THE RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES BOYS USE TO ESTABLISH STATUS IN A JUNIOR SCHOOL WITHOUT COMPETITIVE SPORT

Abstract

The data in this paper comes from an ethnographically-based study of Year 6 (10-11 year old) boys in an English junior school. It investigates the resources and strategies used and created by the boys to classify themselves, and to construct and perform their masculinity in a tightly regulated school where competitive sport (including playground football) is prohibited for the majority of the school year. The paper considers the relationship between the formal school culture and informal pupil culture, and, in particular, the options open, limited and closed to the boys to construct their masculinities and establish status/prestige within their immediate peer-group. One option open was being able to work hard in class without peer reprovement, but despite the limitation of competitive games/sport, the most favoured form of masculine status was still exemplified by embodied forms of athleticism and physicality. The paper also explores another way of gaining status which was by a form of verbal abuse known as 'cussing': this was a pervasive and prevalent part of school life, and is viewed as another form of competitive, stylised, performance.

Introduction

Much research has been carried out into how boys construct and perform their masculinity through competitive games/sport in a school setting (see, for example, Kessler et al., 1985; Heward, 1988, 1991; Connell, 1996; Parker, 1996 (a), 1996 (b); Salisbury and Jackson, 1996; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Adler and Adler, 1998; Martino, 1999), and there has been a recent concentration of empirical studies on association football (soccer) in the primary/junior school in relation to issues of dominant or 'hegemonic' masculinities (see, for example, Renold, 1997, 1999; Skelton, 1997, 2000; Benjamin, 1998; Connolly, 1998; Epstein, 1998; Swain, 2000). In contrast, this paper is concerned with how boys construct, negotiate and perform their masculinities within a highly regulated and authoritarian school setting where there is little competitive games/sport, including playground football. Although it specifically explores the various options available, and looks at which other resources and strategies the boys were able to use and create to gain status/prestige within their own peer group culture, it finds that the most valued form of masculine status still accrued from various forms of embodied physicality and athleticism. The paper also shows that it was possible in this

school environment to construct an acceptable and desirable masculine identity by working hard; further, it is intended to show that not all boys are necessarily disruptive or alienated from academic work, and that academic success does not have to be incompatible with masculinity (Martino, 1999; Younger et al., 2000; Francis, 2000).

In all schools, pupils will find that there are a different number of ways and opportunities to construct masculinities and establish status. These are contingent to each school, and certain options will be either open (possible), restricted (difficult) or virtually closed. A fundamental influence on these opportunities will be the relations between the formal/official school culture (the teaching and learning, the pedagogy, the disciplinary apparatus, and the policy/organisational structures) and the informal/unofficial pupil peer culture (Connell et al., 1982; Pollard, 1985; Gordon, Holland and Lahelma, 2000). Each have their own particular hierarchy, rules and criteria of evaluation and judgement, and to maximise their enjoyment of their time at school pupils must learn to manage both parts at the same time. Sometimes the two cultures may coexist, or they maybe in opposition to each other, causing pupil resistance.

Theories of masculinity and available 'storylines'

The acquisition of status is interwoven with an individual's identity, and for boys it is inextricably linked to the active construction of their masculinity: thus the search to achieve status is also the search to achieve an acceptable masculinity, which is also part of constructing an acceptable identity. Schools are important agents in the formation of masculinities and their organisation and policies have a significant effect on how boys go about *doing* boy. The findings below arise from a school which is part of a wider comparative study investigating the construction of masculinity of Year 6 boys (10-11 Year olds) in three different junior schools differentiated by the social characteristics of their intake. The theoretical framework in this paper is based on recent feminist and feminist-inspired work which views masculinity as a relational construct occupying a place in gender relations: it maintains that there are multiple masculinities; there is a hierarchy of masculinities; masculinity is a precarious and ongoing performance; and it is generally a collective social enterprise (Connell, 1995, 1996, 2000; Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Lesko, 2000; see also Francis, 2000). Essentially, masculinity is a set of both social and material practices which refers to bodies and what bodies do, and so this paper embraces the idea of embodiment and views the boys as embodied social agents. My findings have also demonstrated that masculinity is contextually bound and assumes different meanings in different places, and so being a boy is a matter of

constructing oneself in, and being constructed by, the available ways and meanings of being a boy in a particular time and place, or, as Gilbert and Gilbert (1998, p. 51) maintain, it is about negotiating a 'set of storylines' and 'repertoires of action'.

Background and Methodology

All the names of people and places have been changed, and I have called the school in which this research took place Petersfield junior. The school is an LEA junior school[1] situated within a mainly middle-class, multicultural, outer-suburb of a large urban city. There were just over 400 pupils on role, who were taught in 12 classes with an average class size of 34 organised by Year group. There was an average number of pupils eligible for free school meals; about 30% had English as their second language, and 15% were Jewish. According to the last OFSTED[2] report (1997), the majority of the children were above average attainment on admission to the school, and overall, standards met 'national expectations'. The junior school site is shared with the infant school, and there is a comparatively limited area of playground space which necessitates a staggered morning breaktime between the lower and upper school pupils.

During my time there I spent between two or three days a week for a period of a month each term between November 1998 and July 1999 following one Year 6 class, 6H, (10-11 year olds, in their last year at junior school), with their teacher Mr Hughes. The descriptions and interpretations presented below are based on two major sources of data: firstly, my observations of the boys and girls during class lessons and around the school site such as in the assembly hall, the dining hall, the playground etc; secondly, on a series of 33 loosely-structured interviews (20 involving only boys; 13 involving only girls) based on nominated friendship groups of between 2-3. The interviews took place during morning breaktime, lunchtime, or occasionally during lesson times, and almost all of the pupils were reinterviewed at least once. I saw my own role as a facilitator and the pupils were encouraged to express their views and feelings, and share their experiences on a wide range of topics; however, I also used directive questioning to test out various emerging theories, to pursue and clarify points arising during the interviews, and to cross check data from other pupils.

The formal school culture

(Teacher) attempts to control

The main 'storylines' of the formal school culture at Petersfield centred around academic achievement (as measured by SATs)[3] an astringent control of pupil autonomy by a series of strictly applied rules and regulations; and an anti-competitive philosophy which included games/sport. However, the headteacher, Mrs Flowers, and her staff were well aware that the parents of the school largely judged its success on the published results of inspection reports and the SATs which had, effectively, developed into a public examination in the educational marketplace. Thus government policies had put the school's anti-competitive orientation under severe pressure and, as Mrs Flowers acknowledged, the school had been forced into 'playing the game'. There was a calculated effort to obtain 'good' results to ensure a high place in the school league tables, with an imperative on 'hard work' leading to 'high academic standards', although Mrs Flowers understood that higher levels in SATs did not necessarily equate with 'raising standards'. Policies/structures had been systematically introduced, and Year 6 pupils begun regular SAT practice and revision in September for the tests which were to take place the following May; as Mr Hughes told the class: 'You've got to do four terms work in three.'

There were an enormous number of (mainly unwritten) rules/regulations at the school which were implemented by Mrs Flowers and her staff, and I have categorised them into three areas covering the pupils' appearance/uniform, the curriculum/classroom, and the playground and dining hall. I list a few of them below by way of example. For school uniform, the pupils were required to wear white collars on shirts or polo-shirts *inside* a Petersfield sweatshirt, black/grey trousers or skirt, and black shoes, with training shoes (trainers) generally prohibited. For curriculum/classroom matters, they had to write in black ink, were not permitted their own pencil case, and were not allowed to read certain books such as 'Goose-bumps', 'Point Horror' and Roald Dahl. In the playground, they had to line up at the end of the morning and lunchtime breaktimes in a straight line without talking, and were not allowed to play or swap conkers, pop-group/football stickers etc, play any physical contact games (the favourite was a chasing game called 'Bulldog'), any ball games using feet, including football, and although tennis balls were usually allowed, games such as cricket could only be played by using hands instead of bats. No sweets or crisps were permitted to be eaten at breaktime, and this meant that, on some days when they were on late lunch, the Year 6 pupils had to wait until 1.10 to eat anything. In the dining hall itself, the pupils were required to put their hand up when they had finished eating, and seek permission to leave from one of the midday supervisors. Here was the school trying to control the body itself, and was reminiscent of Foucault's (1976) concept of 'bio-power' which he sees as a form of social control, where institutionalised practices

involving knowledge of, and power over, individuals gestures, movements and locations is used to produce, or attempt to produce, 'docile' bodies.

Many of the rules/regulations emanated directly from Mrs Flowers. She acknowledged to me that there were a lot of rules at Petersfield, and then went on to differentiate between 'ordinary school rules' (those, which she thought, were found in the majority of schools), and the 'Mrs Flower's' rules which were introduced by her (usually in assembly) and which, she acknowledged, were the result of her own personal tastes and value system. These included a rule where the pupils were not allowed to tie their jumpers round their waists because Mrs Flowers thought that it looked aesthetically displeasing, or in her word, 'sloppy'.

Some of the rules were introduced for spatial and safety reasons such as the no- conker rule; others were inaugurated to reduce arguments such as the ban on swapping stickers. Playground football was banned in the autumn and spring terms due to the lack of space *and* the arguments it led to. During the summer it was allowed to be played on the school field, but:

> *Mrs Flowers:*   ... Even then, I often end up stopping them from playing it because it's just awful; they just end up arguing at the end of lunchtimes and it takes half of the afternoon session to sort out...and it's to do with role models on football pitches anyway so...it's...you know, it's always been quite contentious, in a way, that the football… but I just can't bear what it brings into school...

Mrs Flowers had an anathema to competitive games/sport, and had particularly pathologised football for its associations and displays of hyper-masculine, macho-aggression, hero worship and so on. Although a few friendly matches took place against other schools, and there was a regular football practice either during lunchtime or after school, there was no school football team. School policies can, and do, make a real difference, and the interdict on playground football had a profound effect on the possible 'storylines' the boys were able to use in the construction of their masculine identity. It soon became clear through the interviews that the whole topic of football had been effectively marginalised in the informal culture, especially during the autumn and spring terms: although the majority of boys in 6H professed their dissatisfaction with the no-football rule, only 4 out of the 17 boys classified themselves as being 'very keen' on football, while two more declared that they were half-to-three quarters interested. Although some would talk about important televised games, the main topics of playground conversation seemed to be computers, television, and various other outside school interests. Football was allowed in the summer term on the school field

although, just as Mrs Flowers had predicted, it was banned for the last three weeks of the term after a fight between two Year 6 boys. The restrictions placed on football and other ball games meant that the boys were compelled to find and invent a range of alternative activities during their breaktimes, but this did not mean that more conventional and macho types of masculinity disappeared, but rather that they appeared in other forms as I will discuss below.

Many pupils in the class thought that there were too many rules/regulations at the school, and two boys said that they felt that the school was more like a prison:

> *Vinny:*   School is all trapped up with the gates, the bollards, the security cameras
>
> *CT:*   [...]He [Vinny] went up to my sister and said it was a jail house

However, the vast majority of the pupils were generally content to acquiesce in the interests of getting on with their daily routines, doing well in their work, and not wishing to displease their teacher, Mr Hughes. Mr Hughes was one of the senior members of staff, and during the summer term he secured a post of deputy headteacher at another school. Although nearly all of the pupils thought that Mr Hughes was a very good teacher, who presented the work in an interesting and lively way, there was a manifest display of unequal power relations, and many of them were rather frightened of him: as Vinny said, 'Mr Hughes just scares you; whenever he shouts you shake'. From my observations, he was a strict enforcer of rules, ever-vigilant, and quick to pick up on any misdemeanour: it was difficult for any pupil to get away with anything.

For many pupils, the rules/regulations only became conspicuous when they were tested or challenged: many rules were deemed to be pretty much unbreakable, and most were accepted, almost without question. However, some pupils viewed a minority as being either unfair, trivial and/or lacking in any adequate rationale, and, for instance, many Year 6 pupils ignored the dining hall rule and the jumpers-around-the-waist directive.

Pupil resistance

All pupils are involved in the relations of control and resistance, and all are engaged in strategies of resistance to varying degrees (Epstein and Johnson, 1998).

> *Richard:* Most people in these boy groups do mostly everything you're not allowed to do in the school rules, but we don't get found out 'cos we have ways of hiding it and no-one finds us…

However, out of a total of 35 pupils in the class, Richard was the only pupil who actively set out to try to challenge and subvert the system with a number of forays into deviancy. Although, as in every school, it was possible to observe countless examples of pupils resisting the formal school regime, for much of the time a consensus existed and there was little tension between the two cultures; the vast majority of pupils at Petersfield conformed (or adapted) to the school's expectations and learnt how to be a 'good' pupil. Inside the school building minor transgressions included cussing, swearing, bringing in sweets, wearing a watch (under the sleeve) and the bravado of non-singing during assemblies and singing practice; outside, in the playground, I witnessed a number of covert games of football using a tennis ball, and a number of physical games like wrestling which went on behind teachers backs. The boys in 6H were proud of the fact that they had renamed their favourite game 'Bulldog' as 'Hullaballoo' and had, thereby, managed to avoid Mr Hughes's keen detection.

The most noticeable sign of pupil resistance was the wearing of trainers, and the boys were quick to point out to me they were wearing them. The number of boys with trainers increased over the Year: I observed only 4-5 boys wearing them in November, but this had grown to twelve in March and this was still the case in July. Seven of the boys wore trainers to school everyday, while five came in shoes, changed into trainers at breaktime, and then kept them on for the rest of the day, which meant that they able to escape detection in the Year 6 meetings that were held by Mr Hughes early on Thursday mornings. However, the fact of the matter was that trainers were actually tolerated by the school in the summer term as Mrs Flowers and Mr Hughes (I did not ask the other teachers) had made a deliberate decision to relax their gaze and concentrate on other priorities. Mrs Flowers acknowledged that, 'We're fighting a losing battle with the trainers,' and when I pressed her further, she said she felt that it was unfair for some of the less well-off parents to have to buy two different types of shoes, particularly when some of the pupils were soon leaving for secondary school. She also confessed that, 'I turn a blind eye to that in summer,' when she thought that wearing trainers actually looked better with the shorts (grey or black) that were allowed to be worn, and which, again, fitted in with her own personal aesthetic tastes.

The informal school culture: friendship groups; self-categorisations and perceptions

The fundamental influence of the informal pupil culture has been well documented in sociological research (Pollard, 1984; Woods, 1990; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Harris, 1998; Connell, 2000), providing boys with a series of shared meanings of what it is to be a boy. Indeed, Harris (1998) argues that the pupils' peer group has a great deal of power, and is actually more influential than their parents in the formation of their identity, of who they are, and who they will become. Rather unusually, and unlike in the classes in 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 17 boys, there was one large, dominant group of 13 boys, and 4 others who were victimised and subordinated (Gavin, Robert, Andrei and Daniel). The main group was composed of boys from a wide range of interests and abilities, and who played together everyday; they were rather uninterested in the girls in the class, and rarely mixed with them outside the classroom. Although, on first appearances, they seemed to be a close-knit and coherent unit, there were a number of underlying tensions and power struggles for, of course, there are also hierarchies *within* groups as well as *between* groups. There were two acknowledged leaders of the main, dominant group who vied for power and status: Jinesh, and a boy known as CT; then there was rather a disparate, associate group of 9 boys (Richard, Marcus, Vinny, Jameil, Hussein, Tom, Marc, Robin and Grant); and finally, 2 boys (Carlos and Benjamin) who were really followers, and who were more tolerated, than integral members. Harris (1998, p. 245) maintains that leaders are the people who tell others what to do and they can have a major affect on their peer group in three main ways: they can influence the group norms in terms of the attitudes and behaviours that the majority of the members adopt and regard as appropriate; they can specify the boundaries of the group by saying who is with *us* and who is with *them*; and they can determine the image that the group has of itself. In some ways, they also exemplify the salient features of what the peer group comes to regard as the 'idealised' boy.

The dominant group categorised and defined the other smaller group of boys by their 'differences' (Hey, 1997, p. 28) and their 'deficiencies' or their lack. They were regarded, and pathologised, as non modern and lacking knowledge of up-to-date things (such in television, computer programs, football news and results etc); as lacking 'coolness' by not wearing the latest fashions and trends; as lacking loyalty to friends by not sticking up for their mates; and lacking in athleticism or sportyness. They were also perceived to be lacking 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/
Robin:	Yeah
JS:	Silly things, such as?
Richard:	Going to the toilet with some wet tissues and throwing them at the ceiling...erm/
Robin:	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
Robin:	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/Robin:	Yeah

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, p. 9).

Chandni:	They're the more popular ones...like everyone wants to hang around with that group
Ashley:	And, I'm not meaning to be rude, but they're a bit sad
JS:	Right, OK...so sad in what way?
Chandni:	Er, they go around annoying the girls
Ashley:	They spread rumours, and try and break the girls up
Chandni:	[…] It's just that they're more...trendy
JS:	Modern, trendy? Trendy in what way then?
Chandni:	Like, they wear the clothes, they talk like how everyone talks and everything like that

Ashley:	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?
Chandni:	All the new *PlayStation* games...the new computers, things like that
JS:	So they're up with the latest kind of trends?
Chandni:	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 Andrei wore a popular make of trainers was not even noticed by some of the boys in the interviews. When Daniel deliberately broke a toilet window it was regarded as being 'naughty', and rather wild whereas, I have the suspicion, if CT had done such a thing he would have been thought of, by some of the boys, as being a hero of counter school resistance.

Over the course of the year the differences and rivalry between the two nominated leaders became apparent as each struggled to maintain their position. Jinesh seemed more of a 'natural' leader: you only had to observe the playground games to see it was him who made the vast majority of the decisions as to which games they were going to play, who was allowed to play, who was going to be on whose side, or when they were going to change games, and so on. Pollard (1985) argues that competence is one of the most effective ways off achieving status and Jinesh was admired for his organisational ability, for his general intelligence, and his ability in school work, especially in maths. He was also venerated for his social and technical knowledge of football, the teams and general football news, as well as for the latest computer information, which added up to a kind of 'savoire faire', which Adler and Adler (1998, p. 42) refer to as a pupil's 'sophistication in social and interpersonal skills'. His other great resource was his athleticism, and the restrictions on playground football meant that his prowess at cricket received greater recognition. As with the majority of the pupils in 6H, Jinesh was able to maintain a careful balance between the expectations of both the formal and informal cultures (Woods, 1990), and was also highly regarded by Mr Hughes.

Jinesh's decision-making did not go down well with every group member, and some told me that they found him rather 'bossy'. In other words, he was esteemed for different qualities by different people.

JS:	Is Jinesh popular, is he quite a leader?
CT:	Only for his brain
JS:	For his brain
CT:	Yeah
JS:	So he's admired for his brains?
CT:	Yeah
Vinny:	And his football...'cos CT doesn't like football...I like football a lot; Marcus, hmm, half...Jinesh... full [a lot], he knows all the scores and stuff...

CT was a particular rival but his standing and authority in the peer group hierarchy came from using a set of very different resources. Although, as Vinny says, CT did not like football very much (probably because he was not particularly good at it), he was tall and fast, but his greatest resource was his strength and his willingness to use it to dominate others with displays of 'macho' toughness. In fact, his status was underwritten by violence and, although this did not bring him popularity, it earned him a certain amount of wary respect.

JS:	OK, of this group [the main group of 13 boys] is there any one leader that stands out or not?
Richard:	No, mainly Jinesh and CT… everyone's scared of CT, he can beat up anyone, everyone's scared of him/
Robin:	He's so tall/
Richard:	Yeah he's so tall, he's bigger than me
JS:	[...] So are you saying CT is a leader because he's strong?
Richard:	Yeah, if you don't do what he says, he'll jump on top of them and beat us up won't he? [looking at Robin], and he never does as he's told

Unlike Jinesh, CT was a potential counter-school resister in the classroom. He had been permanently excluded from his previous school for hitting a teacher, but although he had given last Year's teacher a difficult time, and despite Richard's last comment indicating his defiance, CT got on well with Mr Hughes and rarely got into trouble in class. Anyway, the work ethic engendered in Mr Hughes' class meant that both poor behaviour and not working well were frowned upon, rather than admired. Indeed, a feature of the informal culture was that boys used the various 'storylines' to take up different constructions of masculinity at different times and in different places, and CT, for instance could change from the physically active and domineering person in the playground to the passive, demur, and hard working pupil in the classroom within a matter of minutes.

As Chandni and Ashley have already postulated, CT also gained a certain kudos by presenting himself as being 'cool' which, of course, is a moveable social construction involving certain presentational skills and impression management techniques (Goffman, 1959; Fine, 1981). Although school surveillance and enforcement of school uniform meant that he could not wear much more than his trainers inside the school building, all the pupils noticed his Nike hat and his Nike gloves in the playground, which he continued to wear even when the warm spring sunshine arrived. In the summer term, CT wore a colourful bandanna round his head, not only to signify difference, but to symbolise an alternative way of being: although some of the pupils may have told me they thought he looked good, the majority made more pejorative comments and no imitations ever appeared. Paradoxically, although boys like CT had sufficient status in the bank (Thorne, 1993, p. 123) to be able to emphasise their 'difference' and individuality, the vast majority tried to ensure that they were seen as 'the same as the others' in the main group for this provided a certain protection (Gordon, Holland and Lahelma, 2000) from teasing and, perhaps, even subordination.

Ways of establishing status: open, limited and closed

Harris (1998) points out that a child's primary objective is not to become a successful adult but rather a successful child, and, therefore, the most important people at school are the other pupils for 'it is their status among their peers that matters most to them (Harris, 1998, p. 241). In every school certain practices and possibilities exist for pupils to gain and establish status/prestige. Some of these fall within the formal school culture and will vary from school to school, as different schools have different priorities and needs. Some, for instance, will place a higher emphasis on academic attainment and sporting excellence than others, and the same achievements that are affirmed and celebrated in some schools will go unrecognised, or be challenged or marginalised in others. Other opportunities to gain status/prestige will exist within the informal pupil culture but again, different possibilities will occur in different schools. For instance, while working hard, and/or academic achievement may be valorised in some pupil peer groups it may be derogated in others, and the same might also go for visibly displaying resistance to teachers and so on.

Some of these different status opportunities will be heavily influenced and structured by the formal school culture (with its policies and organisation) in the sense that some opportunities are more open and easy to achieve than others. Some are more limited or restricted, while others are

practically closed and almost impossible to achieve. Some will be created by the pupils themselves and may either co-exist, or be in opposition, to the formal school culture.

Figure 1. shows the options of gaining status/prestige within the informal pupil peer group at Petersfield junior school, and categorises them into being open (possible), restricted (difficult) and closed (virtually impossible).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Working hard/academic achievement

At Petersfield, it was possible to gain status and respect by being academically clever, and doing well at your school work within *both* the formal and informal cultures. Within the peer group, Jinesh was widely admired for his general intellect and was affectionately known as 'the human calculator' for his ability in mathematics. While other pupils viewed academic achievement as having a neutral effect on status, aspirations to gain academic success were not ridiculed, nor constructed as non-masculine or effeminate. Contrary to studies set in the secondary school (most notably from Willis, 1977 and Mac an Ghaill, 1994), in this school it was perfectly possible to be clever, work hard, have little interest or ability in sport, *and*, still be a popular and respected member of the group. The important thing was not to be seen as too *un*intelligent as this carried a high risk of being stigmatised. In fact, there was an enduring, and widespread work ethic in the class and a keen ambition to do well. Many pupils told me that they enjoyed most of the classwork they were given, but many also said that they wanted to work hard for instrumental reasons, to get on and do well in their SATs, recognising that there was a link between good qualifications and job prospects with their material remuneration. Although the school (particularly the classroom context engineered by Mr Hughes) had a profound influence on the academic and social experiences of each pupil, family/parental ethos, aspirations and affiliations to schooling also, undoubtedly, played a part. Indeed, the proportions of mainly middle-class Asian (about one-third) and Jewish children (about one-seventh), may well have been significant with their cultural tendencies of studiousness. For instance, it is noteworthy that the majority of the pupils (14 out of the 17 boys) had a home tutor for at least part of the Year.

> *Tom W:*   I want to do well

> *Jinesh:*   I want nice clothes and a nice car when I grow up, so I may as well study while we can

These boys seemed to be saying that as they were compelled to attend school anyway, they were going to use it as an opportunity for their self improvement/advancement. Another boy, Richard, said that he enjoyed learning (possibly for its own sake or/and instrumental reasons) but, again, he viewed school as an expedient resource; for him, school was a distinct and discrete world, separated from the life he led at home.

> *Richard:*   I just like learning, that's what school's for, just go to school and learn, go home/
>
> *JS:*   To improve yourself?
>
> *Richard:*   Yeah, go to school, learn, go home, that's what's school's for, […] go to school, learn, go home, watch TV, forget everything

Physicality/athleticism

Despite the school's anti-competitive policies which attempted to mute the salience of the body and position games/sport on the margins, conventional macho, but above all, physical forms of masculinity were manifest in the various playground games, and the single most important resource used to gain status and popularity within the informal peer group culture was still an embodied form of physicality and athleticism (and this was also the case in the other two schools of my study). The boys defined their masculinity through action, and created their own series of games based on speed, skill, force, fitness and strength. For instance, playground games such as the chase-game Bulldog had been deliberately designed around a competitive test of speed; being a fast runner meant that you were more often a winner, and losers risked subordination and isolation.

> *Jameil:*   If you're a slow coach, you won't be able to catch with us...'cos the main fastest kids are like, me, CT, Marcus and [...] Hussein
>
> *JS:*   They're the fastest, and is that quite important for the games you play...if you're a real slow coach you get caught?
>
> *Jameil:*   As we're the fastest we can get to the other side easily
>
> *Robin:*   And then when we play with Carlos, he always gets caught first, but we don't let him be 'it' [in Bulldog] because he's always going to be caught

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Bodily strength was a prerequisite in physical games designed to test toughness/stamina such as wrestling (a covert activity), and many boys recognised that it was also needed to be a good footballer.

JS:	OK, what makes a good footballer?
Jinesh:	Skill
JS:	Yeah but in what way, 'cos you might be really really skillful but/
Jinesh:	You have to be a bit strong so you don't get barged out the way
JS:	So you've got to be quite physically strong/
Jinesh:	[inaudible] so they don't foul you

In the context of all of these playground games/activities the boys' bodies were far away from the 'docile', passive bodies that the school attempted to produce in the classroom and assembly hall; they were full of energy and action, and were both the objects and agents in performances and practices in which their bodies/identities became defined and appropriated as 'skilful', 'fast', 'tough', 'hard' and so on (Connell, 1995).

There were a number of other possibilities/opportunities to gain status that were either more limited/restricted, or virtually closed to the boys. Fighting, or threatening pushing/shoving, was a limited option and was generally maligned, although CT was admired by some of the boys when he had a fight against another boy who committed too many fouls during a breaktime football match, even though both of them were sent to Mrs Flowers, and football was banned for the last three weeks of term. One option practically closed was exhibiting poor behaviour in Mr Hughes's class: it was an extremely rare occurrence, and if it did happen a pupil would be more likely to damage his/her reputation rather than enhance it.

In some schools, the wearing of certain items of clothing displaying brand-names and 'makes' can acquire a specific symbolic value, but the school's strict enforcement and surveillance systems severely restricted this option at Petersfield. It was made very difficult to bring the outside contemporary mass culture inside the school gates: even a small Nike tick was not allowed on a sweat shirt in the classroom, but although CT was the only boy who I saw with a Nike hat, a few of the boys had symbols and logos on their PE bags and outdoor coats. Most of the boys did not seem bothered about wearing designer-makes but a small minority still tried to get around school regulations by incorporating symbolic emblems into their hair cuts. Jinesh told me that CT had an

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Adidas one and Jameil had a Nike one, although they was so subtle that they were hardly noticeable (which, of course, was the point).

Cussing

Along with physicality/athleticism, the other main way of gaining status/prestige, and positioning others in the masculine peer group hierarchy, was through a form of verbal abuse known as 'cussing' which was a ubiquitous phenomenon amongst the upper school boys. The term is actually a derivative of 'cursing' which dates back from the 18th century (Ayto, 1991), and was used at the school as a generic term for a kind of face-to-face verbal interaction covering anything from friendly playing and teasing, to highly personalised attacks. Although there has been some research into cussing amongst adolescents from Hewitt (1986) and Back (1990, 1996), there has been little previous exploration into cussing *at school*; it is alluded to in Kehily's and Nayak's (1997) study on humour, and there is important work specifically into racist name-calling in schools from Kelly and Cohn (1988), but the main empirical exploration directly concerning school-cussing is Slater's (1993) PhD thesis, and this is again set in the secondary school.   The cussing at Petersfield took many different forms: it could be of a short or protracted duration, involve friendly teasing or hostile persecution, be a private affair between two individuals, or be a public exhibition involving whole groups. Essentially, it was a verbal face-to-face interaction of name-calling based on displays of wit, and can be viewed as a competitive, stylised, theatrical performance; it was accompanied by a variety of gestures and postures, which often included the vigorous shaking of the fingers to affect a clicking noise.

Cussing rarely took place in Mr Hughes's classroom, although I witnessed an occasion when a particular pupil from the subordinated group got admonished by Mr Hughes, and there was a whispered chant of 'cuss-cuss' from some of the boys out of range from Mr Hughes's hearing [Fieldnotes, 10 March 1999]. However, it was a prevalent and pervasive part of playground life which could be observed every time I went out at breaktime. It generally consisted of a rapid exchange of insults between two pupils, which often followed a pre-prepared script. They were following a set routine of verbal jousting, and although the cusses were quite personal, often referring to the other person's lack of intelligence, the vast majority seemed to be effecting an entertaining performance as a way of passing the time, and not doing much more than having a laugh. Some saw it as fun, but teasing and name-calling are fine if you are strong and on the winning side. Constructing themselves as funny and witty could enhance a pupil's popularity and prestige (Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Francis, 2000), and cusses were supposed to be exemplars of wit

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which appeared to abrogate the need to be able to tell good jokes. Humour is obviously a highly subjective and value-laden phenomenon, but I have to say that I found most cusses pretty unfunny. However, I will give you two examples to allow readers to judge for themselves: 'You're so dumb, you tried to drown a goldfish', and: 'You're so stupid, you got run down by a parked car.'

The ability to 'hold your own' in a slanging match was seen as an important way of gaining and maintaining status: cusses often lasted for about half-a-dozen exchanges before one party either got bored or ran out of cusses to say; in some senses they were rather like a tennis match with each 'player' taking turns to make a 'hit'. Although most cussing 'matches' lasted no more than a minute, and were often enjoyed by both the cusser and the cussee, some developed into nastier, protracted affairs over a period of days. The conversation below is the first time I come across the term:

JS:	Is it important to be able to tell good jokes?
Jinesh:	No/
Jameil:	No.... it's like...cussing
JS:	Cussing, what is cussing?
Jinesh: […]	It's hard to explain/
Jameil:	It's something like, say someone calls you a name, you can say a name back to them that's worse/
JS:	Oh, Ok and then they say a name back to you
Jinesh:	Yeah/
Jameil:	And then people are frightened, and they see who is the best cusser

Jameil's last comment is an indication that, although some boys used cussing to gain status/prestige within their peer group, there was also an accompanying pressure of peer evaluation. Jameil reckoned himself to be something of an expert, and it became apparent that some boys would be recruited as helpers to provide good cusses when cussing matches took place in full public view, rather like duelling attendants. The effect of these insults depended on the context and the size and type of the audience present. As I have mentioned, although the majority usually started off as a joke, they could be some irritating, upsetting and demoralising, and sometimes they degenerated into serious arguments or even fights.

Jameil	Say we had a fight, and it's a bit like having a lawyer, so you can

	get someone else to cuss them down, and I'm the best cusser […] say Benjamin had a fight with Richard, Benjamin would probably get someone like Gavin or Robert or someone, and Richard would probably get CT/
JS:	What as cussers?
Jameil:	Yeah, and say Benjamin loses, he gets someone better than CT
JS:	Who is better than CT?
Jameil:	I'm the best cusser in the school
JS:	So a cusser would say a worse word that he could say?
Jinesh:	Yeah/
Jameil:	Because I've got the dictionary
JS:	So you look them up, do you? So you're well prepared?
Jameil:	I've got the cussing dictionary
JS:	Where did you get it from, there's a special book is there?
Jameil:	Yeah, when I went to Blackpool

Jameil was physically slight and not very good at games, and his projected image as a cussing authority was the probably his best strategy to use to establish himself in the peer group hierarchy. In fact, not every boy shared Jameil's inflated opinion of himself, and many thought that his cusses relied too heavily on swearing rather than on any genuine wit, and that he also said them 'just to gain attention'. Many cusses did, however, contain swear words for by the end of the junior school many boys are in the process of disengaging from their childhood past (Harris, 1998), and using language replete with swear words and sexualised imagery were considered, by some of the boys, to be a testimony to their forthcoming engagement with their adolescent future; moreover, they were a necessary ingredient that defined their cusses apart from lower juniors boys who were deemed to be unready and uninitiated. People were certainly admired for cussing within the peer group: Vinny, Jinesh and Richard were thought of as being particularly good (witty) but the best cusser of all was said by many to be CT who could 'cuss anyone down.' In fact, some of the girls said they thought that cussing really took off when CT arrived in the school at the beginning of Year 5.

In their study into racism in the secondary school, Kelly and Cohn (1988) found that the single worst form of name calling concerned 'the family', or more accurately, 'the mother'. This was the same at Peterfield, and although I did not come across a single example of racist cussing, most of

the serious cusses had misogynist undertones and began with: 'Your mum....' which was a highly personalised attack on identity. Two girls told me that CT's favourite expression was, 'Your mum…' , and although it could still be a more straightforward type of direct insult such as: 'Your mum's belt is the size of the equator,' many invariably, concerned sexual mores/appetites; for example: 'Your mum has felt more knobs than the gasman.' Kehily and Nayak (1997, p.73) argue that the reference to a boys' mother exploits 'the contradictory "private" emotions of maternal affection and the public disavowal of the "feminine",' where males are positioned as some kind of moral guardians of their mother's (and girlfriends and sisters) sexual reputations.

Although some pupils were able to 'laugh it off,' some of these cusses were calculatingly and gratuitously designed to hurt and provoke a reaction; they have a direct link to bullying (Olweus, 1993; Sharp and Smith, 1994), and it was these types which sometimes ended up in a fight. Cussing occurred between girls as well, but not with the same frequency or intensity. Girls and boys would also cuss each other, but the major difference in girl-to-girl cussing was that girls did not refer to another girl's mother.

I do not know where cussing came from at Petersfield but it was a phenomenon created and passed on through successive generations by the informal peer group culture, and was an expression of counter-school resistance. Mrs Flowers described it as being 'nightmarish', and taking up a lot of her, and other teacher's, time. Mr Hughes told me that he had a theory that the TV programme *South Park* was the main influence and prime mover behind cussing but, although it might have injected a new impetus and provided a few more ideas, the pupils themselves said that it had been going for as long as they could remember. However, in my last visit, during the last four weeks of the summer term, the amount of cussing seemed to have declined and this was confirmed in the interviews: some of the boys said that they had 'just got tired, [of it] 'cos it was the same,' and others told me that it was 'not in fashion anymore'. Whether or not this was because more of the boys' time had been spent playing football during the summer term will have to remain a speculation but it is still, nevertheless, a plausible possibility.

Conclusions

This paper has looked at the relationship between the formal and informal school cultures in one junior school, how the boys classify themselves, and, in particular, the resources and strategies used by Year 6 boys to construct masculinities and establish status/prestige amongst their peers. The

peer group is recognised as a key area of school life which has a profound and powerful influence on the formation of identities. However, pupils live their lives at school within the particular historical, economic, political and cultural contexts of their society: these structures and pressures influence school's policies and organisations which, in turn, mean that there are different possibilities/opportunities in different settings for pupils to gain status: while some are open, others are more limited or even closed. Status may be acquired individually, or may come through, and be confirmed by, the sense of belonging to a particular friendship group, but it is not given, but is contested through negotiation and renegotiation, and once it is achieved there will be a daily need to defend and maintain it.

Status was an integral component of the boys' ongoing construction of their masculinities, and, as in other settings, there was a hierarchy of masculine types: certain forms were more valorised and dominant than others which were, consequently, subordinated and actively derogated. At Petersfield, the large dominant group of boys positioned and defined itself against the smaller group by using the concepts of 'difference' and their 'deficiency' (or lack) in certain, ordained, (but largely ephemeral) local-culturally desirable attributes.

As the boys were not always able to draw upon an already made and established set of resources they often had to improvise and create their own, and this made the ways of doing masculinity less visible, more fluid and unstable. The formal school culture at Petersfield was primarily concerned with academic standards (as measured by the SAT results) and the regulation and control of pupil identity, and competitive games/sport was consigned to the margins of school life. Sometimes the aspirations of the formal culture coincided and were often in harmony with the informal culture, and, for instance, in class 6H, pupils could work hard and succeed academically without any peer reprovement or equation with femininity. At other times, the two cultures clashed causing pupil resistance which was exemplified by the routine of cussing which, although was another option open to the pupils to gain status, was a practice created by the pupils themselves. One major area of contestation was the ongoing struggle over the control of the pupils' bodies. Whereas the school tried to produce 'docile' bodies with the body *acted upon* by techniques such as regulation, classification, normalisation and surveillance (Foucault, 1977), the boys' bodies in this paper are often *bodies which act*, full of embodied power and agency. (Crossley, 1996). In fact, as Connell (1995) maintains, it is possible to view the bodies as both objects and agents.

The headteacher, Mrs Flowers, seemed to have a wish to make Petersfield impervious to certain outside social and cultural practices which she deemed to be undesirable, but the school could not

be hermetically sealed, and outside influences crept inside the school gates such as the wearing of trainers. Moreover, despite policies being largely inimical to sport in general, and football in particular, the single most effective way for boys to gain status and popularity amongst peers was by demonstrating athleticism and/or physicality with their bodies through competitive playground games, many of which were again designed and invented by the boys. As sport also contains any number of positive values it could be argued that Petersfield (and Mrs Flowers in particular) could have spent more time promoting the beneficial virtues of sport, rather than fixating on its harmful and anti-social tendencies. Some schools may be tempted to discourage or even ban competitive sport, but this paper has shown that this has little significant effect in preventing (at least in schools) the construction of masculine hierarchies with the dominant forms predicated on the physicality of the body.

Jon Swain, May 2001

Key to transcripts

[text]   Background information;

[…]   extracts edited out of transcript for sake of clarity;

...   pause;

/   moment when interruption begins.

[1] LEA is a Local Authority or state school, as opposed to a private or independent school; junior school contains pupils between ages 7-11

[2] OFSTED is the Office for Standards in Education, officially the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England. It was set up in 1992 and is a non ministerial government department.

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

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Options open **Options limited/restricted** **Options virtually closed** Working hard/gaining academic achievement

Physicality/athleticism
CussingSporting prowess

Wearing trainers

Being tough/hard

Exhibiting bad behaviour around the schoolWearing 'makes'/fashionable clothes

Exhibiting bad behaviour in Mr Hughes's class

Figure 1