

Needing to be ‘in the know’: strategies of subordination used by 10-11 year old school boys

Abstract

It is important for educators to understand the tactics used in subordination between young people if they are going to take effective measures to counter them in their pedagogical practice. This paper explores strategies used by school boys aged 10-11 to subordinate and position boys at the bottom of the pupil hierarchy. The findings are based on data gathered from a year long empirical study (between 1998 and 1999) set in three UK junior schools which were differentiated by the social characteristics of their intake. The research emphasises the role of the body in the construction of masculinity. The hegemonic, or most idealised, form of masculinity at each school was constructed around activity and, in particular, various forms of embodied physicality/athleticism (exemplified through skill, strength, fitness and speed), and boys who did not wish to, or who were unable to, use these resources generally found themselves marginalised and/or subordinated. Many of the subordinated forms were symbolically assimilated to femininity, and the paper proposes that the main strategies of subordination can be summarised under the generic heading of ‘difference’. The final section discusses the pervasive use of homophobia, and concludes that it should be conceptualised in terms of *gender* as well as *sex*.

Introduction

While there have been a number of notable ethnographic studies exploring the subordination of boys (both individually and collectively) in the school setting since the late 1970s [1], many have tended to consider subordinated boys as an adjunct to the more dominant groups and patterns of masculinity. This paper concentrates on subordinated forms of masculinity *per se*. I set out to detail the strategies used to subordinate individuals and groups of boys in the school setting at three different schools in the UK,

and to show how dominant types of masculinity classify and position these boys at the bottom of the pupil hierarchy. I highlight the role of the body in subordination, and propose that the strategies of subordination can be summarised under the generic heading of 'difference'. For many boys in this subordinated position, their daily experience of school is often highly uncomfortable and distressing, and they often suffer from verbal and physical bullying. This situation can also have adverse effects on academic performance, and is of course by no means limited to schools in the UK. It is therefore important for inclusive educators to understand how and why some of the main tactics of subordination are used in order to try and counter them and, indeed, change them.

Theories of masculinity; subordination; and the importance of peer group status

The ongoing construction of boys' nascent identities at school is essentially an issue about masculinities which are actively produced using the strategies and resources which are available in each particular setting (Connell 2000). Many recent theoretical conceptualisations about masculinity have been coherently summarised by Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) and, along with Connell (1987, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2002), they highlight the inadequacies of sex-roles/socialisation theories, and affirm a number of key points from recent feminist and feminist-inspired work: masculinity is a relational construct occupying a place in gender relations; there are multiple masculinities; there are hierarchies of masculinities; masculinity is a precarious and ongoing performance; and it is generally a collective social enterprise.

Masculinity refers to the body, and as the boys' identities are defined and generally described in terms of what they do with/to their bodies, I have embraced the concept of embodiment (Turner 2000). Although there are a number of ways of defining embodiment it needs to be understood as a social process (Elias 1978). Although bodies are located in particular social, historical structures and spaces, the boys in this study are viewed as embodied social agents, for they do not merely have a passive body which is inscribed and acted upon, but they are actively involved in the development of their

bodies, using it as a resource throughout their school life (and indeed for their entire life-span). The boys experience themselves simultaneously *in* and *as* their bodies (Lyon and Barbalet 1994:54) and in this respect *they are bodies* (Turner 2000). The body is thus an integral part of identity and of their biographies, for the process of making and becoming a body also involves the project of making their self (Shilling 1993, Synott1993).

Within the hierarchies of masculinity, each setting (such as a school) will generally have its own dominant, or hegemonic, form. Although this may differ in each school, it gains ascendancy over and above others, becomes 'culturally exalted' (Connell 1995: 77), and exemplifies what it means to be a *real* boy. The hegemonic masculine form is not necessarily the most common type on view and may be contested. Although it is often underwritten by the threat of violence, it generally exerts its influence by being able to define what is the norm and many boys find that they have to fit into, and conform to, its demands. While there may be other types of masculinity which do not aspire to emulate the leading form, other forms will be marginalised and subordinated. This paper looks specifically at these subordinate modes of masculinity which are positioned outside the legitimate forms of maleness, as represented in the hegemonic form, and which are controlled, oppressed and subjugated. Said (1995) argues that patterns of subordination are actually inevitable as each historical age and society requires the existence of another and competing alter ego, and so will create and recreate 'others'. Within any given society (including the micro cultural milieu of the peer group) the construction of identity is bound up with the disposition of power which is embodied in the norm, and powerless which is embodied in the different. As all masculinities are constructed in contrast to being feminine those which are positioned at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy will be symbolically assimilated to femininity and tend to have much in common with feminine forms (Kenway *et al.* 1997, Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, Connell 2000, Skelton 2001). As with the other forms of masculinity at the schools in this study, there were similarities and differences between the subordinated types which were contingent to each school. However I wish to argue that the strategies of subordination across all three schools were constructed under the generic heading of 'difference'.

One of the most important features of the school setting is the informal life of the pupil peer group. It has a fundamental influence on the construction of masculine identities, and there are constant pressures on individuals to perform and behave to the expected group norms (see, for example, Pollard 1985, Woods 1990, Mac an Ghail 1994, Kenway *et al.* 1997, Adler and Adler 1998, Connolly 1998, Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, Harris 1998, Walker 1998, Connell 2000). Each peer group has its own cultural identity which can be said to refer to a 'way of life' (Dubbs and Whitney 1980: 27) with shared values and interests, providing boys with a series of collective meanings of what it is to be a boy. Harris (1998) argues that the peer group actually has more influence on children than their parents in the formation of their identity, of who they are now, and who they will become, and is the main conduit by which cultures are passed from one generation to another. Thus the construction of masculinity is, primarily, a collective enterprise, and it is the peer group, rather than individual boys, which are the main bearers of gender definitions (Connell 2000, Lesko, 2000).

For many pupils, the safest position to aim for in the formal school culture [2] is to be 'average', while in the informal pupil culture it is to be the 'same as the others' for this provides a certain protection from teasing and perhaps even subordination (Gordon *et al.* 2000). In fact, it is a paradox that while pupils attempt to construct their own 'individual' identity, no-one aspires to be, or can afford to be, too different, and they are conscious that they need to be 'normal' and 'ordinary' within the codes set by their own peer group.

One of the most urgent dimensions of school life for boys is the need to gain popularity and, in particular, status (see, Weber 1971, Corsaro 1979, Adler and Adler 1998): indeed, the search to achieve status is also the search to achieve an acceptable form of masculinity. The boys' notion of status comes from having a certain position within the peer group hierarchy which becomes relevant when it is seen in relation to others. It is not something that is given, but is often the outcome of intricate and intense manoeuvring, and has to be earned through negotiation and sustained through performance, sometimes on an almost daily basis. Ultimately, the boys' position in the peer group is determined by the array of social, cultural, physical, intellectual and

economic resources that each boy is able to draw on and accumulate. Although some of the most esteemed resources will generally be an embodied form of physicality (sporty, tough etc), others may also be intellectual (general academic capability and achievement); economic (money); social and linguistic (interpersonal); or cultural (in touch with the latest fashions, music, TV programmes, computer expertise etc). Of course, ultimately, these resources are all symbolic in that their power and influence derives from their effect, and from what they are perceived to mean and stand for. These resources will also always exist within determinate historical and spatial conditions. Moreover, the resources that are available will vary within different settings, and some may be easier to draw on than others at particular times and in particular places. This means that the boys who use a set of resources and interactional skills to establish high status in the dominant pupil hierarchy in one school will not necessarily be able to sustain this position in another.

Background and methodology

The findings in this paper are based on data gathered in a year long empirical study between September 1998 and July 1999 set in three co-educational junior schools [3] in or around Greater London, UK. The schools were selected through personal contacts and with the help of Local Education Authority (LEA) inspectorate, and were differentiated on the basis of the social characteristics of their intake (see Table 1).

TABLE I GOES ABOUT HERE

The ethos, or atmosphere, of each school was very different. Highwoods marketed itself on the twin pillars of academic achievement and excellent sporting facilities; there was a highly competitive atmosphere and the pupils were tightly regulated and controlled.

Petersfield also promoted high academic achievement (as measured by the SAT results) and also had firm control and regulation, although there was a deliberate policy of non-competitiveness. Westmoor Abbey was very different: although all schools would like to be able to state that their primary objective is the promotion of academic excellence, Westmoor Abbey's main concern seemed to consist of being able to cope with, and contain, pupil (mis)behaviour as best they could. This was more of a survivalist school (Hargreaves 1995) where the ethos was more insecure, and social relations were generally poorer.

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

Ethics

During my fieldwork I had to make a number of decisions over whether or not I should intervene in a variety of situations. Although I tried to take a non-interventionist and

non-judgemental position my ethical position as a responsible researcher meant that some interventions were unavoidable. For example, I had one firm rule that I would always intervene if ever a child was in physical danger, and I would try and stop a serious fight if no other adults were around. However, when I was in the playground and a child came up to tell me they were being bullied I would refer them to the teacher on duty. Connolly (1996) notes that not intervening can reinforce and almost condone attitudes and behaviours and yet, if I overheard examples of swearing, verbal bullying or homophobic abuse I would try and force myself to 'turn a blind eye'. For example, here is an instance which I recorded in my field diary at Westmoor Abbey:

Fieldnotes (22.10.98). As we are leaving the classroom, I see Jack deliberately barge into Jessie. He knocks her over and she begins to cry. Jack sees that I see it but I don't assume the teacher's role and tell him off, or tell SM [*Sandra Morris, the teacher*]. Instead I ignore it –wonder if this is the right decision?

There are no easy answers here, and although I felt I might be betraying a trust by 'telling' on them, perhaps the question to ask is *whose* trust, the perpetrator's or the victim's?

During some interviews it transpired that some boys were being bullied and made to feel very unhappy. Although I told them that I was unable to intervene directly, I always asked them if they wanted me to tell another adult in the school, such as their teacher or headteacher, but this offer was not taken up. Had I ever found out (and I did not) that any child was in any immediate danger I would then have made every effort to persuade them to inform and seek help from an adult (see, for example, Alderson 1993, Morrow and Richards 1996, Hill 1997). There is also an additional issue that I wish to mention concerning the interviewer's role during interview when he/she is attempting to elicit information about another person who is not present at the time. For, although the interviewer needs to show that he/she is actively involved, and part of the conversation with the interviewees, I feel that it is important that he/she does not take sides against the

other person by egging interviewees on, and by openly agreeing with (and thus condoning) views and stories which are potentially damaging and malicious.

Subordinated groups and the 'ideal' boy at each school

The four classes that I studied were called 6J and 6B at Highwoods, 6H at Petersfield, and 6M at Westmoor Abbey. As the period of research progressed, a number of patterns of masculinity began to emerge based around friendship groups which came from my own observations, and from the boys themselves during interview sessions. Although each interview group had slightly different perceptions of how the boys' friendship groupings were constituted the names of the boys who were positioned at the bottom of the peer group hierarchy were generally consistent. Of course the boys' 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 1990:132).

TABLE 2 GOES ABOUT HERE

In all three schools the idealised boy who exemplified the dominant/hegemonic form of masculinity was connected with activity. At Highwoods it was the sporty boy, probably the captain of the football [5] A team which was the most prestigious sport amongst the boys. At Petersfield, it was less clear but was still connected to physical/athletic ability with the additional attribute of being a good cusser (a form of scathing wit). At Westmoor Abbey, it was again the sporty boy, although in this school you also had to be tough, visibly contest teacher authority, be able to generate a laugh, and wear the right kinds of clothes/trainers.

Subordinated masculinities

Being different from the majority is often an unenviable position for boys (and girls) to be in. The powerful pressures to conformity that characterised the peer group cultures meant that a boy had only to look, and be, *slightly* different from the norm to be accorded inferior status. Under the rubric of ‘difference’, boys could be subordinated for associating too closely with the formal school regime (such as by working too hard, being too compliant or over-polite); by speaking too formally/correctly or being ‘too posh’; by singing in the choir; or by looking different. Although I did not come across a single incident of any pupil being subordinated because of their ethnicity or race, aberrant physical appearances and differences in body language were keenly scrutinised and commented on. As I have already written, boys had to work hard at learning the appropriate peer group norms, and to be included they had to be what Thornton (1997) calls ‘in the know’: that is they needed to be able to talk about the right subjects, use the right speech (using the same style and vocabulary), wear the right clothes, play the right playground games, as well as move (sit, walk, run, catch, throw, kick, hit etc) in the ‘right’ way that being a boy demanded. Although I did not come across any pupil being teased because they were wearing glasses, Simon was bullied at Westmoor Abbey because he was deemed to have a ‘funny shaped head’. Pupils who had physical ‘differences’ of the more unusual kind also did not always escape the more pernicious comments. For example, even though Peter (from the same class as Simon) suffered from alopecia, and was allowed to wear a base-ball cap in class to cover his baldness, he had occasionally still been called names such as ‘cancer-head’ by a few boys, particularly from other classes. However, the major material bodily difference came from the impression of being overweight, and my data are littered with disparaging references directed to boys and girls being ‘a big fat blob’, ‘fat-boy’, ‘too fat’, ‘so fat’, ‘really fat’ and so on. It was a serious handicap to boys’ (or girls’) attempts to establish peer group status, and boys needed to use other strategies and resources in order to compensate for it. In the extract below (which comes from Highwoods) I am trying to find out if a group of boys have any ideas why Rex (who is academically bright) misbehaves in certain classes. Travis’s theory is that Rex deliberately attempts to avert the masculine gaze:

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

Subordination could also come through perceived exhibitions of immature and babyish behaviour (doing ‘silly’ things, playing infantile games, or associating too closely with younger children); displaying a lack of toughness (such as crying, showing fear, not sticking up for yourself, and/or acting ‘soft’); being too passive and generally not active enough during both school sports and informal playground games; and showing a shortage of effort which was usually connected to a sporting context. Boys were also subordinated for the perception that they were wanting in certain culturally acclaimed traits, particularly connected with embodied forms of physicality/athleticism (such as skill, strength, fitness and speed etc), and in areas of locally-defined class norms of academic achievement (which included pupils who were on the school’s register for Special Educational Needs (SEN)). Subordination could also accrue from an ignorance of locally-celebrated knowledge. This could be, for example, in the latest culturally-hot topics such as a TV programme, in the technical language of football, or unfamiliarity with the latest computer games (such as *PlayStation*), and this could render a boy silent and be used as a marker of difference. For example, Sam at Westmoor Abbey was derogated because he did not understand the off-side rule in football, and neither he or his friend Simon knew the names or descriptions of some of the main characters in the TV programme *South Park*. It was also important for a boy to be able to show a commitment to their adolescent future by being ‘in the know’ regarding the meaning of certain swear words and matters of sexuality, although this did not appear as a main theme in any of the interviews I conducted.

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

The forms of discrimination worked at both the interpersonal and the group level. The usual defamatory aspersions included 'goody-goody' (Highwoods), 'teacher's pet' (Highwoods and Petersfield) and 'boff' (Westmoor Abbey) which were used to equate with too-close a conformity with the formal school regime; while 'wimp', 'sissy', and particularly 'girl' and 'gay' were used across all three schools as the main terms of abuse to confirm masculinity as heterosexual, and, to position boys as different and attack their identity. Much of these insults were insidious and occurred out of teachers' earshot: moreover, telling a teacher inevitably exacerbated the situation, and boys would find themselves subjected to further, and more intense, levels of abuse. There is a fuller discussion of homophobia at the end of the paper. This next section considers subordinated forms of masculinity at each of the three schools in turn.

Highwoods

It soon emerged that there were only two boys at Highwoods who were isolated from the rest of their peer milieu, and who were regularly subordinated in the sense that they were actively, and almost continually, derogated and pursued: Timothy from 6J and Daniel from 6B. Although they did not comply in their subordination, they found it too powerful to effectively resist. What made the hegemonic agenda of competitive sport/games so powerful at this school was the fact that it was backed and, indeed

created, by the official school regime, and so the boys were able to use storylines that were already there. The following quotation, which was used about Timothy, could apply equally to either boy:

Rex: He can't play football, he can't run, he can't play rugby, he can't play cricket and...he can't play anything

As Highwoods operated a policy of selection, subordination by low academic attainment was not such a prominent feature within the peer-group culture as in the other two schools. Although it would be easy to assume that any boy who was unable to compete with the cultural hegemony of the sporty boy would be subordinated this was not necessarily always the case. Other Year 6 boys who were in the school C teams (and who were therefore both perceived and formally positioned as being less-talented/proficient) told me that they experienced little or no abuse, and further investigation revealed that their poor sporting abilities was only one of a number of reasons for Timothy's and Daniel's exclusion. The fundamental reason was that they were different from the norm and were lacking certain culturally valued qualities. Not only were both boys no good at sport (and so had a shortage of sporting prowess), they did not enjoy rough games (and so had a deficit of courage and toughness), and importantly, gave the impression of putting in little effort. Daniel was also accused of preferring to play with younger aged boys (presumably because he did not have any friends in Year 6), and he supposedly had an obsession with sticks and was referred to by some of the boys as 'The Woodsman'.

In this long extract below we are talking about why three boys thought Timothy spent so much of his time on his own. I have included such a long extract in its entirety as it provides an unedited, contextualised, example of the kind of conversations I had with the boys. There are lots of interruptions as the boys almost fall over each other in their enthusiasm to position Timothy as a kind of 'unmasculinised other' at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Derek: Well he's like, he acts sometimes like/
Calvin: A girl/
Derek: A girl/
Sinclair: He doesn't like sport, he doesn't like computer games/
Calvin: He *does* like computer/
Derek: No, he plays all the crap ones, he plays all the crap ones/
Sinclair: There's this helicopter game/
Derek: No, there's this 2-D helicopter game, you have to shoot these things/
Sinclair: And he sort of, like, works on how to use the computer and not just all games on the computer and doing other stuff/
Calvin: This is his idea of breaktime: practise his music notes, either the computer room, or practising his instrument, he's like/
Derek: He doesn't enjoy it either
Calvin: He doesn't enjoy life, it's like he doesn't want to enjoy life, 'cos he doesn't mix with other people, he doesn't try to get friends [...], he doesn't try to at all
Derek: He just gives up/
Calvin: He just gives up ...and he's like, he even admits/
Sinclair: He doesn't like football, he doesn't like any sports apart from golf/
Calvin: He's different from everyone else
JS: Yeah, but/
Derek: He's just one person/
Calvin: And he likes to be by himself very often
JS: What do you mean, he's like a girl
Sinclair: Well/
Calvin: Well he does everything/
Derek: Well he doesn't really act like a boy/
Calvin: He's very prudish/
JS: Let's hear from Sinclair
Sinclair: He's always sort of like...when you call him a girl he's just/

Calvin: Yeah/
Derek: He agrees
JS: Does he get called a girl?
Sinclair: Yeah, he doesn't sort of go, 'Oh I'm not a girl,' he just goes, 'Ok'
Calvin: Yeah, and sometimes he admits he's a girl
JS: Does he?
Derek: Yeah, and we.../
Sinclair: Well I think he's just sort of like joking actually/
Derek: Yeah probably...he was born in the [*inaudible*]
Calvin: And he's very prudish and/
JS: What do you mean, prudish?
Calvin: When he's at swimming, he always goes in the corner, he doesn't like to be with anyone
Derek: He's quite scared of stuff as well, like scared of the ball in rugby/
Sinclair: Yeah I remember in football, there were two people running for the ball and Timmy sort of like backed away
Derek: And when the ball is coming at him [*in rugby*] he just drops it and/
Sinclair: Yeah he can't kick it you know [..], it was painful to watch yesterday
Calvin: He's like a boy yeah, he's like.../
Sinclair: He's a boy but he, like, wants to be a girl
Calvin: Well he doesn't want to be, I think like, he backs away from everything, and he's like...if someone has a go at us...if someone pushes us we'll push them back, this is a simple way of saying it: if someone pushes us, we'll push them back
JS: You stick up for yourselves/
Calvin: Yeah. Timmy, if someone pushed him, he goes and tells the teacher or/
Derek: He gets scared/
Calvin: He gets scared
Derek: He cries a bit I think/

JS: I've noticed that he's very polite as well, does that/
Derek: He's too polite, it's like the formal thing we did in English/ [*in that morning's English lesson*]
JS: He speaks in quite a formal register
Derek: And we're informal
Sinclair: He can't sort of say, 'Shut up,' to someone
Derek: And he doesn't say any swear words or anything
Calvin: We don't use swear words/
Sinclair: Well not in school
Calvin: No, we don't say them ever [*laughter from Derek*]
JS: So he always speaks in the same way, whereas you'd speak to your mates totally differently
Derek: Yeah, and he doesn't have different interests, he doesn't really like *South Park* does he? [*turning to the other two boys*]
Calvin: He doesn't like anything we like/
Sinclair: He doesn't like anything violent or rude

And so, again, all the reasons given above can be categorised under difference. Indeed, at one point, Calvin actually says: 'He's different from everyone else'. Although the reasons include his poor sporting ability (he does not like games, he is no good at games, he is frightened of getting hurt in games), there are also a number of other factors which have caused Timothy's exclusion. He uses the computer in a different way, he does not enjoy life, he lacks perseverance and gives up too easily, he's prudish when getting changed, he does not stand up for himself, he cries in front of his peers (the antithesis of manliness), he is too polite, he does not swear, he speaks in rather an affected, posh register, he does not like the same cultural interests such as watching the TV programme *South Park* and so is unable to share in common topics of conversation. Time and time again in the interviews, the boys would refer to Timothy's 'posh accent'. Although, nearly all of the boys at Highwoods were very well spoken, they felt that Timothy's voice was rather unnatural and affected, and this set him apart from themselves. Although some may argue that this may have been a class reaction, I would maintain that it is used

as another factor which helped to construct him as 'other'. One of the main tactics the boys use is by feminising Timothy and they use the word 'girl' six times during the transcript. In other words, they are saying that he, and the femininity associated with him, is diametrically opposed to them: he (and it) are defined by what they are not. Epstein (1998b:103) writes that, 'the worst thing a boy can be called is a "girl", even worse than being called "gay boy", "poof" or "sissy" ', but although this was confirmed by a few boys at each school, the majority told me that it was actually swear words or (at Petersfield) a really bad cuss concerning their mother that really upset them.

Petersfield

Rather unusually, and unlike in the classes at my other two schools, there were only two friendship groups of boys in class 6H (see, for example, Pollard 1985, Thorne 1993, Adler and Adler 1998, Connolly 1998, Renold 1999). Out of the 18 boys, there was one large, dominant group of 13 boys, and 5 others who were victimised and subordinated. The dominant group at Petersfield also categorised and defined the other smaller group of boys by their 'differences'. They were regarded, and pathologised, as non modern and deficient in knowledge of up-to-date things (such as TV, computer programs, football news and results etc); as lacking in 'coolness' by not wearing the latest fashions and trends; as not being sufficiently loyal to friends by not sticking up for their mates; and scant in athleticism or sportyness. They were also perceived to be wanting in a certain Year 6 sophistication by being more immature and 'babyish', and their counter school behaviour was deemed to be 'naughty' and 'silly'.

JS: What marks out this group from the other group of boys?

Richard: They do silly things/

Matthew: Yeah

JS: Silly things, such as?

Richard: Going to the toilet with some wet tissues and throwing them at the ceiling...erm/

Matthew: Going in the infants playground/
Richard: Yeah, they go into the infants, hide behind the trees, and then they run and bang on the windows in the infants
JS: [...] So they do silly things, what else?
Robin: They play silly games...like, they chase the girls all the way around/
Richard: And kiss them
Matthew: Yeah
JS: But you say, you chase the girls as well?
Richard: Yeah, but we don't try and get them, we just try and beat up each other, so if, like, Candy gets some of us, she punches us and that
JS: Right, so it's a different form of game with the girls
Richard/Matthew: Yeah

Although there was more resistance to the hegemonic agenda than at Highwoods (and at Westmoor Abbey) the subordinated type of masculinity found itself swamped by the sheer numbers of boys embracing the dominant form. The differences were also recognised by the girls who also categorised the boys into two main groups. They saw one (group) as 'trendy' and 'new' in terms of clothing/appearance, linguistic locutions, and socio-cultural knowledge, and therefore, the 'popular' ones; while the other (group) was the opposite of this and, hence, 'sad' and 'annoying'. The popular group had a certain style which was seen as a symbolic expression of masculinity, 'a collective evocation of an attitude embodied in their movements and appearance' (Radley 1995:9).

Julia: They're the more popular ones...like everyone wants to hang around with that group
Fiona: And, I'm not meaning to be rude, but they're a bit sad
JS: Right, OK...so sad in what way?
Julia: Er, they go around annoying the girls
Fiona: They spread rumours, and try and break the girls up

Julia: [...] It's just that they're more...trendy
JS: Modern, trendy? Trendy in what way then?
Julia: Like, they wear the clothes, they talk like how everyone talks and everything like that
Fiona: And 'cos Richard and CT are really, like, hip and cool, like everyone goes with them and everything/
JS: Right, in what way are they hip and cool?
Julia: All the new PlayStation games...the new computers, things like that
JS: So they're up with the latest kind of trends?
Julia: Yeah

The point is not so much whether these things were actually all true but that they were thought to be true, for their power and influence derived from their effect, and from what they were perceived to mean and stand for. The fact that, for instance, Gavin and Andre wore a popular make of trainers was not even noticed by some of the boys in the interviews. When Denis deliberately broke a toilet window it was regarded as being 'naughty', and rather wild whereas, I have the suspicion, that if one of the leading boys in the class had done such a thing they would have been thought of, by some of the others at least, as being a hero of counter school resistance.

Westmoor Abbey

The subordinated boys at Westmoor Abbey experienced far greater levels of abuse than at the other two schools. Levels of verbal and physical bullying were high and homophobia was prevalent throughout the peer group culture. There was virtually no resistance to the hegemonic pattern, (at least in class 6M) and all the boys practised a type of the dominant masculinity but to a greater or lesser degree. There were only three boys in class 6M who experienced ongoing subordination and Emlyn only joined the class in March. Emlyn found it difficult to form friendships and was widely disparaged.

Again, the main strategies used came under the rubric of difference. Of course Emlyn was immediately different because he had come from another school, but he was nearly everything the dominant form of masculinity was not. He worked hard, was a high academic achiever (he actually got three Level 5s in his SATs [6]) and was thought of as a ‘know-all’; he was polite and did not call out in class; he spoke with a middle class accent which the boys (and girls) castigated as ‘posh’; he wore school uniform; he did not act tough and did not stick up for himself; and, he was overweight and rather unaccomplished at games and sport (particularly in terms of speed, skill, coordination, and levels of fitness). In the conversation below I am asking how Emlyn is getting on in the weekly football games where I had heard that he was playing in goal. Notice the derogatory comments about his the way he moves (like a goalkeeper in a computer game), his level of fitness, and about his weight which was deemed to cause an absence of bodily control:

Chris: He’s like this right: do you know, like, on computer games when you boot the ball, yeah, he [*the goalkeeper*] catches it and then he falls on the floor, Emlyn pretends he’s done a wicked dive but he’s so fat, so the ball’s, like, past him into the back of the net, then he dives.

Robert: Or if the ball’s just in front of him and it’s stopped/

Chris: He sweats well bad ‘cos like he’s here, Eric’s there, the ball’s there and he’s running and he’s sweating

The other two boys who were regularly bullied and subordinated were Simon and Sam who were not close friends, but often came together by default because they were ostracised from the other friendship groups. In the next extract I am asking three boys about people who are bullied, trying to uncover some of the reasons why they get picked on:

Chris: Some people, including *me*, bully Simon and Georgia, ‘cos we say ‘Egghead’ and ‘Spam’ and things

JS: Why is Simon picked on?
Chris: I dunno, it's just that he's got a funny head and people say/
Robert: And he's got a funny voice...and he's sort like really soft inside
and so he's easy to, like/
Chris: Pick on
Ryan: He's a bit behind

The physical features again play a part but it is also because Simon is 'soft inside' and therefore the antithesis of what a boy at Westmoor Abbey needed to be like. Both Simon and Sam (and Georgia, mentioned above) were also on the school's Special Needs Register and received extra help with their work from a Teacher's Assistant [7]. However, the main reason that Simon and Sam were subordinated was that they did not possess any other resources to compensate and construct their masculine identities in other ways.

JS: Why aren't they that popular then?
Tom: Because, like, they don't do anything, they're not good at football,
they're not good at running, they're not fast
Eric: You've got to be good at something to be popular
Tom: They ain't no good at drawing
JS: OK, so there's nothing that they're really good at?
Tom: No.

Homophobia

Although homophobia was most prevalent and persistent at Westmoor Abbey, homophobic abuse was also an enduring constituent of the peer group culture at each school. In fact, the word 'gay' was probably the most common word of abuse found across all three schools and was used to describe anything from being not very good to absolute rubbish. At Westmoor Abbey, I found that a boy could even have 'gay' trainers

if they were perceived to be a not very good make. Many researchers (see, for example, Connell 1990, Epstein 1996, Johnson 1996, Mason 1996, Epstein and Johnson 1998, Gilbert and Gilbert 1998) argue that dominant masculinity sees homosexuality as a threat and so attempts to distance itself by vilifying and oppressing it through homophobia. By doing so, the boys are making the point that their own sexualities are entirely 'straight' and 'unfeminine' in every way, and 'in a doubly defining moment the homophobic performance consolidate[s] the heterosexual masculinity of Self and the homosexual femininity of Other' (Kehily and Nayak 1997: 82). Hence it can also be argued that by subordinating alternative masculinities/sexualities, these performances also, by default, subordinate femininities which, therefore, include all girls. Some boys told me that they only called other boys names like 'gay' or 'queer' for a joke or a laugh, and that it was not meant to be 'nasty' or 'harmful'. However, as Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) point out, these names are more than a personal insult as the victims are implicated in wider discourses of public condemnation, and so endure the abuse from an entire community. At the very least homophobia should be regarded as a form of bullying, while other writers (see, for example, Epstein 1996, Salisbury and Jackson 1996, Skelton 2001) argue that it should be regarded as a form of sexual harassment.

In many ways, homophobia is another aspect of masculine performance (Nayak and Kehily 1996). Epstein (1996) maintains that homophobia also plays a fundamental role in regulating and constructing heterosexual masculinities in schools: masculinity and heterosexuality are entwined and thus to be a 'real' boy (or girl) is to be heterosexual. Parker (1996) asserts that these homophobic insults should be conceptualised in terms of *gender* as opposed to *sexuality*, and that they therefore imply being 'non-masculine' and 'effeminate' rather than homosexual. However, the essential point is that homophobia is used to police and control the general behaviour of boys *and* their sexuality, and is used as a strategy to position boys at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy.

Sometimes, boys appeared to notice the seeming incongruity of calling a boy 'gay' and 'a girl' (almost) at the same time. As Timothy (from Highwoods) said: 'My mum just tells me things to say to them, like, erm, well, 'cos they also call me gay and I say, 'Well at

least I like being a girl because I can't be gay.' However, of course, both these terms were actually used to mean 'other'. Epstein (1997:109) found that homophobia was used towards boys as a means of implying their similarity to girls, and that the terms 'gay' and 'sissy' were often used interchangeably. Boys certainly risked derogation if they associated too closely with girls, and from an early age they have to work hard to prove that they have the right masculine credentials as heterosexual boys. In one of the interviews Fred, at Petersfield, told me of a conversation he had had with Jinesh (one of the class leaders) which had arisen after some of the boys had been calling him 'Barbie' (after Barbie doll). This had happened because he was perceived to be fraternising too closely with the girls and the following quotation shows Jinesh clearly defining the normative boundaries.

Fred: I mean, [*I said to him*], 'It's nice to be popular with girls, like with the boys', and he [*Jinesh*] went, 'No it isn't, I like to play with the boys, and if you're a boy you're like a sissy if you play with the girls'

In some ways this may seem an apparent contradiction in that when people are popular with the opposite sex it is usually taken as an expression of, and confirmation of, their heterosexuality. As Josh (from Highwoods) told me, 'the people who hang around the girls and talk to the girls cannot be called gay', and this could cause confusion when boys were collectively constructing others as gay. In the passage below I am talking with three other boys at Highwoods about Travis who has been referred to by some boys as being gay.

Josh: Oh yes, he's gay, totally gay
Paddy: He took down his trousers and showed his bot at the window
Adam: He kissed Jenny, didn't he?
JS: But if can kiss Jenny, how can he be gay?
Adam: I think he did
Josh: He didn't, he didn't [*getting excited*]
JS: I mean that just seems/

Josh: It's weird because, I don't know, I don't know whether he's gay or not

JS: All right

Josh: He acted gay but he's always hangs around with the girls

JS: What do you mean, 'he acts gay', how do you act gay?

Josh: I don't know

Paddy: Like he goes up to the boys and he starts saying to them, 'Er-er-er-er-er-er-er.'

It is interesting to see the backtracking and negotiations going on in the peer group dynamics as they try and work out the contradictions of showing your bottom at the window when changing for games and kissing a girl, and in the end Paddy is reduced to justifying the assertion of Travis's gayness by the fact that Travis makes a series of funny noises.

Conclusions

This paper has concentrated on subordinated groups of boys in three schools and has proposed that the strategies of subordination used by the dominant boys can be summarised under the generic heading of 'difference'. Many of these were linked to the body (particularly in embodied forms of physicality/athleticism) which was the primary resource used to establish peer group status, and those boys who either would not, or could not, use this resource were generally positioned at the bottom of the pupil hierarchy. We can see that these boys endured a considerable amount of suffering, and their lives at school were often both an undesirable and unhappy experience. Clearly, this situation is not limited to these schools, or to the UK. A greater awareness and understanding of some of the motivations behind the methods of subordination employed will give inclusive educators a better chance of formulating programs to counter some of the worst excesses of dominant masculinity. The paper has argued that the peer group

has a fundamental influence on the formation of their masculine identities, and that there is a powerful, almost overwhelming, need to play safe and conform to the group norms.

Although difference from girls is a central component in the construction of masculinity, the boys in the three schools generally tended to categorise girls as different rather than oppositional, and the most common reaction and relationship was one of detachment and disinterest. Some writers such as Jordan (1995:69-86) and Renold (1999) claim that it becomes even more important for subordinated boys to define themselves against the female, and that when they are threatened, and feel more insecure, they are more likely to engage in anti-feminine behaviour than boys who exhibit other masculine forms. However this was not confirmed amongst the subordinated boys in this study. From my observations and interviews (including those with the girls), I was unaware of any boy in this category of masculinity traducing the girls; if anything, they tended to keep away from them as they were still keen to mark out their own spaces and define their identities as different from femininity.

The final section discussed the pervasive use of homophobia and I concluded that, although masculinity defines itself as exclusively heterosexual, and homophobic abuse is used as a means of normalising a boy's masculine identity, it is also employed as another way of positioning boys at the bottom of the peer group hierarchy as 'non-masculine' and/or 'effeminate' and can therefore be conceptualised in terms of *gender* as well as *sex*.

* Approximately 7600 words

Key to Transcripts

- / Indicates the moment when an interruption in speech begins;
- ... a natural pause in the conversation;
- [*italic text*] descriptive text to provide background information;

[...] extracts edited out of the transcript.

Notes

[1] The majority of the research comes from Australia and the UK. For example, in the secondary school sector there is research from Willis (1977), Corrigan (1979), Heward (1988), Walker (1988), Connell (1989, 1996), Mac an Ghail (1994), Nayak and Kehily (1996), Parker (1996), Kehily and Nayak (1997), Redman and Mac an Ghail (1997), Fitzclarence and Hickey (1998), Martino (1999), Gordan *et al.* (2000), Light and Kirk (2000), and, in the primary sector, there are studies from Thorne (1993), Jordan (1995), Skelton (1996, 1997, 2000), Warren (1997), Adler and Adler (1998), Connolly (1998), Benjamin (1998), Epstein (1998a), Francis (1998), Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), Renold (1999, 2000, 2001), Lesko (2000) and Swain (2000, 2002a, 2002b).

[2] During my field work I differentiated between the formal and the informal cultures of the school. The formal school culture is laid out in documents of the school and state, and includes the teaching and learning, the pedagogy, the disciplinary apparatus, and the policy/organisational and administrative structures (Gordon *et al.* 2000). The informal school culture is not intended to be in binary opposition, for it is different from, rather than a reaction to, and is in a continual negotiation with, the formal school culture: it includes not only the relations and interactions between the pupils, but also the informal relations between pupils and teachers outside of the instructional relationship.

[3] To protect anonymity, all names of places and people have been changed.

[4] In order to disguise the school's identity the number of pupils on roll have been rounded up or down to the nearest 25

[5] Throughout the paper, 'football' refers to the game of 'association football' or 'soccer'.

[6] SATs are Standard Assessment Tasks (Tests) which pupils take at the ages of 7, 11, and 14 in English, Mathematics and Science

[7] Teachers' assistants or 'Support Teachers' were used at both LEA schools to support pupils with their class work and spent time in the classroom on most days.

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Name of school	Type of school	No. on roll [4]	Social characteristics of intake
Highwoods Independent	Private, fee-paying	350	Upper-middle class
Petersfield Junior	LEA	425	Middle class
Westmoor Abbey Junior	LEA	300	Working class

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

Highwoods	Petersfield	Westmoor Abbey
Timothy	Gavin	Simon
Daniel	Denis	Sam

	Andre Bobby Fred	Emlyn
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Table 2: The groups of subordinated boys at each school

Abstract

It is important for educators to understand the tactics used in subordination between young people if they are going to take effective measures to counter them in their pedagogical practice. This paper explores strategies used by school boys aged 10-11 to subordinate and position boys at the bottom of the pupil hierarchy. The findings are based on data gathered from a year long empirical study (between 1998 and 1999) set in three UK junior schools which were differentiated by the social characteristics of their intake. The research emphasises the role of the body in the construction of masculinity. The hegemonic, or most idealised, form of masculinity at each school was constructed around activity and, in particular, various forms of embodied physicality/athleticism (exemplified through skill, strength, fitness and speed), and boys who did not wish to, or who were unable to, use these resources generally found themselves marginalised and/or subordinated. Many of the subordinated forms were symbolically assimilated to femininity, and the paper proposes that the main strategies of subordination can be summarised under the generic heading of 'difference'. The final section discusses the pervasive use of homophobia, and concludes that it should be conceptualised in terms of *gender* as well as *sex*.

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