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Popular boys, the ideal schoolboy, and blended patterns of masculinity for 10- to 11-year-olds in two London schools

Jon Swain ⓘ

Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK

Correspondence
Jon Swain, Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK.
Email: j.swain@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

Generating data from small group interviews with 41 boys aged 10–11 years from two London schools in 2022, this paper contributes to the field of gender by introducing a new form of non-hegemonic and positive masculinity, which I am calling 'blended' masculinity, and which was the most common formation in each school. Although its features differed a little in each setting, this blended formulation broadly consisted of orthodox qualities of masculinity (e.g. athleticism, assertiveness, confidence, independence), combined with feminine-associated traits (e.g. kindness, caring, sociability, emotional literacy). I argue that this blended form is different from previous conceptualisations of hybrid masculinity in the gender literature and is more akin to recent conceptions of hybrid femininity. There were no dominant forms of masculinity with hierarchical connotations of superiority, and no hegemony that legitimated unequal relations, with obvious subordination of other masculinities or femininities. Boys and girls generally got on well with each other and there was also no evidence of homophobia or misogyny. The paper also explores notions of peer-group popularity, which was based on a series of resources, and delineates the characteristics of a fictional, 'ideal', schoolboy, whose features and attributes were connected to the different versions of masculinity on show.

KEYWORDS
blended masculinities, popularity, pre-adolescent, school

Key insights

The main issues that the paper addresses are

The construction of masculinities amongst 10- to 11-year-old boys in two primary schools. The paper also considers the issue of peer group popularity (why certain pupils were particularly popular) and introduces the concept of the ideal schoolboy. The paper also considers friendships and relations with girls.

The main insights that the paper provides are

The paper contributes to the field of gender by introducing a new form of non-hegemonic and positive masculinity, called 'blended' masculinity. In contrast to earlier research about boys, there was very little homophobia or misogyny. There also much less bullying, more caring and greater levels of tolerance, kindness and equality.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

I recently spent time in two co-educational schools, talking to 10- to 11-year-olds, about what life was like in their last year of primary school, and what they thought it meant to be a boy or girl. I had originally identified the schools as potential research settings for a funded project about the construction of pupil identities; the headteachers had been very supportive and, when my application was rejected at the final stage, I asked the headteachers if I could carry out the research anyway, albeit with a more limited scope. We agreed that it could benefit both parties: I could use the research as a pilot study if I wanted to apply for a larger funded future project; I could, hopefully, write an academic paper about pre-adolescent children which would be of interest to the field of gender studies. The school would find out how pupil identities were being produced, and I could also report back on pertinent issues, including pupils' attitudes to school and their schoolwork, and levels of bullying. Although the aim of the study was to explore how boys and girls make meanings (including what they think it means to be a boy and a girl), and how different forms of masculinity and femininity are produced, the focus of this paper is on boys and their masculine identities. I was particularly interested in the informal or unofficial school culture of the children (Connell et al., 1982; Pollard, 1985), and investigating (i) why some boys were more popular than others; (ii) what the characteristics were of an ideal schoolboy; and (iii) how different formations of masculinity were constructed and performed.

Research about boys in school settings has proliferated over the last 25 years or so (Bragg et al., 2022). While some studies have focused on boys' poor educational attainment in relation to girls, and their disenchantment with schoolwork, there has been comparatively little in-depth research, certainly in the UK, which has focused specifically on issues of masculinity and children's informal cultures in the upper end of primary or junior school since the ethnographic work of Renold and Swain based on their doctoral studies around the turn of the century. The most notable examples of research about masculinities with this age group since the millennium (some of which include girls) come from Australia, Finland, South Africa, the UK and US, and can be grouped under the following headings: *Academic achievement* (Francis et al., 2010; Skelton & Francis, 2011; Wells, 2016); *Constructions of masculinity* (Bartholomaeus, 2012, 2013; Bhana, 2008; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016, 2018; Mayeza &

Bhana, 2020; Paechter, 2006, 2007; Renold, 2005, 2007, 2013; Swain, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2006); *Gender relations and sexualities* (Atkinson, 2021; Bhana, 2013, 2016; Hall, 2020; Renold, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2013; Swain, 2004b); and *Power, friendship, humour and status* (Huuki et al., 2010; Jago et al., 2009; Manninen et al., 2011; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021; Schiffrin-Sands, 2021).

The paper adds to the field of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) by giving a recently relatively underrepresented age group the chance to talk about life at school with their peers, to show how they make meanings and to problematise how masculinities in primary/junior schools are understood; it also interrogates notions of popularity, which, I argue, are based on a series of resources and strategies. The findings show and confirm the multiplicity, complexity, fluidity and situated nature of masculinity, but the main contribution is the introduction of a new, non-hegemonic and non-hierarchical form masculinity, which I am calling 'blended' masculinity, and which, in the two schools in my research, was the most common form. While it is similar to formations of hybrid femininity (McRobbie, 2009; Messerschmidt, 2018), I argue that it is a different formulation from the concept of hybrid masculinity advanced by Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2018), which, while building on some of Connell's (1995) main ideas, preserves her emphasis on the hierarchical and unequal relationships between men and women (boys and girls), and amongst men (boys) (see below for a fuller discussion of this conception).

Following this introduction and background information, I discuss the theoretical literature and theories of masculinity I am drawing on; I then expand on the methodology employed, before presenting data around the notions of peer-group popularity and the ideal schoolboy, and patterns of masculinity. The paper ends with a discussion and short conclusion.

THEORETICAL LITERATURE AND THEORIES OF MASCULINITY

Drawing on the influential work of Connell (1995) I am conceptualising masculinity as a social construct occupying a place in gender relations: commonly regarded as being in the plural, masculinities are constructed, negotiated and performed, and defined in relation to, and against, femininity. They are also multiple, fluid and contextual, with meanings of being a boy contingent on time and place, and the relations involved. Moreover, because they are dynamic and not static or fixed, and because they are constructed in particular settings and historical circumstances, they are provisional, open to contestation and change.

Dominant and hegemonic masculinity

Theories of masculinity have undergone changes this century. A major conceptual breakthrough in the field of CSMM in recent years has been the move to clarify and distinguish the difference between dominant and hegemonic masculinities. Building on work of scholars such as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), Schippers (2007) and Beasley (2008), this has been led by Messerschmidt (2018), who writes that, whereas dominant masculinity is the most culturally celebrated version of boyhood on show and provides a template of how to think and act in a particular setting, hegemonic masculinities 'legitimate an unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities' (Messerschmidt, 2018, p. 75). Messerschmidt also notes that dominant masculinities can also, at certain times, be hegemonic.

Subordinate masculinity

Subordinate masculinities are regarded as being inferior to, or lesser than, the dominant and hegemonic form. As all masculinities are constructed in contrast to being feminine, those positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy will be symbolically aligned to femininity and inclined to have characteristics of the feminine forms. The various strategies of subordination are often constructed under the two generic headings of 'difference' and/or 'deficit' (or deficient) (Swain, 2003b).

Personalised masculinity

There is also a more egalitarian, or non-hierarchical, form of masculinity, which is outside Connell's framework, and which was first proposed by Swain (2006): *personalised masculinities*. Messerschmidt (2018) calls this pattern part of a group of 'positive' masculinities that have the potential to become counterhegemonic. Just because there is a culturally renowned and authoritative form of masculinity in each setting, it does not automatically follow that all the young men will attempt to emulate all, or even *some*, of its features. While there will be some boys who do not aspire to become involved with the leading boys because they lack the resources to do so, others will choose not to engage with them out of preference. They are content to pursue personal interests such as music, computer games or personalised hobbies. As they pose no threat to the elite groups they are generally ignored, rather than subordinated, and they have no wish to subordinate others.

Blended masculinity

Research about femininities from the UK, US and Europe has recently suggested that the traditional embodied practices of femininity—submissiveness, docility, vulnerability and passivity—are being replaced by contemporary feminine attributes of, for example, authenticity, attractiveness, fitness and athleticism, which are performed particularly by adolescent girls and young women. While still exhibiting heterosexual appeal these individuals also enact a series of more masculine markers and qualities, such self-control, independence, determination, competitiveness and individual freedom, which produces a hybrid form of femininity (e.g. Gonick, 2006; Ringrose, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Budgeon, 2014; Messerschmidt, 2018). I would like to propose that many of the boys in this study also performed a similar type of hybrid or blended masculinity consisting of traditional or orthodox masculine qualities such as being athletic, strong-minded, confident, independent (and able to stand up for oneself), which were also combined with more feminine-associated qualities of showing kindness, emotion, caring and sociability. As we shall see, many boys in this study also possessed characteristics of being funny, (reasonably) clever, working hard and (reasonably) sporty, which, I argue, are more gender-neutral associations. They also showed that they were able to exert a degree of agency, dependent on time and context.

While I do not wish to claim that the term 'blended' masculinity is my own, or is unique, I believe that this new formulation that I present in the findings is a new pattern of masculinity found in school settings. The name has appeared in the literature before: for instance, Sears (2014) used the term to describe how women musicians (band leaders) blended masculine traits into the feminine identities in their performances while teaching, while and Ganapathy and Balachandran (2018) used it to describe a combination of ethnic masculinities ('Malayness' and 'Chineseness') with gang members in Singapore. However, this is very different from my own conception.

Of course, the term 'hybrid masculinity' is also a familiar one to the field of CSMM, but this blended form is different from the concept advocated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014, 2018). While this formulation also involves the incorporation of femininity, it focuses on privileged groups such as white, heterosexual men, which, while giving masculine hegemony a greater flexibility, actually acts to obscure and secure its hegemonic power, thus providing a new way to legitimise unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2018). While there is nothing particularly new about the acceptance that boys and men can embody and perform both masculine and feminine traits (e.g. Paechter, 2007) and vice versa (e.g. Halberstam, 1998; Pascoe, 2007), and that masculinity should not be tied to male bodies, but rather to sets of behaviours or practices, I believe that this version of blended masculinity that I am proposing is a new and specific form of non-hegemonic and positive masculinity, more akin to an emerging hybrid type of femininity. As we will see, the boys in my study may have been privileged (as the white men were in Bridges and Pascoe (2014)), in the sense that they were middle-class and came from financially secure families (particularly at one of the schools), but they came from multi-ethnic backgrounds. Instead of being hegemonic, or concealing hegemony, it was the most common, form. It was not a type of 'geek' (Ging, 2019, p. 651) masculinity performed by 'Beta' (651) males (or in this case, boys)—many of the boys in this study were the 'top' boys who were the most popular individuals in the peer group. Moreover, this blended form did not dominate, in the sense that it was non-hierarchical, did not connote superiority or inferiority, or attempt to subjugate other forms.

Because this masculinity was the most prevalent expression of boyhood in these two schools, there was consequently more space for expressions of various forms of masculinity, such as personalised masculinities, to flourish, and this includes incorporating expressions of masculinity within its aegis that historically have been discrete and even oppositional. These include theorisations of caring masculinity, which is a growing presence in the masculinity literature (e.g. Eisen & Yamashita, 2019; Elliott, 2016, 2020; Hanlon, 2012), although, so far, it has been mainly applied to practices by (mainly) white, middle-class men, such as fathers. These are softer, more inclusive forms that, like personalised forms, reject domination and associated patriarchal traits, and embrace more feminine values of interdependence, tolerance, care and positive emotion (Elliott, 2020).

I maintain that the steep hierarchy used to distinguish various masculinities, as proposed by Connell (1995), and which have been appropriated and applied by many scholars in both primary school settings (e.g. Bhana, 2008; Renold, 2005; Swain, 2004a) and secondary schools (e.g. Frosh et al., 2002; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Peltola & Phoenix, 2022), is now looking a lot less steep, and much flatter, so allowing for more diversity of other expressions of masculinity. While this does not mean that homophobia, misogyny and misandry have disappeared, my analysis suggests that, in these two schools, they have been greatly attenuated and that feminism, and the way it has played out in educational settings, may have brought into existence a more tolerant gender order.

Resources and strategies

As a sociologist, I am also interested in how masculinities are produced by using a series of resources and strategies (see Manninen et al., 2011; Swain, 2004a). Although scholars including Connell (1998, p. 5) write: '[masculinities] are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given milieu', the terms 'resource' and 'strategy' are sometimes conflated, and the distinctions can become blurred. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1986), I refer to resources as forms of capital or assets that relate to types of resources of power, and strategies as the processes that individuals use to apply them. In other words, resources and strategies are the 'what' and 'how' respectively.

METHODOLOGY

The two schools

The two schools were situated on the outskirts of London: one, which I have called Wood Vale Primary School, was a middle-class state school (based on data from the *Index of Multiple Deprivation* and the *Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index*), and the other was a fee paying preparatory school, feeding an independent secondary, or senior, school, which I have named Church Green. As I have written above, both schools had/have a multicultural intake, with the majority ethnicity being Asian. The great majority of friendship groups were composed of pupils from diverse heritages, and a number of these associations also contained boys and girls. All of the pupils at both schools wanted to achieve academically, and no-one was teased for working hard and being seen to be colluding too closely with the official school culture. The prep school, in particular, also worked very hard to reinforce values of kindness, caring and a tolerance of other points of view. Both of these settings also provided an environment of safety and security where children were not facing the challenges of poverty and marginalisation experienced by many in mainstream schools, and this undoubtedly influenced the options available, and the possible ways in which masculinities could be constructed.

The study passed the ethical checks at my university and both parents and pupils provided written consent. Small group interviews (ranging from two to four), around an hour long, were conducted with 41 boys: nine boys (out of a total of 20) from two classes at Wood Vale (between November 2021 and February 2002, and again in July) and 32 boys (out of a total of 35) from three classes at Church Green (between March and June 2022). While most of the interview groups at both schools were with boys only, some were mixed sex, which seemed to work out just as well in the sense that the conversation was free flowing, and the pupils appeared uninhibited. I also interviewed girls, mainly for a planned forthcoming paper about femininities in these two schools, but also because they are part of the boys' world and, therefore, part of the formation of their identities. The headteachers at both schools told me that there were no pupils in the school who identified as non-binary, gender fluid, non-conforming or trans, and, therefore, all the pupils used the categories of girl and boy.

I used a semi-structured interview format (Denscombe, 2014) where I covered the same topics each time, but questions were not asked in a particular order, and pupils were allowed and encouraged to talk about new areas of interest, as long as I judged that they were connected to, and were answering, my research questions. Over the course of the fieldwork, and as my research interests became more focused, the interview schedule grew from around 20 questions to around 35.

I selected the pupils for interview by asking them anonymously to nominate one or two friends who they would like to be interviewed with. A major reason to group children together by friendship groups was to create a familiar and secure atmosphere of trust (e.g. Woods, 1981), and being with friends also enhanced the possibility of them talking more freely.

Analysis

The study embraced a form of thematic analysis called a hybrid approach (Swain, 2018), which combines deductive and inductive approaches. This involved constructing a set of *a priori* (or pre-empirical) codes from the research aims and interview questions, and a series of *a posteriori* (post-empirical) codes generated from the data. While the *a priori* codes included *masculinities*, *sports*, *popularity*, the unanticipated *a posteriori* codes that surfaced

during the interviews included *pressure, humour, physical attraction*, amongst others. Swain writes that he does not differentiate between a code and a theme. Once the list of *a priori* and *a posteriori* codes/themes was assembled, they were collapsed further into a smaller number of family codes and these can be used as headings to organise and present the findings, as was the case in this study.

Limitations

All research involves compromises and there were limitations to my study. Firstly, this was not an ethnographic study where I was immersed in the school culture over a lengthy period of time. Although I only interviewed around a third of the boys in the two classes at Wood Vale, I believe that I was still able to discover most of what I wanted to know. In some areas I was approaching 'data saturation' and, although this was not a criterion that was decided in advance, I was beginning to re-hear the same stories, and they were neither qualifying or challenging, nor generating any new theoretical insights. Nevertheless, I admit that the amount of data I collected was limited, and my understanding was still partial in this school. And then there was my own subjectivity, positionality and reflexivity, which of course had a major impact on the research process and data generated. My age, gender and ethnicity were all highly visible markers and were likely to influence what the children chose to tell me. I also recognise that the data that I was generating were a snapshot of a particular time and place: things can and do change, and when I was able to return to Wood Vale in July, 2 weeks before the end of their time at primary school, I did find that some aspects of the pupils' lives had, indeed, altered. Another limitation is that, as I was only on the school site at Wood Vale during lunchtime, and was shut away in a room away from classes at Church Green, and, apart from one 30-minute football game in the playground at Wood Vale, I was not able to observe the children, either in class or in the playground and so only have the boys' testament to rely on. As Douglas ([1976](#)) pointed out almost 50 years ago, people do not always tell the truth in interviews, either because they cannot remember or mis-remember, or because they are deliberately telling lies. However, in my defence, the boys' stories were remarkably consistent, and I cross-checked some information across interviews, which made me feel more confident that the data was accurate and valid. Moreover, when I fed back my conclusions to the senior management at both schools, although some aspects of the pupils' worlds were a surprise to them, most findings closely resonated with the staff's own understandings of what was going on. However, I also concede that this may have only told me that what children tell adults is consistent.

FINDINGS

The findings are organised and presented around the three headings outlined in the introduction: *peer group popularity*; *the concept of the ideal schoolboy*; and *patterns of masculinity*.

Peer group popularity

Along with Paechter and Clark ([2007](#)), this paper starts from the premise that one of the main influences on children's constructions of their gendered identities within school setting is their community of peers, which organises the ways that enable or constrain the practices and ways of being or *doing* boy.

Many researchers have pointed out the importance of friendship (which all the pupils told me was the best thing about school) and its connection to popularity (e.g. Manninen et al., 2011; Renold, 2007; Swain, 2002b). The notion of popularity is generally relational and derives its meaning from this relationship: thus, if an individual is deemed to be popular, someone else will be unpopular, which can imply subordination. However, in these two schools, there was no apparent subordination of 'inferior' models or versions of being a boy, and while pupils were keenly aware of who was categorised as being popular, or the most liked, no individuals in either school appeared to be viewed of as being *unpopular* and therefore derogated and/or bullied. Further, although popularity also has connotations with hierarchy, and most popular boys derived greater levels of prestige and social status amongst the peer group, despite this meaning that other boys will necessarily have less status, I could not find evidence to suggest that this led to them being subordinated.

When I asked boys in both schools to name the boys who were the most well-liked in the class they generally came up with the same few names. However, they were adamant that, while certain boys were more favoured than others, there was no obvious leader, or leaders (in the class or in the year group)—that is, someone who was able to dictate, or set, the agenda of how they should think or behave, and who other boys might try to emulate. While some boys were seen at Wood Vale as being more 'bossy' than others, their leadership was contested, and no obvious candidate stood out. The conversation below comes from Wood Vale, and we can see that both myself, the researcher, and some of the boys, conflate popularity with leadership.

Researcher: Is there a leader in the class, someone who is the most popular boy?
Arlan: Mack
Danny: Mack
Researcher: Why is Mack the most popular boy?
Danny: He's not the most popular boy, he just thinks he is … I do not know how to explain … he acts like he's the boss
Arlan: He acts like the boss
Researcher: He acts like he's the boss but is he the boss?
Danny: Kind of
Arlan: No
Danny: I do follow him if he suggests to play something, I do follow him

Despite the last comment, from Danny, that he follows Mack, the other boys that I interviewed at this school did not regard Mack as either *a* leader or *the* leader. In fact, it was Danny who was consistently cited as being the most favoured (not leading) boy in one class, and Zade and Billy in the other, and while two of these boys (Danny and Zade) were some of the best (most skilful) footballers, and often the opposing team captains in the playground games (from different classes), Billy was not particularly sporty. People had a range of different talents and were respected for this.

The popularity of boys at the prep school was more contested, and although the names of Seb, Phil and Pete were those most commonly cited across the whole year group, and they were also considered to be the best at football, many other boys did not mention these names during our conversations.

Dharshan: All the popular kids are in 6MM [*The name of the class based on the teacher's initials*]
Researcher: Why are they popular, is it because they are sporty?
Dharshan: I do not know
Viraj: It's because they are good at lots of things

Researcher: Are lots of them all-rounders?
Viraj: Yeah
Lewis: Like Nicky, he's good at every sport there is
Researcher: Is he admired for that?
Viraj: No, not really, he's just popular
Researcher: But to be admired you have to be a bit popular, do not you?
Dharshan: I do not think people really look up to him, they …
Researcher: So people do not try and copy him and regard him as a hero
Dharshan: No

In the conversation above I use the word 'admired' about Nicky, which implies respect, but, I argue, is different from the phrase 'being looked up to' which implies a greater veneration. After all, I can admire or respect an individual, such as a top musician or sportsperson, but I do not necessarily have to look up to them. The main conclusions from these two boys are that while some individuals can be popular it does not necessarily follow that people look up to them; these more favoured individuals are good at many things, not just sport (and maybe not even including sport), and they have a range of talents and attributes.

While, again, at Church Green, there were no leading, or dominant, boys, who set the agenda and others looked up to, certain individuals stood out from the rest of the group, and this meant that this conferred on them higher social prestige. They also tended to have more friends, and some boys and girls liked to be associated with them because this could bring associated peer-group status. As we can see from the conversation above, the popular boys had a portfolio of skills and characteristics—they were *good at lots of things*, and, importantly, also enacted a range of attributes and qualities.

At both schools being sporty and being fast were noticed and almost every boy knew who was the fastest in their class. During the conversations I had with boys at Church Green, most did not seem so concerned about strength, and opinions on which boys were the best, or most skilful, at sports were also more disputed.

Boys and girls at both schools generally got on well with each other and some friendship groups contained a mixture of genders. However, most boys spent their free time in single sex groupings. Some boys could enhance their popularity by having a girlfriend, although there were very few of this kind of relationship in either school (I could only uncover three sets of boyfriend–girlfriend relationships, or 'couples', across the whole year group of 64 pupils at Church Green, and two sets from the 60 pupils at Wood Vale). In the extract below, from Wood Vale, Mack is also keen to note that, although Danny's high peer group status is enhanced by being a 'couple' with Lillie, it is also linked to his football prowess.

Mack: I do not think if Danny wasn't with Lillie, I do not think he would be, like, as popular (Danny is sitting next to Mack), nothing to do with …
Freddie: Because little people admire you because you are the only one in our class who is …
Mack: He's also one of the best footballers, but …
Researcher: So they are the golden couple … interesting
Freddie: Yeah

At both schools, certain boys (and girls) were admired or respected for having specialised knowledge (e.g. about computer games), or excelling at a subject like maths or art, but while their knowledge and skills were appreciated, the crucial point to make is that they were not looked up to or revered.

If we think about the resources and strategies that boys used to become particularly favoured, and by extension, gain status, we can see that the resource of *physicality and*

athleticism, identified by Swain (2004a), was one of the most essential and the most highly prized and cherished. However, the resource of *interpersonal*, or *linguistic* skills (knowing and using the latest verbal expressions, which showed a person was 'modern' and added up to a kind of *savoir faire*), and the *social resource* of being able to get on with people and form networks of friendships, were also important. While specialist forms of culturally cherished knowledge acted as a form of *cultural resource* (e.g. knowledge about computer games or being able to recite internet memes) or possessing particular skills (e.g. in a sport) may have been admired, they did not necessarily bring about greater peer group popularity. Another cultural resource was, as we have seen, being witty, or using the strategy of humour to engender a laugh, sometimes at the expense of a teacher. As one boy told me at Church Green, 'You can't really like someone if they're not funny'. Humour consolidated the bonds of friendship and, in many ways, was actually 'constitutive' of identities (Kehily & Nayak, 1997, p. 70). While humour was an integral ingredient of the peer group culture at both schools, it played a more prominent part at the prep school where more of the boys (and girls) defined themselves around humour (e.g. by reciting memes from social media and/or acting up in class). All of the pupils at both schools told me that that the boys used humour in class more than the girls, which I argue is to enhance their popularity and gain peer group status, although the boys struggled to articulate the exact reasons why, as can be seen in this exchange from Church Green. The need to negotiate an affiliation between the formal and informal school cultures, and trying to please both teachers and peers, needed a careful balancing act, which Woods (1990) refers to as 'knife-edging' (p. 131).

Researcher: Do boys muck around in class more than the girls?
Krish/Haoyuan: Yes
Haoyuan: Definitely
Dev: Way more
Researcher: What do you do when you muck around?
Krish: We tell jokes
Haoyuan: We crack jokes …
Researcher: So why do boys show off more than girls
Krish: It's because … I dunno … it's hard to explain

Other embodied resources that boys have utilised elsewhere in schools, such as acting tough/hard, or the wearing of fashionable clothes and/or training shoes, that Swain (2002a) recognised almost 25 years ago, did not feature in either school.

As we can see in this conversation below from Church Green, to be particularly appreciated, boys generally had to possess a portfolio of different attributes, drawing on specific resources and using various strategies. We can see again that humour is an important ingredient, and these two boys also cited characteristics of needing to be a nice, friendly person, and being modern and up to date with the latest cultural expressions and practices.

Ishir: There are really popular children in each class …
Researcher: What makes them popular?
Noah: They have lots of friends; they sort of keep up with the times; they think they are funny; they are modern; they are entertaining, they are nice to hang around with.
Ishir: Not everyone thinks they are funny, some people do, and some people do not
Researcher: What do you mean by 'keeping up with the times?'
Noah: it's sort of, like no one really wants … it's quite difficult to explain … it's about keeping up with the modern era, using the latest expressions, telling internet jokes, that's always a really popular thing; repeating memes, knowing the latest memes from the internet (we are the meme group) … if you do not know the latest memes you are missing out.

The concept of the ideal schoolboy

In each interview I asked boys to name the features, or characteristics, of an 'ideal' school-boy, someone who was a fictional character, or similar to Weber's (1949) 'ideal typology'. If such a person were to exist, what would they be like? I use the word 'schoolboy', as opposed to 'boy', because masculine identities are highly contextualised and are performed differently in settings outside school such as the family. The reason I asked this question was because of its link to popularity and status, and to the resources and strategies the boys used to achieve these. Analytically, these named features were also linked to different forms of masculinity, and very few boys had a problem listing a series of adjectives. I did not ask what this ideal schoolboy would look like although, in retrospect, I wished I had; however, it was the qualities that I was most interested in. Although there was a variety of viewpoints across the different groups, there was an overall consistency and the same adjectives kept being repeated in different interviews. The main descriptors at Wood Vale of the ideal schoolboy were sporty, clever, hardworking, sociable (with good interpersonal skills), funny and being a 'bit of a character' (charismatic). At Church Green, it was someone who was kind, considerate, friendly/sociable, funny, a little sporty, hardworking, clever, but not super smart. The common signifiers at both schools were being sporty (although this varied between schools), clever, hardworking and sociable. Being funny, or having a charismatic personality, was not mentioned at Church Green, although these characteristics were frequently talked about during our conversation about the popular boys. The other difference between the two schools was being kind and considerate, which the formal culture at the prep school worked hard to reinforce. Almost every interview group at this school put 'kind' as their top quality, as we can see in this extract below.

Researcher: What would be the characteristics of an ideal boy at this school?
Phil: Funny
Pete: Kind
Nicky: Sporty …
Researcher: Smart?
Phil: They do not have to be …
Pete: Not dumb though
Researcher: OK, so are funny and kind in a hierarchy? Are these the most important?
Phil: Yes, funny, but they *have to be* kind.

As we can see, these adjectives fit into the idea that there are a range of masculinities and, at first glance, would seem to suggest that an ideal schoolboy practises a combination of both masculine and feminine traits. On closer inspection though, the majority of the traits appear feminine (being sociable, kind, considerate) or more gender neutral (clever, hardworking, funny, charismatic). The only masculine quality is, possibly, being sporty, although I think this is also more gender neutral. There were no definite (or less contentious) masculine traits mentioned such as being physically strong, fast (quick) or assertive, confident, independent, even if these were mentioned in conversations about the popular boys.

Different formations of masculinity

One of the main findings from this study is that I was unable to detect a form of hegemonic masculinity, which is unusual in empirical research carried out with boys in school settings (e.g. Swain, 2000, 2002a, 2004a; Renold, 2005, 2007; Huuki et al., 2010; Manninen et al., 2011; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016, 2008; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, 2021; Messerschmidt, 2020;

Schiffrin-Sands, 2021). There were high levels of tolerance of others' points of view, and very low levels of bullying—the pupils only identified one bully in each class at Wood Vale and none at Church Green—and I could not find any suggestion of the homophobia or misogyny that Renold (2002) and Swain (2003b) highlighted around 25 years ago. There was no use of disparaging terms such as 'gay' that Hall (2020) recently uncovered, or 'slut', or other synonyms, that Ringrose (2008) found with adolescent schoolgirls. Femininities, or other forms of masculinity, were not subordinated and so there was no form of masculinity that led to the legitimation of unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2018). The only possible example that came to light of unequal relations between boys and girls was in the football games. There was a daily football game at each school, but it dominated breaktimes to a much greater extent at Wood Vale, at least during the autumn and winter/spring terms when I was there. Around 15 of the 20 boys (75%) from the two classes played football every day and were joined by around eight out of the 36 girls (22%). The numbers of footballers at Church Green were around 12 of the 35 boys (34%) from the three classes, and five out of the 27 (19%) girls. Although the boys insisted that girls were treated equally, deeper questioning revealed that the boys rarely passed the ball to girls, who were, therefore, not equal participants. The boys' excuse for this was that the girls' commitment to the game was less serious and that they would 'muck things up'. Although some scholars may argue that this still makes the relations unequal, some of the girls admitted that they liked 'hanging around' the boys as much as joining in the game.

As I have written, there was no evidence of a subordinated masculinity. Boys who were not interested in sport were not picked on. No one got teased or bullied if they did not want to play football, or if they were not very good at the game. Nor were any boys traduced who openly cried, and this was an accepted practice. There was one boy at the prep school, Liam, who many boys (and girls) thought could be a little 'over dramatic' and 'emotional' and was prone to cry too easily; he also played with the girls every day, but he was consistently cited by both boys and girls as being one of the most popular boys in the class, and this did not appear to affect his status (see Paechter, 2019).

The most common version of boyhood at both schools was a blended form of masculinity. The boys enacted masculine qualities of athleticism, confidence, assertiveness and independence, and although they were generally more extrovert than the girls, they also practised feminine attributes of kindness and sociability, tolerance and emotional intelligence. However, the characteristics varied a little at each school. At Wood Vale, the blended form drew more on the resource of physicality and athleticism; it was represented by the large group of footballing (rather than sporty) boys that I have mentioned above, but the most popular boys in the whole year group—cited by the boys and girls—were the ones who were also smart, sociable, funny and being a 'bit of a character'—in other words, they were charismatic. According to some of the girls, the coolest boys—a synonym for popularity—were also kind and mature.

Researcher: Who is the coolest boy in the class?
Annie: I have three
Researcher: You have three, go on, who are they?
Astrid: I think Freddie, Danny and Mack
Aurora: I think kind of the same
Researcher: Why is that then?
Annie: Because they help us
Aurora: Sometimes they are kind
Astrid: I agree, and they are kind
Annie: They have got more sense
Astrid: They take things more seriously; they are more grown up

At Church Green, while sporting prowess was also important, the most common pattern of masculinity was far more diverse; while football was the main playground game, a variety of other sports were played at breaktimes, and in afterschool clubs. There was no school football team—rugby was the official sport—which is also probably significant. Sport was important, but it did not dominate the peer group culture as football did at Wood Vale, and the qualities expressed in the notion of the ideal schoolboy at the prep school meant that the attributes of kindness and sociability were the most prized in the peer group, again by both boys and girls. Thus, we can see that there are links between the characteristics of this blended form of masculinity with the features of the ideal schoolboy, as well as with the attributes and qualities associated with, and performed, by the most popular boys.

There were also some examples of personalised masculinities (Swain, 2006) at both schools, and many of the boys also spent their time during the interviews talking about their hobbies and mutual interests. People liked, and made friends with, peers (including girls) when they had similar interests and shared similar values. As Krish told me, what people did, or how they behaved, was not always important: 'I think it's more about who you are … you get on with someone if they like the same stuff, do the same thing'. At the state school the main interests of two boys in one class were based around having expertise in art (drawing and painting) and computer science. They did not want, or attempt, to emulate or join in with the group of sporty footballers, nor did they wish to subordinate any other forms. However, there were many more boys at the prep school practising this form, who built their interests around particular sports like table tennis and a wide variety of pastimes such as reciting internet memes, or around more specialised interests, like using particular computer games (e.g. Minecraft or Roadblocks), playing in a musical group or band, or in aviation. This form of masculinity had a particularly egalitarian quality. Like the boys at the state school, and those practising a blended formation, they were comfortable in their own skin and had no wish to copy others or derogate them, and they regarded not only themselves, but other boys across the year group, as being equal.

Researcher: Is there a leading boy in the class who people look up to and who makes lots of the decisions?
Noah: Not really, we are all pretty much together
Researcher: You are pretty much equal?
Laksh: Yes, there's not really anyone.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this research are a good news story, and have implications for education and policy: they show that dominant or hegemonic systems are neither natural nor inescapable, and although schools can create gender hegemony, gender is a category that is under constant revision and negotiation, so they can also do much to negate it and foster kinder, more tolerant and more equal environments. Teachers and educators must be given training to support boys towards the common goal of achieving gender equity.

In some ways, the findings overlap with the conclusions from Anderson and McCormack (2014, 2018), who have argued that younger generations are eschewing homophobia, homohysteria, misogyny or misandry, and versions of hyper-masculinity. While their research subjects were mainly middle-class, white adolescents and young men in England and the US, my study suggests that there is a similar movement amongst preadolescent boys in the UK, certainly amongst these young, multicultural boys in these two London schools. In stark contrast to the ethnographic findings of Swain and Renold, from

around 25 years ago, there was also much less bullying, more caring, and greater levels of tolerance, kindness and equality amongst these citizens of the future. The pupils were happy at school and were proud of their schools. Boys and girls generally got on well with each other—there were a number of mixed friendship groups—and there was very little antagonism between them. Some boys played with girls at breaktimes without fear of derogation, although the majority of boys, while sitting next to a girl in the classroom, were wholly disinterested in girls in recreational areas during their free time. There were no ethnic tensions. While there were no leading boys who set the agenda in terms of how to think and act, certain boys, who drew on a range, or had a portfolio, of different resources and strategies, were more favoured than others, although this does not mean that boys looked up to them or wanted to copy, or be like, them. The concept of popularity was also less relational at these two schools in the sense that there did not appear to boys who were deemed to be unpopular and therefore subordinated. Popularity was, though, hierarchical, and could bring higher prestige and social status amongst the peer group.

There was no discernible pattern of hegemonic masculinity at either school that legitimated unequal relationships between boys and girls, or between masculinities and femininities, or amongst masculinities (Messerschmidt, 2018), and this shows that not every setting will necessarily have a visible and identifiable hegemonic, or even dominant, form of masculinity. Masculinity and femininity did not appear to have an asymmetrical ordering, there was no obvious masculine privilege/advantage, and there did not appear to be any hierarchies of masculinity, or examples of marginalised identities, or subordination that I could find.

Although sporting and athletic prowess remained important signifiers of successful and favoured masculinity for many boys, particularly at Wood Vale, because so many pupils at Church Green played a range of sports—either in afterschool clubs or in the playground—games like football did not assume such an important part of the informal school culture and it did not dominate. It was also not the official school sport. Around a third of the boys played football at breaktimes, but the other boys did not look up to them for this and instead pursued their own interests.

The findings show that the most common form of masculinity at both schools was a non-hegemonic and positive blended form—composed of masculine and feminine qualities—although it was constituted of slightly different features in each school and the footballing (as opposed to sporty) boy was more prevalent at Wood Vale. Although we can see that the blended form contains elements that are similar to the more feminine values contained in caring masculinity, I argue that these features are part of blended masculinity, rather than representing a discrete form. However, this may be an ongoing debate. Readers may also have noticed that I have also written that this blended formulation was the most *common* pattern of masculinity in both schools, rather than also being the most *dominant* form. If we take Messerschmidt's definition of dominant masculinity as being the most culturally cherished version on show it probably was, but for me, the word 'dominant' also has notions of hierarchy and connotations of superiority or inferiority, and the blended form in these two schools did not attempt to subjugate other forms. This may also be a cause for further discussion.

Although the boys' lives were shaped by structures and conditions that they found themselves in, I argue that, like hybrid femininities, blended masculinities have a particular agentic quality and offer opportunities to perform different ways of being and *doing* boy. There were also connections between the blended form with popularity, and the notion of the ideal schoolboy, and many features, and enacted attributes, overlapped.

These data also reveal that boys can, and do, perform different versions of masculinity at different times and places and with different individuals. Sometimes boys could enact blended masculinities, and also perform personalised masculinities (which had a particular egalitarian quality) and vice versa. Each form is not discrete or singular and they can often

overlap and merge. Sometimes boys could emphasise and perform different features of masculinity in the same space almost concurrently, which shows up the limitations of using mono typologies such as 'sporty boy' or 'caring' boy.

If we were to view blended masculinities as being part of a spectrum or continuum, ranging from masculine and feminine forms at either end, we can see that these forms will have different features in each specific local setting. While some boys will practise more masculine features, such as being extrovert, confident, independent and competitive, others will emphasise other, more feminine, versions of doing boy such as being quiet, soft, caring and kind. For much of their time they can, and will, perform both versions, showing how nuanced and fluid masculinity is and how contingent it is on time, space and the relationships involved.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest for this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No data is available to be shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical issues were submitted to, and approved by, the UCL ethics committee. All names have been anonymised.

ORCID

Jon Swain 🔘 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3255-453X

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