Poofy Dresses and Big Guns: A poststructuralist analysis of gendered positioning through talk amongst friends

Rebekah Willett[*]

Institute of Education, University of London

This article uses data collected from a class of eight to nine year-olds to show the specific ways children are defining their gendered positions within the context of their same-sex friendship groups. Children's subjectivities are described as both actively formed but also positioned within the surrounding (gendered) discourses. This article will show specific ways that structure and agency is played out through talk amongst friends. Importantly, the analysis of the talk indicates that children are able to both align themselves as well as challenge dominant gendered discourses. The article argues that informal talk amongst friends is an important space for children to make sense of masculinities and femininities and to develop their identities, particularly in the context of schools.

Introduction

A significant body of research on gender and education has investigated the complex structures and discourses in schools which affect various social interactions, including the ways children play together, the topics they choose to study and the ways they perform within schools (see for example Epstein et al., 1998; Francis, 2000; Millard, 1997; Rowan et al., 2001). Studies which describe classroom interactions through poststructuralist lenses show the complexity of children's interactions not just with their peers and teachers, but also within the discursive field of schools (Baxter, 2002; Francis, 2000; Hey, 1997). Children are described not just as having the free-will to adopt any particular form of identity, nor are they positioned passively as, for example, boys and girls. Poststructuralist analysis helps to illuminate times when children take up positions but are restricted in their choices, when children do not take up dominant discourses, when dominant discourses constrain children's thoughts and

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[*] Address for correspondence: London Knowledge Lab, 23-29 Emerald Street, London WC1N 3QS. Email: r.willett@ioe.ac.uk

actions and when children shift between sometimes contradictory positions. Although there is a small body of literature using poststructural analysis in primary schools (e.g. Davies, 2003; Francis, 2000; Walkerdine, 1997), almost nothing has been written on primary school friendships from this point of view. Without accounting for friendships, and particularly both the active and passive aspects of interactions within those friendships, these analyses are ignoring a crucial element of a child's identity work. Furthermore, although schools recognise talk (or 'speaking and listening') as an important skill, it is also crucial to understand the role of informal conversations between peers, particularly in school systems where unstructured time is under threat. This article will argue that informal talk within the context of schools provides an important space for children to make sense of surrounding discourses as they perform and define their identities.

This article analyses the way talk between groups of friends is used as a way of performing gendered subjectivities and also defining and evaluating particular masculinities and femininities. Using data collected in a class of eight to nine year-olds, the article examines and compares a group of girls and a group of boys as they sat together and wrote stories, discussing their illustrations, after-school plans, likes, dislikes and feelings. Through their talk, the groups not only shared knowledge, humour and displays of intimacy, they also developed joint opinions and values, defining what was acceptable as middle-class girls and boys in their setting. The questions raised by these interactions concern the amount of agency we can attribute to these groups of friends as they negotiate their identities. Do friendship groups provide a forum whereby identities can be shifted, rejected and accepted; do friendships offer a means of resisting or challenging dominant discourses; or do children simply rehearse and further define existing identities within friendship groups? Drawing on research in the areas of sociolinguistics, gender and education and feminist poststructuralism, this article engages with debates about structure, agency and identity and young children's social worlds.

Gender, Talk and School-Friends

Numerous researchers have examined the interactions of women and teenage girls within friendship groups. These researchers point to specific structures of girls' and women's talk through which feminine subjects are produced (Coates, 1996; Kehily et al., 2002; McRobbie, 2000), the changing and sometimes conflicting nature of identities within friendship groups (Hey, 1997), and the struggle of adolescent girls in relationships as they attempt to hold on to their personal freedom but recognise growing responsibilities to others (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Underlying these studies is a view of identities as fluid and containing tensions, but also a recognition that there are a range of femininities on offer to women and girls. As outlined above, some of the questions surrounding issues of identity are concerned with how people engage with these tensions, how wide the available range of femininities is, and how much agency one has to perform or redefine a particular identity.

Increasingly, studies are analysing the *active* nature of children's identity work, thus focusing on children's agency. Pollard and Filer show the ways children resist or take up available discourses in order to negotiate their positions in schools (Pollard with Filer, 1996; Pollard and Filer, 1999). Similarly, Dyson (1997, 2003) describes the way children establish and maintain both individual and group identities in schools. Focusing on children's use of media and writing, Dyson describes how the 'symbolic material' the children are drawing on (superheroes, for example) are embedded with complex meanings which are negotiated through children's use of these materials. Thorne's work (1993) looks specifically at *gendered* identity practices

and includes an examination of the way gendered positions are constructed and resisted. Thorne dissects gendered binary oppositions in order to show the way children actively construct boys' and girls' positions, and also the many times when gender becomes less relevant as a way of constructing group differences and similarities. Thorne's research indicates the importance of seeing past gendered binary oppositions which then allows us to see the multiple and contradictory subject positions which children take up and the many different ways of 'doing' boy and girl. All of these studies provide compelling evidence that children's subject positions are products of the children's negotiations within the structures of the classroom and social life more generally. However, the children in these studies are attributed with a large degree of agency—they appear to take up various positions with a great deal of freedom and alacrity. The studies say little about dominant discourses around masculinities and femininities, which are bound to impact on the children's identity negotiations.

Hey (1997) describes the way meaning making occurs within teenage girls' friendship groups as they are positioned by the discursive field surrounding them. Hey analyses the ways identities are established within friendship groups, and she includes a description of the fluid and sometimes contradictory nature of identities within these groups. Through their identity work, girls formed strict positions for themselves and other girls which lead to inclusion or exclusion in their friendship group. For example, Hey describes how middle and working class friendship groups formed exclusive positions based on their differences. Working-class girls created positions which emphasised heterosexuality, excluding middle-class girls due to what was seen as an over-interest in academic study. Similarly middle-class girls created positions which excluded working-class girls, because of their excessive interest in heterosexual identity and activity. The significance of Hey's findings in relation to this article is that these multiple 'forms of femininity' are not only performed but also defined and negotiated within the girls' friendship groups.

I am proposing that access to friendship groups involves positioning oneself 'correctly' within the dominant gender-specific discourses, and so within the friendship groups children are fixing their gendered positions through the repeated performance of those positions (see Butler, 1990). However, children are not just accepting and repeating their gendered positions through their interactions with friends. Because of the shifting nature of subjectivities, children are further able to define and in some (limited) ways play with their positions (Connell, 1995; Davies, 2003). Previous research using poststructuralist analysis to examine subjectivities within friendship groups has focused on the work of older girls (Hey, 1997). This article will compare work of girls' and boys' groups, focusing on primary school aged children. By looking at both boys and girls, as in Thorne's (1993) work, an attempt is made to analyse the gender dichotomy which dictates the ways boys and girls behave and talk with friends (e.g. the assumption that boys have mates with whom they play football, whereas girls have best friends with whom they share intimate feelings). Furthermore, by examining primary school children's talk within the context of informal times during the school day, the article provides evidence that important things are happening during those times. In school systems where testing and preparation for testing is on the increase, it is crucial to be able to articulate what is happening through informal interactions in schools so as to be able to argue for the maintenance of these less structured spaces.

The study

This article is based on data collected from a class of eight to nine year-olds over a period of one year in 1997-1998 and is part of a larger study on children's identity work during school story writing time. The study was done at a private 'international school' located just outside London. The population of the school contains a large number of different nationalities and consists of mainly two-parent families from middle class backgrounds. The study draws on ethnographic research methodology and discourse analysis techniques. I was the teacher for the children in this study, and therefore I was part of the culture of the classroom. My interest as a researcher was to investigate the *processes* that were occurring in the classroom, looking at how particular children interact with particular discourses in particular ways. By doing qualitative research and looking closely at the entire context surrounding a small number of children, I was able to look at the tension between structure and agency within one aspect of their lives. Although the culture is specific to the children in this study, the focus is on the processes of children positioning themselves and interacting with discursive practices as friends. By using discourse analysis to investigate these processes, we can see the complexity of the children's interactions as they are both positioned by and through the discursive practices surrounding them.

The data I will be discussing in this article are tape recordings of children talking together during classroom story writing time. In the writing program which I conducted, known as 'writing process' or 'writing workshop', the children were able to choose their story topics, writing materials, and seating arrangements (within certain limits). Some amount of discussion (i.e. talk related to their stories) was allowed. The result was not a quiet classroom with children sitting in rows, but a constant hum of chatter from children scattered all over the room and adjacent corridor. To record some of the talk which occurred during this time, I requested groups who were engaging in conversations to have a tape recorder running near them. Generally the groups consisted of two to four friends and were same-sex.

Using a form of data-led discourse analysis, I examined the transcripts of the recordings and colour-coded themes which emerged. The four themes which I will cover in this article are 'opinions and values', 'fan knowledge', 'drawings', and 'displays of intimacy'. These themes relate broadly to the theoretical stance I am taking—each theme contains an element of structure and agency as displayed through the children's gendered identity work. In the first theme, the children agreed on and expressed particular opinions which defined themselves within discourses in terms of gender and, in some cases, class. Similarly the way the children discussed popular media and shared their fan knowledge both determined and was determined by their economic position and gender. Illustrations the children were doing as part of their classroom activities included discussions about how men and women look, and the way the illustrations were discussed was embedded in particular gendered discourses. Finally, displays of intimacy, often seen as highly gendered, were established within friendship groups, further defining and negotiating what it means to act as a boy and girl.

Friendship as a Space for Negotiating Values and Opinions

An important aspect of a friendship group is having shared opinions or a similar view of the world (Coates, 1996; Hey, 1997; Pollard & Filer, 1999). But do friends meet each other through their common view or is that view developed within their friendship? In my study we can see how opinions were formed jointly as the children talked. Children would often ask each other if they liked a particular popular music group, a videogame, a school subject, a style of clothing or a TV show; and instead of saying 'This show is rubbish' which would possibly conflict with their friends'

opinions, they would first ask their friends and then inevitably come to an agreed opinion. This type of interaction is described by Coates (1996) as 'hedging', and is used by individuals for various reasons including showing sensitivity to others' feelings and protecting themselves. However, it is significant that through hedging the girls in this excerpt are developing shared opinions which become part of their friendship and their group identity. In this excerpt Lori and Jessica are planning what to do on their next play date, and in the process they come to a shared opinion of their favourite movies:

1   LORI: ... that's perfect should I bring *That Thing You Do*?
2   JESSICA: ya ya
3   LORI: and then we can watch it that's such a good movie
4   JESSICA: it's the best movie ever except it's not my favourite
5   LORI: what is
6   JESSICA: I don't know
7   LORI: I'm like what is?
8   JESSICA: *A League of Their Own* and
9   LORI: *Cool Runnings*
10   JESSICA: ya
11   LORI: same
12   JESSICA: *A League of Their Own* just *That Thing You Do* and *Cool Runnings* I love that song

Brown and Gilligan (1992) describe how adolescent girls are keenly aware of the risk of expressing feelings outright, yet also the risk of not being honest with friends. In the above excerpt, the girls are demonstrating the power of this discourse—to remain *girl* friends they are learning to express themselves in particular ways. However, the movies they have agreed on also express a particular taste and reflect the girls' group identity—none of the movies are particularly girlish in theme or style, nor are the movies risqué (all rated PG). Their choice positions the girls within dominant discourses as 'good' middle-class girls, which will be explained further in relation to the next extract.

     The following conversation occurred while the girls were drawing illustrations for their stories which featured the Spice Girls as characters:

1   LORI: I agreed this with my mom I'll wear dresses as long as they're short I don't like long dresses or poofy
2   JESSICA: I hate poofy dresses
3   LORI: I know I hate the ones that have a big arm thing
4   JESSICA: ya, they're just not for me
5   KATIE: I'll only wear those short dresses that like go down to your knees
6   JESSICA: me too
7   LORI: I only wear the ones that have the little like
8   JESSICA: I have those
9   LORI: string
10   JESSICA: I have one of those dresses
11   LORI: I have like thousands of them that only have the string things and then you have to wear a T-shirt under it
12   KATIE: string things
13   LORI: yesterday I didn't wear one, but it was hot out, so

14   JESSICA: remember that one that was up there, Lori, came down to there? that one?
        …
15   JESSICA: no the thing your neck part came down to there
16   KATIE: oh my gosh
17   LORI: that's why you have to wear a T-shirt under it

The girls agree that long dresses, dresses with poofy arms, and dresses which are low-cut in the front are not acceptable. I would argue that these styles of dresses which the girls are rejecting are signifiers of particular forms of femininity. The long dresses with poofy arms sound particularly girlish (like a flower girl or bride's maid dress), a form of hyper-femininity which the girls are rejecting. The criticism of low-cut dresses aligns with the girls' objections to incidents when the Spice Girls revealed too much of their bodies (which I discovered when talking with the girls about the Spice Girls). Here the girls are rejecting a sort of 'loose woman' position, similar to the middle-class girls in Hey's study (1997) who reject what they perceive as working-class girls' highly sexualised positioning. The girls' rejections also define them in terms of age – they are rejecting dresses that young girls wear (frilly or poofy dresses) and ones that older teens where (low-cut).

In the excerpt above, the girls' agreement about clothing styles, which has been formed through the talk amongst friends, establishes which subject positions are desirable and undesirable within their (middle-class) social group. Furthermore, the agreement becomes visible as the girls adapt their style of clothing to meet with their friends' approval. However, this seemingly active choice has to be examined in the context of the discursive practices surrounding these girls. As in Hey's study, it would not be acceptable for these girls to be interested in risqué movies or ways of dressing, and, at the same time, the girls need to perform 'border work' in order to define themselves as female (Thorne, 1993). The girls therefore are restrained in their choices: although they are rejecting a dominant form of femininity (watching romance movies, wearing clothes that show cleavage or midriff), they must not be too boyish nor too sexy. Furthermore, as pre-teens they must not be too babyish. Age, social class and gender are limiting their choices to a version of femininity which, in many ways, is decided for them.

Although I have used excerpts from the girls' conversations, the boys had equal amounts of discussion which led to shared opinions. The data I collected shows boys forming joint opinions about various cultural items such as movies, videogames, and football teams and players. Again, the boys formed opinions in a very similar manner to girls: that is, instead of directly giving an opinion, the boys would ask each other their opinions and then gradually come to a joint agreement. Although this may seem surprising, given research which describes boys' and men's conversations as dominated by interruptions and overlaps (e.g. Esposito, 1979; Zimmerman & West, 1975), the intimate way in which these boys act is similar to the 'boys bonding' described by Redman et al. (2002). It is important to note that within close friendships, and particularly through the kinds of informal conversations examined in this article, boys are 'bonding' and establishing ways of relating which resist dominant discourses.

Boys were particularly preoccupied with forming joint opinions about what was considered funny. The boys' conversations were dominated by jokes, and toilet humour received some of the greatest amount of laughter. Through this joint sense of humour the boys would develop jokes together which formed a sort of secret code, and thereby an inclusive group. This is similar to the function of gossip which Pilkington (1998) describes in both men's and women's groups as a means of expressing solidarity and group membership (p. 245). In the next excerpt, Roy and

Oyvind are developing a story together, based on *The Simpsons*, which centres on rude jokes. This experience became part of their shared culture, something they could refer back to as a sort of bonding experience. Only they knew how this *Simpsons* story developed, and due to the 'inappropriate' toilet talk, the story was only meant for a small audience (the story was not shared formally with the class or the teacher).

1   OYVIND: see look [reading] *one day Bart had a diet Bart drank too much beer he farted so it smelled around the whole house, Bart went to bed Homer gave him ... more and more beer*, this is going to be the funny Bart, no why did I say the funny Bart, the funny fart, this is going to be the funny part
2   ROY: (laughs) the funny fart
3   OYVIND: *the next day* ... [writing then says] listen to this [reading] *in class Bart farted so loud* (both laugh)
4   ROY: [reads Oyvind's story]
5   OYVIND: so loud
6   ROY: it blew all the windows (laughs)
7   OYVIND: [writing] *it*
     …
8   ROY: blew the children away blew the teacher away
9   OYVIND: [writing] *the windows*
10   ROY: the windows the children and the blackboard away
11   OYVIND: so it smelled ... it smelled so much
12   ROY: I'm gonna drop, can I make a Simpsons story?

This private writing experience (private because it was just the two of them, and because the humour of the story went against what was considered 'appropriate' for the classroom) not only formed a friendship bond, it also became part of the discourse about what boys do. As in Dyson's (1997) superhero stories, the materials the boys are drawing on are embedded with meanings. It is no coincidence that the rude characters in *The Simpsons* are Homer and Bart (the males). Roy and Oyvind learn from early on that rude humour is a boyish thing, and by developing that humour together through their friendship activities they are further defining and refining their masculine subject positions. This analysis is supported by research by Kehily and Nayak (1997) who look specifically at male humour in secondary schools and conclude, 'humour plays a significant part in consolidating peer group cultures ... offering a sphere for conveying masculine identities' (p. 67). The boys are clearly engaged in dominant masculine discourse, but we can also see their interactions as a balance between resisting authority and gaining peer approval whilst at the same time embracing school writing. Parody, in this case in the form of *The Simpsons*, offers boys ways of balancing their performance of dominant masculinity with their role as school rule followers (see also Newkirk, 2002).

Displaying Cultural Capital, or Friends Sharing Fan Knowledge?

Closely connected with forming joint opinions is the way children developed shared knowledge. Children were eager to discuss what they knew about items which had high status, often displaying knowledge about media cultures, and at times expressing both cultural and economic capital. On many occasions, one child in the group would have more status than the others as a result of their superior media knowledge. For

example, Lori saw the movie *Titanic* in the U.S. before the other girls were able to see it, although all the girls knew the soundtrack to the movie. Similarly, Oyvind had far more videogames (having a new Nintendo 64 system), and because he had an older brother who was into games such as Warhammer, he had far more access to certain types of media than Roy. These fan performances not only expressed dominant masculine and feminine discourses (female interest in romance movies and male interest in 'violent' games) but also middle class positions. Both Lori and Oyvind had financial means to gain this fan status. Much of the displaying and sharing of these resources was done outside of the classroom (playing videogames, watching movies, reading magazines were all done on play dates). However, the sharing of knowledge also occurred during school. Again, this sharing experience is a way the children are developing their friendship, and at the same time defining and refining their subjectivities.

In the following excerpt Oyvind and Roy are joined by Andrew, and the three of them are writing separate chapters in a joint book called 'GoldenEye Levels'. Andrew and Oyvind have the Nintendo 64 game *GoldenEye* at home, but Roy does not. Also, Andrew and Oyvind have differing amounts of expertise with the game. The boys share their expertise in this extract:

1   OYVIND: OK my level's called The Mall
2   ANDREW: my level's called Dam
3   OYVIND: my level's called Andrew
4   ROY: what kind of dam? is it like a dam?
5   ANDREW: ya a dam
6   ROY: but not the real swear word
7   ANDREW: no not that word it's the stuff that slows down water and
         makes it into little streams
8   ROY: oh ya
9   ANDREW: and you have to jump off
10   OYVIND: oh ya you have to jump off from that thing
11   ANDREW: ya I know
12   OYVIND: but you have to have to complete your thingey first
13   ANDREW: Agent is so easy [2 seconds undecipherable]
14   OYVIND: all you have to do is go there and jump off
15   ANDREW: I know my little sister likes to kill everybody there
16   OYVIND: Double Agent you have to do like everything kill everybody
         destroy the whole place and those towers inside the, have you ever
         been a double agent?
17   ANDREW: I've never tried it out
18   ROY: I can try it at your house on Sunday
19   ANDREW: my brother's completen [sic] the game he can do any
         difficulty level any level

Using Dyson's (1997) terms, the 'GoldenEye' story the boys are writing is functioning as a 'ticket to play', but in this case, the text is functioning to exclude Roy because he doesn't have a ticket. However, Roy is learning about different levels (Agent and Double Agent) and missions (Dam and Mall) and what needs to be done on these different missions. Furthermore, through the sharing of knowledge of the game, the boys are defining their interest and their ways of performing masculinity. Andrew and Oyvind compare notes about the game, and then Oyvind shares his knowledge about being a Double Agent (the next higher level). Through this discussion in which the

boys are sharing their knowledge about *GoldenEye*, Andrew and Oyvind are confirming their opinions about the game and showing off their abilities (it is hard to have knowledge about levels if you have not played them). The boys are not only sharing knowledge they are also developing joint interests. Pollard and Filer (1999) describe how friends develop distinct group identities around shared interests and how it is particularly important to be accepted within mainstream boys' culture. Through a shared interest in *GoldenEye*, the boys are positioning their friendship group within dominant masculine discourses. Andrew's statements about his siblings also show the way boys are using the game to position themselves. By referring to his younger sister, Andrew is stating that the Dam mission is easy, and he uses his older brother (who has completed the game) as proof that the game is difficult and to show that he has access to someone who has done it all. It is no wonder Roy wants to play the game, because he needs to gain enough competency to position himself as more able than a younger girl. This sharing of knowledge which is occurring within the friendship group is a way of defining what expertise is necessary to maintain one's status as a nine year-old boy. Furthermore, as in Pilkington's (1998) analysis of same-sex talk, the boys are expressing a particular form of masculinity, one in which, according to Pilkington, 'the norms are those of masculine mateship culture which requires displays of fearlessness and power' (p. 268).

Size Matters: Gendered positioning through drawings

Because illustrating was part of story writing, children were able to explore ideas about visual images with their friends as they were involved in drawing. The drawings were often idealised or stereotyped images of men or women. The boys drew Schwarzenegger-like characters with rippling muscles, for example. While doing these drawings many details were discussed, and size was a particularly salient feature of discussion in boys' conversations. Always starting with the question, 'how big is ...?' the boys discussed the size of their fathers, their characters, their stories, and of course, that great 'penile extender', their characters' guns. The size of each other's muscles and guns was especially important when they were using each other's names in the stories, and the boys would question and comment on each other's drawings of guns and characters. In his analysis of one boy's superhero story, Sefton-Green (1993) describes how the naming of weapons, typical of masculine genres, 'contributes to the credibility of the story', and also how lists of weaponry which make a character seemingly all-powerful point to fears of powerlessness (p. 141). Instead of dismissing the guns in boys' stories as boys' phallic obsessions or as inappropriate violent instruments, one needs to look at the range of possible ways boys use guns in their stories to create subject positions for themselves as authors, as well as characters, in their stories.

In this excerpt the boys are working on videogame stories simultaneously, and I have included a lengthier excerpt (1.5 minutes of dialogue) to show how often size is discussed in a relatively short time span:

1   OYVIND: is that a boss?
2   ROY: [no]
3   ANDREW: [ya] first boss
4   ROY: no the boss is right here his head's <u>that big</u>
5   OYVIND: <u>that's big</u>...oh ya...what's that X?
6   ROY: it's a mad face he's like a Sun Dude
7   ANDREW: <u>how big</u> is your story going to be?

8	ROY: I've got this whole <u>this whole book</u>'s about GoldenEye levels
9	OYVIND: let's make this a collection
10	ANDREW: GoldenEye levels
11	OYVIND: ya GoldenEye levels
12	ROY: ya
13	ANDREW: no GoldenEye 007, call it GoldenEye 007
14	OYVIND: GoldenEye levels, I'm going to do the Mall
15	ANDREW: we'll all work on them I'm doing Dam
16	ROY: OK guys this is <u>really big</u> sort of gun things like ZZZZT and then look he's like so deadly like he's got a chain gun on (machine gun noise) but look this is the bottom there's gonna be <u>a hole that big</u>, this shows the bottom of this and the bottom's nearly <u>half a page big</u> (machine gun noise)
17	ANDREW: there's only one way to kill him

This excerpt is typical of the way boys discussed their drawings and stories with size being a common point of reference (size of characters, guns, and stories in this case). As the boys drew and discussed these elements, they were exploring the dominant discourse which says that 'size does matter', and although I do not have a record of the boys refuting the importance of size, they did sometimes question each other on the possibility of an exaggeration in the size of a particular object. Thorne (1993) describes studies which assert that competitiveness and hierarchy are markers of masculine culture, and certainly this is part of what is going on in this extract. Roy in particular seems to want to have a contest to see who can make the biggest of anything. But, as Thorne points out, we need to look for signs when this discourse is challenged or disrupted. We can also see cooperation going on here—Oyvind's statement in line 9 and Andrew's statement in line 15 indicate that they want the stories to work together, not against each other. Therefore, the boys' conversation can be seen as evidence of the competing discourses in which the boys are variously positioning themselves—masculine discourses about competitiveness and perhaps school discourse about cooperation.

Displaying Intimacy: Girls and boys as friends

The last element of the children's conversations which I will address is intimacy. As shown above, developing opinions and sharing knowledge leads to a certain degree of intimacy which is part of friendships. There are further signifiers of the children's intimate relationships which are interesting partly because the idea of male intimacy is almost an oxymoron in our society. Boys are considered to have a wide circle of friends with whom they 'have a good time', whereas girls have 'soul mates' with whom they share everything. (For a review of research on intimacy within same-sex friendships, see Perlman & Fehr, 1987 and Winstead, 1986.) As can be seen from the analysis so far, there are many similar events going on within the boys' and girls' friendship groups. Although groups of girls and boys in my study were similarly intimate, sometimes they displayed their intimacy differently. These different displays of intimacy can be seen as another way children are interacting with the discursive practices within the context of their friendships, which are then in turn defining their subjective positions (what it means to be intimate as a boy or a girl).

Dyson (2003) describes children's use of writing and drawing as a means of establishing and defining friendships. In my study, the use of classmates' names as characters' names in stories was not only a display of friendship, but also an act of

intimacy. When using a classmate's name in a story, children were required to receive permission from the classmate whose name was to be used. The process of getting permission to use someone's name involved a discussion and often negotiation of what the character would look like, what would happen to the character, and what type of character it would be. Through this negotiation the child whose name was to be used had to reveal what sort of character was acceptable and perhaps desirable from their point of view. Children used friends' names frequently, so these negotiations became a discussion of what sort of character was acceptable within their social circle and what the ideal boy or girl would be like. Furthermore, when a character with a friend's name was part of a story, the actions and spoken words were discussed as the story was being written, and the illustrations were scrutinised for significant marks such as big guns or long thin legs. This defining of the ideal character which was part of the intimate process of using each other's names, then became part of the discourse about the way girls and boys look, act, and talk. More importantly, as Dyson (1997) describes, one function of children's stories is dialogic, that is, offering the possibility to challenge the ideological assumptions contained in, for example, a media text. By using friends' names in stories and connecting them with particular images, characteristics and actions, children are given the space to not only define their gendered positions, but also to discuss and challenge existing discourses.

I noticed in my data girls shared their fears in a way which I did not hear in the boys' conversations. Whereas the girls expressed their concerns outright, the boys would be more likely to make a joke about something they were nervous about, typical of interactions in the 'mateship culture' as analysed by James and Saville-Smith (1989). The following excerpt is typical of the way girls share their feelings. Katie expresses insecurities about herself which then elicits sympathetic reassurances or compliments from her friends:

1   KATIE: I am stupid (laugh)
2   KATIE: what?
3   LORI: you're not stupid
4   KATIE: I am too stupid
5   JESSICA and LORI: no you're not
6   KATIE: I am
7   JESSICA: am not
8   KATIE: are too
9   JESSICA: then how come you're writing that and it's good
10   LORI: I know
11   KATIE: you told me to that's why
12   JESSICA: no we didn't it was your idea
13   LORI: I know
14   KATIE: no it wasn't
15   JESSICA: yes it was
16   KATIE: it was my substitute brain's idea
17   JESSICA: what?
18   KATIE: I don't know I have two different sorts of brains
19   JESSICA: OK can we write now?

I find this excerpt perhaps a bit extreme, but it is an example of a feminine discourse open to girls which Katie clearly takes up. Holmes (1998) suggests that women in particular use compliments to express solidarity, and if this is the case Katie can be seen as inciting compliments from the other girls in order to bond as friends, but she does it by drawing on feminine discourse which defines the use of compliments in this

way. Coates (1996) suggests that amongst girls, best friends share secrets and express their vulnerabilities, expecting mutual sharing of insecurities. Perhaps Katie is hoping to do this, but unlike the girls in Coates' study, at this point in time Jessica and Lori are not willing to indulge in this behaviour, perhaps resisting this feminine discourse but adhering to school discourse which defines good students as staying on task.

The compliments the boys gave each other were less obvious than the girls'. In the interviews I conducted, boys listed several signifiers of friendship including the use of each other's names in stories (and subsequently what that character looks like and does), writing about the same topic or a shared interest, writing sequels to each other's stories, and being an appreciative audience (i.e. laughing, showing an interest, making the appropriate 'cool' sounds). Perhaps boys' way of complimenting each other, indicating an intimate relationship, is to show that they are friends. If this is the case, then again it is another way the boys are 'doing' and learning how to 'do boy'.

Conclusion

What is happening when boys and girls talk with their friends? This article has shown that through talk, girls and boys define their identity, particularly in terms of gender. As Coates (1996) describes, 'If friendship provides the arena in which we "learn to be ourselves", then talk is the means by which this learning takes place' (p. 44). However, this article has shown that children are not just learning to perform their identity. Children are making sense of the surrounding discourses which are positioning them in particular ways. By sharing knowledge and coming to agreed opinions on pop singers, movies and ways of dressing, by establishing particular ways of relating (hedging and complimenting) the girls are rejecting particular forms of femininity and defining for themselves how they want to perform, in this case, traditional middle-class femininity. Similarly, the boys are confirming their positions within dominant masculine discourses, particularly around media such as *The Simpsons* and *GoldenEye*, firmly accepting traditional forms of masculinity and rejecting anything less than 'macho'. However, the boys are also negotiating their dominant masculine image within school discourses, placing value on story writing, for example. Furthermore, the shared writing experiences allowed the boys to display less masculine behaviour, both in talk and in action. The boys were not just competitive 'mates', as in traditional masculine discourse; instead their talk shows instances of 'boys bonding', developing intimacy and developing a culture of cooperation. Therefore, to a certain extent, friendship groups can provide children with an important space to negotiate particular discourses.

Educators might argue that children work out their gender quite competently without the help of their friends, therefore we do not need to allow space for this to happen in schools. The importance of allowing friends to talk informally in school is partly for children to affirm their identities with their friends, to discuss why particular femininities/masculinities 'aren't for me', but also to experiment with other ways of doing boy and girl, to learn how to negotiate masculinity within a school setting, for example. The boys in this study occasionally brought stuffed toys to school, displaying them (alongside their toy soldiers) as they wrote and illustrated their stories. I would argue that only in the context of a carefully developed friendship, as shown in the boys' talk, could the boys display these babyish feminine artefacts. The analysis of talk in this article, therefore, shows how friends engaged with important discourses, giving them space to perform their identities with confidence but also how to negotiate different discourses and different ways of doing gender.

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