, Shilling (1993) points out that Bourdieu (1981) sees the body itself as an unfinished entity which is in a constant process of becoming. The body is sign-bearing and sign-wearing, and the clothes that we choose to wear make a highly visible statement of how we wish to present ourselves to the world; who we think we are, or who we would like to be (Goffman, 1959). In essence, the clothing worn on the estates constructed a way of being, and this

was true for the children at Westmoor Abbey, as well as for some of the adults I observed in and around the school.

### **Uniform policy: regulation and control**

There was no school uniform when Mr Lane arrived at the school in 1990, but by 1995 a proposition from the school governors that pupils should wear specified school colours had been accepted by a parental ballot and included in the school prospectus. In fact, there appears to have been a good deal of apathy towards this issue and the voting turnout was actually very low. According to the school handbook, the pupils had a choice of two colours of sweatshirt (royal-blue or yellow); three colours of polo shirt (royal-blue, yellow or white); and two colours of trousers or skirts (grey or black). A distinction must be made between school 'uniform' and school 'colours', for it became apparent that, in practice, Mr Lane and his staff did pay as much attention to trousers, skirts or footwear, but concentrated on the colours of the pupil's tops. Any top that was plain blue, yellow, white, black or grey was deemed to be acceptable. In fact, my personal (although not formally researched) observations indicate that many primary schools have chosen the option of school colours (usually *one*, in the form of polo/T-shirts and sweatshirts) rather than uniform. Where Westmoor Abbey differed was that even tops displaying motifs and designer labels were permitted, so long as they were in one of the *five* specified colours. Only football shirts were prohibited, but even here two or three boys in 6M still sometimes wore them.

I am not suggesting that schools should enforce school uniform or colours, but merely making the observation that many of them do so. Both the other two schools in my study had a rigid policy of enforcement, and I was curious to find out the reasons for the more relaxed approach taken at Westmoor Abbey. When I asked Mr Lane why he was not

stricter on the application of uniform he told me directly that “the main reason is because we can’t [...] and the parents know their rights.” It is important to note that the school had no legal entitlement to impose a school uniform [3], and so it was not so much of a question whether Mr Lane *should* enforce school uniform, but whether he *could* enforce it considering the lack of parental support, or in some case, their outright opposition. Schools need parental consensus, and if some parents were not prepared to back him, he was going to find rigid implementation an uphill struggle. So it was largely for pragmatic reasons that he had decided to concentrate on ‘colours’ rather than on ‘uniform’. It was essentially a trade-off.

*Mr Lane:* I just felt that parents of the children here needed as wide a choice as possible in order to give them a chance to conform [...] I really wanted to be as flexible as possible

In fact, even the ‘colours’ rule had turned out to be “an on-going battle”, and it appeared to me that although, Mr Lane could (in theory) have spent a large part of his day ‘picking up’ pupils on their uniform transgressions, he had deliberately chosen to focus his energies on priorities elsewhere, especially in other areas of school discipline. Despite Mr Lane’s assertions that, “on a good day, I like to think we get about 95% compliance,” (for top colours) my own observations suggested the figure was nearer to 80% for the school as a whole, and we both agreed that this deteriorated towards the top age range. However, assessments depend on the criteria used and how strictly they are applied. Within class 6M, only one boy, Chris, wore full school uniform (including grey trousers and black shoes). Although, given such a wide choice of colours it was almost harder *not* to find an approved colour, only about 14-15 out the 25 pupils in 6M wore correct colours on a regular basis. The rest (about 10; 5 boys and 5 girls) wore various tops in various colours emblazoned with designer labels and motifs. Within the context of

clothing there was an inextricable link to sport. Nearly all the pupils in 6M 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. There was no mention of everyday footwear in the school prospectus (apart from plimsolls for indoor PE), and whereas in some schools all forms of training shoes are strictly prohibited, 'trainers' at Westmoor Abbey were the norm.

All schools contain relations of (teacher) control and (pupil) resistance, and the wearing of non-school uniform (or parts of non-school uniform) is a major resource for pupils in the outward/public display of resistance to school regulation (Meadmore & Symes, 1996). By the lack of rigid control and surveillance of school uniform at Westmoor Abbey, a space, or trajectory (which is often denied to the pupils at schools where uniform is strictly enforced), was opened up for the pupils to express themselves. Some pupils seemed to have decided on an almost contemptuous dismissal of school dress codes, with much clothing being highly individualised, and representing a direct challenge to school regulations. What made this situation so difficult for the school to confront was that the pupils' style of clothing was worn in collusion with their parents. Indeed, the class teacher of 6M, Miss Morris, told me during interview that many of the parents she dealt with wore the same style of clothes as their children. Of course, the vast majority of the pupils' clothes were bought by the parents. These children were generally too young to earn money to pay for these expensive items, and there was no evidence that they procured them by illegal means.

### **Teachers, teaching and dress codes**

Teachers too have their own dress code which, as Epstein & Johnson (1998) point out, often tends to be 'safe', 'respectable' and generally neutral. This could certainly be observed in the semiotics of Mr Lane's dress, along with his body language, as he stood

in front of the children in assembly, wearing his own personal uniform of grey suit and tie, promoting his authority and status. However, about a third of the teachers (and a higher proportion of teaching assistants), had adopted a dress code which was nearer to that of the children's, reflecting various signifiers of fashion such as designer-labelled shirts, sweatshirts, tracksuit bottoms, large items of jewellery, and training shoes.

The need for teachers to look right, to fit in, and 'play the game' should not be underestimated. Indeed, it was a powerful influence to which I (as a researcher) began to be drawn. One or two of the pupils made personal comments about my hair style, and were keen to know the make of trainers I wore out of school. I found myself becoming more conscious of my own appearance, and began to take more time to decide which clothes to wear for school before I left the house each morning.

### **Masculinities and pupil cultures**

An integral part of the on-going formation of young boys' identity is the negotiation and renegotiation of their masculinity. Many of the most convincing arguments concerning the theoretical conceptualisation of masculinity emanate from the work of Connell (1987, 1995, 1996) who views masculinity as an interrelational social construction, whereby various masculinities are constructed in relation to each other, as well as in relation to femininities. Incorporating Gramsci's concept of hegemony into the area of gender relations, Connell has placed power at the centre of his analysis. Power is differentiated with a number of hierarchical, competing and frequently contradictory versions of masculinity on view in each particular site (which in this case is the school). However, one hegemonic strand of masculinity often tends to dominate an institution at any one time, exerting the greatest influence and authority, and claiming the highest status. Connell defines hegemonic as 'culturally exalted' or 'idealised' (Connell, 1990, p. 83), while Kenway & Fitzclarence (1997, pp. 119-120) refer to hegemonic masculinity as the

‘standard-bearer’ of what it means to be a ‘real boy’, with other males drawing inspiration from it, and at least attempting to emulate its form. Most significantly, this hegemonic form is able to regulate thought and action by defining the norm which gains the consent of other masculine forms. There was a group of dominant boys in 6M (who also had friendship links with boys in the other two Year 6 classes). To be included, you had to be what Thornton (1997) calls ‘in the know’: that is, you not only had to adhere to the right look, you also had to be able to talk about the right subjects, use the right speech, use the right body language, play the right playground games and so on. It was the hegemonic group that defined what ‘right’ actually was.

The school itself is a thoroughly gendered institution and plays an important role in the formation of masculine identity [4]. Connell (1996, p. 213) maintains that each school has its own *gender regime* and Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) site three key areas of ‘masculising practices’: management and policy organisational practices, teacher and pupil relation, and the curriculum. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that there are at least two cultures in every school: a formal/official school culture (academic, social, policy/organisational structures) and an informal/unofficial pupil peer culture (Connell *et al*, 1982; Pollard, 1985, 1999), each having its own particular hierarchy, rules and evaluation criteria. The production of the dominant form of pupil masculinity at Westmoor Abbey was centred around a counter-school culture which was achieved in and through resistance to the authority of the formal school culture. Those boys who were not able to be included in the dominant group were necessarily marginalised (pushed to the edges) or stigmatised/subordinated (actively pursued). That said, the majority of boys at Westmoor Abbey were content to follow a kind of complicit masculinity by imitating and adopting some of the hegemonic features of the informal culture, which was partly due to the need to gain social recognition and abrogate the risk of abuse and ridicule (Connell, 1995; Parker, 1996a).

Butler (1990) refers to masculinity as part of a gender performance. The main features of the hegemonic masculinity at Westmoor Abbey were bound up with a highly visible kind of presentation, and was expressed as a style. You needed to look and be tough and be a

successful fighter, to look and be sporty/athletic, to show that you were not working in class (even if you actually were), to publicly undermine the authority of teachers (for example, by calling out in class and/or being cheeky), and show you were 'cool' by the wearing of fashionable items of non-school clothing. There was a need to be seen to be doing these things; it was a kind of perpetual performance.

Hegemonic forms of masculinity can often be precarious. At Westmoor Abbey, its maintenance and defence needed to be performed continuously, although, of course, very few boys had either the physical, social or economic resources, or the desire to perform their masculinity in this, undiluted and idealised, form. Only three boys in 6M, Dan, Alan and Jack, regularly displayed all of its aspects, and even then, this did not happen all of the time. These forms of masculinity are also often underwritten by the threat of physical violence which, at Westmoor Abbey, seemed to be a taken-for-granted component of everyday school life. It was recognised by both boys and girls and in the quotation below, Leanne is talking with one of the dominant boys:

*Leanne:* Your group knows the most... and they're always the ones that everybody agrees with 'cos if they don't, then you're (sic) beat them up, that sort of thing

Although the majority of the boys consented to, and colluded with, the hegemonic regime, they either chose not to, or were unable to, perform many of its features. In fact James, Eric, Jimmy, Robert, Chris, Dave and Tom had tended to become rather marginalised by the core dominant group. They were sporty/athletic, played rough games, were often cheeky to the teachers, wore the fashionable clothes, but were not really tough enough to be able to impose themselves physically. Exclusion was part of the hegemonic masculine form at Westmoor Abbey, and two boys (Simon and Sam) had become

subordinated, or victimised, by the other boys in 6M, mainly because of what they were unable (and to a certain extent) unwilling, to be or do. This was demonstrated clearly when I asked some other boys in the class why Simon and Sam were not very popular:

*Robert:* Because, like, they don't do anything, they're not good  
at football, they're not good at running

*James:* You've got to be good at something to be popular [interrupted]

*Robert:* They ain't good at drawing

*JS:* OK, so there's nothing they're really good at?

*Robert* No

In fact the only signifiers of hegemonic masculinity that Simon and Sam chose, or were able to perform, was the wearing of fashionable clothes, their main disadvantages being their physical weakness (they were both rather small), and the fact that they had both been designated as having Special Educational Needs for their general learning.

Although, at this age, boys' appearance in general is fundamentally presented and performed for the benefit of their own male peer-culture, both boys and girls in 6M took keen note of what each other was wearing. Girls also ran the risk of taunts and insults for conforming too closely to school dress codes and regulations (from both boys and girls). In fact, the vast majority wore the same unofficial 'uniform' as the boys, that is, tracksuit bottoms and training shoes, although they did not appear to have the same compulsive need to wear designer makes/brands, and more of them wore the Westmoor Abbey sweatshirt. Clothing was, however, used to promote heterosexual attraction in settings outside school, such as at a series of locally organised discos which many of the boys and girls attended, and where they would consciously and conspicuously 'dress up' for the occasion.

It is important to stress firstly, that models of hegemonic masculinity do not necessarily need to be the most common form on show, and, that secondly, they are contextually bound and will assume different meanings in different places. For instance, the undermining of a teacher's authority, or the ability to be a good fighter may be qualities that are generally despised rather than valorised at other schools. Moreover, the wearing of fashionable clothing at many schools is not even an option open for consideration. There are different alternatives, or possibilities, of *doing boy* within each school setting using the meanings and practices available, and these will often be inter-connected to the formal/official school culture. For instance, some schools may consciously promote and sanction school games/sport while others do not. One of the main ways of gaining status at one of the other schools in my study was by working hard, and gaining academic qualifications, but this trajectory was not open to those at Westmoor Abbey, or at least it was a much more difficult one to attempt to both perform and succeed in without being derided as a 'boff'. In fact, although many of the boys had relatively low levels of academic attainment (as against national norms as measured by SAT results and OFSTED reports) [5], they did not appear to interpret their schooling experience in terms of failure, for they were evaluating their school life in a different way, the way which was open to them at *their* school. In essence, they were negotiating a different 'set of storylines' and 'repertoires of action' (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 51).

### **Pupil cultures and pupil networks**

Pupil cultures refers to a 'way of life', or 'shared guidelines' (Dubbs & Whitney 1980, p. 27), providing boys with a series of shared meanings of what it is to be a boy. Mac an Ghail (1994) points out that peer-group cultural networks are used as a kind of

‘institutional infrastructure’, in which both individual and collective identities are constructed, negotiated, and performed. Within every class there are a number of overlapping pupil cultures to which boys are going to be variably affiliated (Woods, 1983, 1990). As the period of research progressed, it became apparent that there were three main groups of boys within 6M (see Figure 1), saturated and structured by power relations, and governed by a number of clear rules defining attitudes, expectations, and expressions of tastes and behaviour.

Figure 1. about here

Of course, these groups were not as discrete as this. Real life is far more complex, and there was quite a lot of inter-group mixing, particularly in the playground games. Nevertheless, these typologies do point to the range of masculinities on show within one class. The groupings came from my own observations, and from the boys themselves during interview sessions. Each interview group had slightly different perceptions of how the boys’ peer groupings were constituted in 6M. The boy’s classifications of their peers also revealed much about themselves, for as Bourdieu states, ‘nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies’ (Bourdieu 1990, p.132). For Bourdieu, the social world functions in unison as a system of power relations, and as a symbolic system in which distinctions of taste are used as a basis for social judgement. He also views taste and fashion as an important form of cultural capital which can be used as currencies to gain advancement in the social hierarchy. In his empirical study of taste in French society, Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates that fashion (including clothing styles) has an important function in classifications, and taste in clothing was *one* way that the pupils used as a means of uniting, including and differentiating themselves from others. For Bourdieu, taste distinguishes a person in an essential way ‘since taste is the basis of all

that one has [...] and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others.’ (Bourdieu 1984, p. 56).

### **Looking right, and wearing the right stuff.**

For the pupils at Westmoor Abbey appearance was a central part of how they defined themselves, and clothing seemed to signify self worth. Moreover, styles of dress formed a part of how the pupils wished to be publicly represented, and the designer labels and names so prominently displayed were a vital visible component in that promotion. In contemporary mass cultures, children, like adults, consume signs. During the third week of my fieldwork, I remember Dan and Alan proudly showing me their jackets in the cloakroom, outside their classroom, and Alan saying, “This one’s worth £100”, and also the disappointment on Dan’s face when I failed to recognise the make of Kappa which was emblazoned on the side of his jacket. The importance of displaying the labels, getting oneself noticed, and making sure one was part of the ‘in’ crowd is illustrated in the following conversation:

*JS:* Have you heard of Tommy Sports? I saw Leah wearing  
Tommy, that’s meant to be quite good isn’t it?

*Eric :* Yeah that’s quite good, the watch is [interrupted]

*Robert:* It’s very quiet though

*JS:* What do you mean, ‘very quiet?’

*Robert:* It don’t stand out

*Eric* Not many people wear it

*JS:* So have you got to have something that stands out?

*Robert :* Yeah

- JS:* Yeah, I mean the more it stands out the more you get noticed?
- Robert :* I've got a luminous yellow T-shirt, this is a good make, Diadora
- JS:* Is it important to wear something that stands out and everyone goes, 'Oh look, you've got that on?'
- Robert:* No, they don't go, 'You've got that on,' but they won't take the mick out of you. If I wear this it's all right.

Robert's last comment draws our attention to the risks involved for anyone not conforming to the group norms, for the wearing of certain clothes was very much a cultural imperative. It was as if masculine competence was on trial or on show, and looking good and having the right stuff to wear needed commitment and dedication, knowledge, and importantly, peer-group recognition, validation and legitimation. Although the boys' appearance was equated with their performance, and in many ways 'to look was to be' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 116), there was also the need 'to look' in order to be safe.

Within peer-group relations, certain items acquired a specific, localised, symbolic value such as particular brand names, and these were ascribed a higher cultural value than others. There was a hierarchy of brand names in play, and some of the most popular included 'Tommy Sports', 'Kappa', 'Reeboks' and 'Adidas'. 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) points out that the advertising associated with these training shoes carries a series of cultural messages, and they are intentionally marketed to promote the symbolic nature and status of the shoe. Writing in *The Guardian*, O'Reilly maintains that

the training shoe has become the universal footwear, and that 'Wearing a trainer is not about how something looks but what it means. The trainer world is a world not of taste but one of philosophies. Which brand? Which model? Old school? High-Tops?' In many ways it resolves contradictions: it 'is both fashion and anti-fashion, shoe and anti-shoe'. (*The Guardian*, 23 October, 1998.)

For the boys that I interviewed, it was their comfort and mobility, but most important of all it was 'the look' and 'the style':

*JS:* So why do so many people wear trainers rather than shoes?

*Jimmy* Because it makes them look [interrupted]

*Chris :* They reckon it makes them look hard

*JS:* Do you think so?

*Jimmy :* And you can run better in trainers than shoes, and they're a bit more comfortable

*JS:* Is it part of the look as well?

*Chris:* Yeah

*Tom :* Definitely

Chris's use of the word 'hard' here is rather ambivalent and can be taken to mean 'hard' as in 'violence', as in 'cool', as in 'affluent' or as in 'masculine', and may actually represent some or all of these things. As with the tracksuit tops (and also T-shirts, jackets etc), there was a hierarchy of brand names. Two of the lowest ranking were 'Ascot' and 'Gola'. During an interview with two pupils from another class, aesthetic style was highlighted again, but so was the associated high price, and having 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 [interrupted]
- 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 [interrupted]
- Ollie:* Reebok, Adidas, Puma
- JS:* Is that just 'cos of the name, or it is because they [interrupted]
- 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

Once again, it was 'the look', style, and expense of clothing that seemed to come before considerations of practicability and/or comfort. Another brand of training shoes that were near the bottom of the hierarchy were 'Ascots'. Using Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the function of taste, we can see Tammy, in the first part of the following interchange, using clothing as a means of self-classification, inclusion and differentiation.

*JS:* Have you heard of Ascot trainers?  
*Tammy:* Yeah, they're rubbish  
*JS:* Are they real rubbish ones?  
*Tammy:* They don't ruin easily, but they just [*inaudible*]  
*JS:* In what way are they rubbish then?  
*Tammy:* It's just, no-one hardly likes them  
*JS:* Why though?  
*Tammy:* Everyone who likes them, people like who don't come in  
designer gear come in them kind of trainers [ ... ] but me  
and Kevin and all that come in Reebok  
*JS:* Right...so...[interrupted]  
*Tammy:* Reebok do ruin easy though, and they're £45 a pair  
*JS:* Do they? So they're not the best trainers? Is that because you're  
not supposed to play football in them?  
*Tammy:* Erm, they're £45 a pair, they are.

### **Subordinated forms of masculinity: gays and boffs**

Those who did not conform to the right 'look' at Westmoor Abbey were categorised as 'other'. It was the whole look, the whole package, that was required, and this was policed by the boys from both the hegemonic and marginalised groups. If a 6M boy wore anything associated with the regulation school uniform, apart from the sweat shirt they would often be called either 'gay' or a 'boff'. The following extract comes from an interview with Chris, Jimmy and Tom. Chris was a particularly unusual and, therefore, interesting case, being the only boy in the class who wore a recognisable school uniform

of white shirt, black school trousers and black, 'ordinary', shoes. This was due to his mother's insistence, rather than any choice of his own, and he was often ridiculed for it. However, as he displayed many of the other characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, and was often 'one of the lads', he did not pay such a heavy price as, perhaps, other boys might have done. Chris was quick to point out that Dan, the main leader of the dominant group, sometimes wore the official school top, and his rather defiant assertion at the end of the conversation that he did not care about wearing school uniform seemed to lack conviction and probably had more to do with the way he was presenting himself to me, the adult researcher. Moreover, Chris wanted to make the point that his identity at home, and around the estate, was unaffected by what he looked like at school:

*JS:* What about the way you dress?

*Chris:* Some people say, like, you have to dress cool, but it don't matter 'cos they reckon, they call you 'boffins' if you just dress in school uniform like I do, but it don't matter 'cos when you go home you can open your wardrobe and show 'em and you've got all these sports' clothes like [ ...] that's what my mum tells me, I've got loads of jogging bottoms, Giorgio tops

*JS:* So some people, if they came to the school, would be called boff with a school uniform? I mean you've got a school uniform [*indicating Chris*]

*Chris:* [...] Yeah, but Joe don't normally say it anymore 'cos *he* wears a school jumper, and a school shirt

*JS:* [ ... ] I can see a lot of you wear trainers, but you haven't got trainers on today have you? [*indicating Chris*]

*Chris:* No, I leave my trainers for football day, P.E., and when I get home I change into something else...he knows [*indicating Dave*] that I don't wear all these fake things [... ] because I come out in jogging bottoms and things like that...

*JS:* So you feel it's all right to wear the school uniform?

*Chris:* Yeah, I don't care what I wear

### *Getting called 'gay'*

Gilbert & Gilbert maintain that "heterosexuality has been found to be a powerful marker of masculine identity in most studies of boys' school cultures" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 129) and at Westmoor Abbey, the valorised, dominant masculinity was partly shaped by homophobia. A number of researchers have recognised homosexuality as being a key form of subordinated masculinity (see, for example, Connell, 1987, 1995; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Epstein, 1997; Redman & Mac an Ghail, 1997; Martino, 1999), and it was no different here. Parker (1996a) argues that insults such as 'gay' and/or 'poofter' need to be implicitly conceptualised in terms of *gender* as opposed to *sexuality* and, therefore, connote to being 'non-masculine' and effeminate rather than being homosexual. Certainly, at Westmoor Abbey, these terms were essentially used to control the general behaviour of boys, rather than their sexual preference. 'Gay' was used as a means of positioning particular boys at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy and was used ubiquitously as a term of abuse which could be applied to a whole range of actions in different situations. Basically, 'gay' meant 'naff' or 'terrible'. A boy could ask a gay question in class; he could do gay work (rather incongruously, by either producing a poor piece of work, or by actually working too well), he could even make a 'gay pass' in football and so on. Even the clothes that he wore could be called 'gay', and this included his choice of shoe. I had already been alerted to the fact that shoes could be deemed 'gay' in an interview with Jimmy and Tom:

*Jimmy:* Some people say that Tom has got gay trainers because they're old

*Tom:* These are old but I'm getting new ones

This next extract comes from an interview with two other boys as I am attempting to find out some of the reasons why some boys are labelled 'gay':

*JS:* I've heard of people just doing their work and they get  
called gay, why is that?

*Eric:* Because of, like, being too good [ ... ] and if someone is doing,  
like, rubbish work they go, 'Oh that's gay, something like that'

*JS:* So you've just got to be doing rubbish work then, to be  
called [interrupted]

*Eric:* It's not necessarily, just like being horrid to someone  
about your work

*JS:* What else?

*Eric:* Some of the clothes you wear, like the shoes

*JS:* So you get called gay if you wear different shoes and things?

*Eric:* Yeah

*Simon:* Like Jimmy

*Eric:* He goes, 'They're gay shoes'

*JS:* Gay shoes!? What sort are gay shoes then?

*Eric:* They're like Ascots, [*the type of cheap training shoe,*  
*mentioned above*] they're worn by people like [*inaudible*]

*Sam:* No, now he's got shoes like mine, and mine are [interrupted]

*JS:* As far as I can see the only person in the class who actually has proper shoes is Chris Dowland, he actually has black shoes doesn't he?

*Eric:* Yeah ones like that [*points to my shoes*]

*JS:* How are they called?

*Eric:* They're sometimes called gay but he won't let [ ...], no-one will be able to call him gay when we go to Broadmead Manor [*the local secondary school*] because you have to wear them when you go to Broadmead Manor

*JS:* Everyone's got to wear them

*Eric:* Yeah, one's like that [*points to my shoes*]

It is highly significant to note that the space that was open at Westmoor Abbey for gaining status through the type of footwear and clothing worn was about to be severely restricted when the boys changed school at the end of the year. Although, like primary schools, secondary schools also have no legal entitlement to enforce school uniform, they have a longer tradition in wearing uniform, and parents appear more willing to accept secondary schools' uniform policy and abide by the rules. As far as the pupils and their parents were concerned at Westmoor Abbey, the wearing of school uniform at secondary school was compulsory, and it was, therefore, going to be more difficult to use clothing as a major strategy and resource in the construction of peer-group hierarchies. This is not to say that the school would be unable to close the strategy completely, it just meant that the distinctions of differentiation would become finer. The pupils knew from their older siblings and other Broadmead pupils that it was still possible to customise their uniforms by, for example, in the way that they wore their ties. At that moment, however, pupil clothing remained highly individualised. Indeed, boys also risked being called gay if two

or more of them came to school wearing the same item, and this could even mean that the boys had to plan ahead:

*Robert:* Say if you get all the same stuff; say he gets a goalie kit, I get the same one, he gets shoes, I get the same shoes

*JS:* Oh so if two people look quite similar

*Robert:* Yeah it's called gay

*JS:* You get called gay!

*Robert:* But Ricky, he always gets stuff, and so do, I but I don't know he's got it, and he don't know I got it

*JS:* So that means [interrupted]

*Robert:* But we don't wear it at the same days

*JS:* So do you actually say, 'Don't wear that tomorrow because I'm going to wear' [interrupted]

*Robert:* Yeah

*JS:* So if you did both turn up [*wearing similar clothing items*] would both of you get called gay then?

*Eric:* Yep

*Robert:* Yeah

### *Being called a 'boff'*

The other main term of abuse was 'boff'. This was often used alongside gay, or on an interchangeable basis with it, but was usually applied to anyone who worked hard and did not reject the official school culture of conformity and academic achievement. That said, the use of the term was not confined simply towards work, it also represented a general indication towards the suitability and appropriateness of 'the look'. A boy could have a

boff shirt, boff trousers, boff shoes, which basically meant anything that was 'smart', a term which the pupils equated with conforming to the school regulations:

*JS:* What sort of person do you think a boff is?

*Robert:* It's like they do all their work, never get told off, get it  
all first, get it done neatly...

*JS:* What else?

*Robert:* Don't moan, listen, do as they're told, don't take things  
as races [interrupted]

*JS:* Don't take?

*Robert:* Like if it's a race, they take it as a race; if it's a practice they take it  
as a practice...they don't get into fights

*Eric:* Like when you're playing Runouts, if you get your hand in,  
normally people go, 'You never got me', but the boffs will just go  
[puts on a stereotypical upper-class accent] 'OK, you got me, I'll  
just go back to the wall', you know

*JS:* And tell me about how they dress?

*Eric:* Smart trousers [interrupted]

*Robert:* Smart trousers, smart shoes, school uniform [interrupted]

*Eric:* Jumper [interrupted]

*Robert:* Smart shirt, not a tie...Julian Johnson always wears a tie  
but he can't help it

Eric's imitation of an upper-class accent may suggest an issue of class division, associating 'boffs' with people who speak in an upper-middle class register, and who are outside local cultural norms. Robert's last comment, also, possibly alludes to the fact that some pupils (like Chris) face greater parental control and restrictions than others and

were made to wear certain official school clothes. Later on, during the same interview, I discovered that even socks were included in the clothing, small socks being boff.

*JS:* What did you mean about small socks?

*Eric:* These ones are big, [*inaudible*] they come up to, like,  
there [*indicated half way up the calf*]

*JS:* So these are good ones, 'cos they're nice and long yeah?  
[*I show him mine*]

*Eric:* They're nice and bright [*they're actually lime green*]

*Robert:* Their ones stretch about up to here [*indicates a line on  
his leg*]...some go like that and pull their trousers over them

It is important to stress that the above data only refers to one class at Westmoor Abbey, that of 6M. During the summer term I recall asking two pupils from another Year 6 class whether they would also be castigated for wearing the 'wrong' training shoes:

*JS:* In Miss Morris's class, if you have these awful trainers,  
they get called gay trainers, do you have that in your  
class?

*Leanne:* No

*Ollie:* We ain't that sort of sad

*Leanne:* We're not sad

*Ollie:* We don't say things like that

Of course, we need to bear in mind that Ollie's and Leanne's assertion of not being 'sad' should not be taken at face value, or as a transparent representation of reality, but, rather,

as with the other interview data in this paper, as part of their ongoing negotiations and presentations to an adult researcher. However, this also demonstrates quite neatly that meanings are often negotiated and performed, and are often highly localised. Each school classroom has its own unique cultural milieu where, for instance, historic pupil groupings and individual teacher's policy/organisations and personalities/styles can and do make a real difference to the way children experience and live out their lives at school. Although, I maintain, that wearing designer clothes was a powerful symbolic marker of identity throughout the whole informal pupil culture, it did appear to have a different expression and significance within each class.

## **Conclusions**

For the pupils at Westmoor Abbey, their style of dress was intrinsically linked to their own identity, for as Finkelstein maintains, 'fashioning the body becomes a practice through which the individual can fashion a self' (Finkelstein, 1996, p. 50). Clothes acted as a powerful signifier of the pupils worth as people, and were an essential ingredient of social acceptability (or rejection) within their specific peer-group culture.

Clothes/training shoes were part of pupil performance, a symbol of how they wished to be interpreted, of how they wished to be known and perceived. Particular articles of clothing acted as signifiers of fashion, as well as to the money that was needed to make the purchase, which meant that designer labels needed to be conspicuously displayed. 'The look' was all important, and many clothes were also connected to sport, with its associations of athleticism, strength and power. (Parker, 1996b.) 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.

Although pupils have a certain amount of agency and choice, they were, nevertheless, living their lives in circumstances which were not of their own choosing, and the symbolic value attached to dress style was part of the localised cultural knowledge and attitudes within the surrounding community. The children brought their home values into Westmoor Abbey. In many ways, their lives inside school were an extension of their lives on the estate, but were just being performed in a different site.

The school (the head and the teachers) practised a loose form of bodily surveillance which was largely due to the fact that a school uniform was virtually impossible to enforce. But even Westmoor Abbey's adoption of school colours was only loosely applied, and a space was created for the pupils to individualise their clothes and challenge the school's formal authority and control.

There were a range of masculinities and femininities on view within the class peer-group culture, and the public display of designer labels on non-school uniform was *one* key feature of the dominant, stylised form of masculinity. It is important to reiterate that this hegemonic norm was specific to the school (and perhaps even to 6M) and lost its currency outside the localised area. In this sense, it formed virtually no part of the dominant/hegemonic features in the other two schools where I was carrying out my research. Here, school uniform was much more rigidly enforced, and so the opportunities of using clothes for individual and collective expression were acutely curtailed.

The risks of non-conformity to peer group norms at Westmoor Abbey were severe and would generally result in abuse (often of a homophobic nature), or/and outright rejection

and peer-group ostracism. The main policing of clothing was conducted by the pupils' themselves, and the two prevalent terms of abuse were 'gay', which basically connoted 'naff' (awful), and 'boff' which connoted a conformity to the school's values and authority. Put simply, there was a cultural need to *conform* and *perform* to the masculine boundaries in play.

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### **Key to Transcripts**

[interruption]	Indicates the moment when an interruption in speech begins;
...	a natural pause in the conversation;
[ <i>italic text</i> ]	descriptive text to provide background information;
[ ... ]	extracts edited out of the transcript.

## NOTES

[1] In order to preserve anonymity, all the names of places and people have been changed

[2] This paper is part of an unfinished PhD thesis which is due to be submitted at the end of 2000. The working title is: ‘The construction of boys’ masculinity in the junior school, and how this relates to their academic achievement’.

[3] The Head’s Legal guide (June, 1998, p. 786) states that there is no established case in law to say whether a school can or cannot legally compel pupils to wear a specified school uniform. Moreover, “it is considered inadvisable for Heads to state emphatically that school uniform must be worn. It is better to phrase this aspect of the matter as *a strong request*” (my italics).

[4] (see, for example, Willis, 1977; Kessler *et al.*, 1985; Heward, 1988; Connell, 1989, 1996; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 1996; Parker, 1996a; Kenway, 1997; Skelton, 1997; Connolly, 1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1999; Renold, 1999; Lesko, 2000)

[5] Standard Assessment Test results (SATs) for 1998 from the school’ OFSTED report

This table shows the standards achieved by 11 year olds based on the SAT results for 1998, as reported in the school's most recent OFSTED report.

<b>Performance in:</b>	<b>compared with all schools</b>	<b>compared with similar schools</b>
English	D	E
Mathematics	D	E
Science	E	E

**KEY**

well above average	A	
above average	B	
average	C	
below average		D
well below average	E	