

Gendered Learning Practices: Exploring The Costs Of Hegemonic Masculinity For Girls And Boys In Schools

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Introduction

In this paper I want to explore the effects of dominant models of masculinity on learning in schools and on the costs for both girls and boys. In addressing issues around educational disadvantage, I want to focus on the gender system which regulates and structures knowledge and specific regimes of learning in terms of an oppressive private-public binarism (see Connell, 1994). I intend to argue that in order to address some of the problems which affect and inhibit learning for girls and boys in schools, attention needs to be directed to the effects and workings of dominant models of masculinity in an attempt to move beyond an oppressive gender bind (see Davies, 1993; Kenway, 1993; Weinreich-Haste, 1986; Armstrong, 1986).

By focusing on my own research into boys' under-achievement and under-representation in subject English, and by drawing on a series of ethnographic studies (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Connell, 1989; Kessler et al, 1985; Wolpe, 1988), I hope to elaborate in more specific terms on how hegemonic masculinity is produced and regulated within school settings and how this affects learning for both girls and boys. In short, this paper represents an attempt to draw attention to the role of various institutional practices, pedagogies and technologies in the formation of gendered capacities and knowledge structured around a public-private dualism.

Boys and educational disadvantage

Last year in the popular media a lot of attention was drawn to the issue of boys' and their educational achievement in comparison to girls, who are now supposedly out-performing the boys (Arndt, 1994; West, 1994). The common catchcry, 'What about the boys?' appears to be driven by a backlash mentality and, as Foster (1994) argues, is based on the presumption that girls have now achieved equal status with boys in terms of educational attainment. I want to draw attention to the work of Foster (1994) and Gilbert and Gilbert (1994), in order to establish a particular theoretical and conceptual framework for assessing educational disadvantage as it applies differentially to girls and boys and

specific regimes of learning. The point I want to make is that I do not think that it is possible to assign a disadvantaged status to boys in the same way that it has been assigned to girls. Many of the claims about boys as a disadvantaged group and the effects of masculinity are based on the 'poor boy' principle (see Wearing, 1994). Wearing claims that one of the problems with research which construct boys as a disadvantaged group is that it fails to adequately address the asymmetrical distribution of power between men and women (see also Connell, 1994). What is left out often are the advantages and benefits that are accrued to men within the hegemonic institutional structures of the state.

West's work (1995) is based on the assumption that boys are deprived and neglected, both emotionally and in terms of the ways in which they are forced to behave according to the dictates of rigid and narrow stereotypes. His work, however, is not based on an adequate theorisation of power and disadvantage and is limited in its capacity to address the issues facing girls in schools in terms of their treatment and positioning in relation to boys. In fact, the effect of his claims and research is to block out the very significant ways in which regimes of practice within educational institutions operate to disadvantage girls in ways that affect their post-school access to particular kinds of employment. Wyn and Wilson (1993), for example, make the point that even though retention rates for girls are higher than for boys in the post-compulsory school years, girls' representation in specific fields of employment and training programs is different from that of boys. Foster (1994) also reiterates that in the public domain women are still underpaid and under-represented in status professions. She also claims that while girls are achieving at the same level as or higher than the boys, they are still under-represented in those non-traditional subject such as physics. Her work is invaluable in that it provides a cautionary tale for those who choose to jump on the feminist backlash bandwagon to claim that girls are outperforming boys. The gender dynamics involved in subject participation and learning are much more complex and involved and require close scrutiny when assigning a disadvantaged status to boys.

Taking into consideration the complexity and the problems involved in analysing and identifying disadvantage for boys, it is important to consider the basis of the claims that will be made in this paper for addressing the ways in which dominant models of masculinity affect and inhibit learning. By focusing on the various ways in which hegemonic masculinity structures specific kinds of learning experiences for both boys and girls in schools, I hope to draw attention to ways in which learning is regulated within a specific regime of institutional and social practices which limit students' capacity for learning. In this way, I believe that interventionist strategies designed to address educational disadvantage and learning difficulties for both girls and boys can be carried out without detracting from or blocking out the focus on (and the need to continue to address) issues around improving girls' educational outcomes and capacity for learning. As Connell (1994) claims:

The object of knowledge is not 'men' but the gender system in which they are constituted as men; and the interests that can be mobilised in support of educational work are those that relate men to women, not those that distinguish men from women.

Gilbert and Gilbert (1994) in their paper, 'Discourse and Disadvantage: Studying the Gender Dimensions of Educational Disadvantage', provide a set of criteria for assigning a disadvantaged status to specific groups on the basis of their social and cultural location. They provide three broad indicators of educational disadvantage:

- those denied access to educational opportunity
- those who leave school early despite their satisfactory performance at school
- those who are prevented from achieving as a result of social and environmental factors.

Quite clearly these indicators can be used to assign a disadvantaged status to boys in the same way as has been done for girls. Gilbert and Gilbert claim, however, that while it is necessary to evaluate educational outcomes in terms of the principles of access, retention, participation and attainment, such an approach is inadequate in explicating the dynamics and processes by which educational disadvantage operates. They stress that there are problems involved with the group indicator approach or practice because it is based on defining a designated group such as boys or girls by a single criterion. The effect of this is to block out other variables or factors which might intersect with gender, such as class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. In other words, differences and diversity within specific groups can easily be ignored. Elsewhere, I have written about the constitution of masculinity as a monolithic category within the field of psychoanalytic and gender theory, pointing to the need to consider and to elaborate alternative versions and styles of masculinity in attempting to move beyond an oppressive gender bind (see Martino, 1995).

Within the conceptual framework for discussing and assigning disadvantage provided by Gilbert and Gilbert, it is possible to consider the various ways in which boys and girls as two disparate groups are disadvantaged in different but related ways within a specific institutional structure, within which is regulated an ensemble of socio-cultural practices. For instance, class and race factors might contribute to the educational disadvantage of both boys and girls in terms of educational attainment, but the disadvantage is not the same. The positioning of boys and girls within the regime of institutional practices of the school has different effects and consequences for boys and girls-different forms of harassment are regulated within the gendered regimes of the school (see Ollis & Tomaszewski, 1993); different modes of learning and capacities are formed within students (see Martino, 1994a)-and these intersect with race and class factors which exacerbate already existing inequalities for girls.

Gilbert and Gilbert (1994) provide a useful theoretical framework for examining the social and historically contingent practices and dynamics which operate within schools (and the wider society) to produce particular forms of educational disadvantage. The processes by which students become gendered in schools through curriculum, teaching and disciplinary practices and technologies, for instance, are an important consideration in a discussion of learning difficulties, and of problems which boys and girls experience in their participation or lack of participation in particular subject areas which have

become feminised or masculinised fields of learning (see Martino, 1993; Kenway, 1987; Curtis, 1992; Shaw, 1984; Wolpe, 1988).

Gender and reading difficulties

One of the major effects of hegemonic masculinity, apart from its social consequences in terms of violence, harassment, avoidance of intimacy and denial of expressing emotion, is the impact that it has on boys' learning in subjects like English which are considered to be feminine. In fact, O'Doherty (1994) claims that boys' performance in literacy tests in the primary school years in New South Wales is much lower than that of girls. Statistical analysis of students' performance in the Tertiary Entrance English Examination (TEE) in Western Australia also indicates that twice as many boys fail English as girls, and that twice as many girls achieve distinctions as boys (see Secondary Education Authority (Western Australia), 1991-1994; Martino, 1993; Zuel, 1994). Claims have also been made by Lee (1980) that boys have lower reading levels than girls and that they do not feel motivated to read. Lee indicates that boys' rejection of reading may be linked to their perception of reading as a feminine activity. Zuel (1994) also provides the following statistics which require further investigation:

- 90% of the students in special classes for those with emotional and behavioural disturbance are boys
- 75% of the students in language or intensive reading classes are boys
- 75% of the students suspended from school are boys
- 90% of serious assaults are committed by boys.

Clearly, further research is required to establish the link between such behavioural and learning problems and the effects of dominant models of masculinity. However, such statistics do indicate how much already is being spent on boys' needs, contrary to the claims that too much attention is now being directed to improving educational and learning outcomes for girls. Despite the fact that such statistics can be used to support the view that boys are severely disadvantaged in terms of their low levels of literacy, other studies have found no significant differences between the sexes in reading performance or in the incidence of reading disability cases (see Downing et al, 1982). Downing et al make the point that reading disabilities in boys are often associated with emotional difficulties which are manifested in terms of aggressive and violent behaviours in the classroom. This leads teachers to direct their attention to the boys who are experiencing problems with reading and may account for why more boys than girls are referred to reading clinics for remediation. Girls are simply overlooked by teachers since poor female readers exhibit less aggressive behaviours. Gilbert and Rowe (1989), in referring to this study, also raise questions about whether boys' concentration in remedial reading classes can be seen as an indication that they are more at risk than girls in developing the requisite reading abilities. This point is also made in a much more recent study conducted by Flynn and Rahbar (1994). They tested the hypothesis that proportionately more boys than girls experience reading difficulties which they claim has been attributed to 'a possible gender-based genetic etiology for specific reading disability (LD)'. Their

findings, however, reject the view that there is a genetic predisposition for reading failure in boys. Like Shaywitz et al (1990), they found no significant differences in the prevalence of reading disability for boys when compared with girls. What they did find, however, was that twice as many boys as girls were referred to remedial reading classes by teachers. They claim that the reasons for this may be related to the overt and disruptive behaviours of the boys which draw attention to the problems that they are experiencing with reading, while detracting from the girls who may also be experiencing similar problems but not exhibiting the same aggressive behaviours. The girls, they state, 'may only be noticed when their intellectual abilities are much lower than boys and their academic difficulties more pronounced.' This study, therefore, highlights the need to examine educational and teaching practices in terms of their capacity to make invisible the extent of girls' reading difficulties.

Downing et al, however, refer to other studies which support the view that boys are 'oriented more toward a verbally receptive and motorically expressive mode of response' which they claim could account for the difficulties which boys experience in learning to read. Are boys and girls trained indirectly through specific child-rearing and other social practices to acquire particular kinds of skills and capacities which become increasingly gender-differentiated as they grow older? Are such differences produced at home and in schools in terms of the differential ways in which boys and girls are treated by significant adults and role-models in their lives? If this is the case, it would account for why there might be significant differences between boys' and girls' reading abilities. Poynton (1985), for instance, refers to studies which document the differential treatment of infants on the basis of gender. She also documents the following research findings:

- there is more vocal-verbal communication between mothers and daughters than between mothers and sons at the age of three
- girls in the first two years are looked at and talked to more than boys
- mothers playing with two-year-olds are more likely to develop conversations with girls than they are with boys
- girls and boys in the same family are addressed differently-girls more softly, boys roughly
- outside play is encouraged more for boys than girls
- sex-typed toys encourage girls to be communicative and to develop nurturing skills while boys are encouraged to develop technical competencies and physical dexterity.

The above findings as documented by Poynton do point strongly to the differential trainings that boys and girls receive as they are growing up, which might help us to understand why boys tend to reject learning practices and refuse to develop capacities which they identify as feminine.

Downing et al also make the point that boys' lack of interest in reading could be related to their perception of reading as a feminised practice and, hence, as a threat to their masculinity (see also Martino, 1993). They stress that the link between acquisition of reading skills and attitudes to reading has not been established and that further research

into this aspect of literacy education is required. They end their paper on a note of caution about the sex-related differences in reading behaviour and levels between boys and girls, however, claiming that 'the differences noted between the sexes in reading are generally small in comparison to the range of differences within a sex, and have proved difficult to measure'.

Adolescent boys' involvement and participation in subject English

In focusing on my research into boys' under-achievement and under-representation in subject English, I want to draw attention to the following:

- the structure and organisation of curriculum in schools within which gender-differentiated fields of knowledge and capacities are mapped out in terms of a bipolarisation of maths/science and humanities subjects
- the effects of dominant models of masculinity which structure the ways in which students perceive particular subjects and how this affects their motivation to learn within gender-differentiated fields of the curriculum.

Both these factors are important in consideration of the ways in which learning is regulated for students on the basis of gender. At the institutional level of the structure and organisation of the curriculum, it is important to stress the historically contingent practices which have produced gender-differentiated bodies of knowledge in schools. Attention needs to be drawn to the ways in which particular subjects have become feminised or masculinised in terms of the structuring of the curriculum around a public-private binarism and its capacity to influence learning on the basis of gender. This public-private dichotomy, as Armstrong (1988), Theobald (1987), and MacDonald (1980) point out, has its basis historically in the sexist meritocratic practices of the industrial revolution. During this time the rising middle classes were concerned to educate their daughters to assume appropriate domesticated roles as 'fit companions' for their husbands who had become the new leaders in the rising capitalist society of the nineteenth century. It was within such an historical context that a particular gender-differentiated curriculum was developed in which humanities subjects were designed for women, while other subjects such as business and commercial studies were designed to prepare men for their active role in the public domain.

Theobald (1987), in fact, specifically takes up this notion of the gendering of knowledge and specific capacities at the basis of the binary structuring of the curriculum. She identifies the 'natural affinity' between feminine attributes of intuition, emotionality and expressivity associated with the humanities and a particular form of rationality associated with the maths/science subjects. MacDonald (1980) also develops the idea that the curriculum is structured around the dichotomies of private and public knowledge with specific kinds of gendered capacities becoming mobilised within particular subject disciplines. Conceptually, their work is important in providing a basis for a discussion of

the effects of an ensemble of learning practices which are regulated within specific subjects in terms of a split between masculine rationality and feminine intuition/emotionality-in terms of a public-private divide. This is reflected most clearly in the polarisation of maths/science subjects at one end of the curriculum continuum and the English/humanities at the other. It is in this way that educationalists like Thomas (1990) and Kelly (1987) draw attention to the ways in which certain forms of knowledge and patterns of behaviour become hierarchically structured and valorised within such a gender regime-maths, in being assigned a masculine status, is positively valued in that it is set in opposition to subject English, which becomes designated as the devalued feminised other. It is in this way that certain subjects become associated with males and others with females-a cluster of specific kinds of gendered capacities becomes mobilised around certain subjects and this dictates certain patterns of learning. Kelly and Thomas both claim that subjects which become designated as masculine can conflict with girls' developing sense of femininity and, hence, influence their participation and motivation. The converse of course can be applied to boys whose developing masculinity comes into conflict with subjects such as English which is attributed a feminine status. The gender regime which is institutionalised in terms of the structure and organisation of the curriculum clearly has the capacity to influence patterns of learning and the motivational dynamics for girls and boys depending on students' differential training as gendered subjects.

Weinreich-Haste (1986) also elaborates on this point about the gendered polarisation of subjects at the basis of the dichotomised curriculum. Different ways of knowing which are gendered have become associated with particular subjects and, like Armstrong (1988), Weinreich-Haste advocates the need to escape from this binary categorisation of thought at the basis of this split between maths/sciences and the English/humanities subjects. She claims that ways of knowing or capacities which are not necessarily attributed to either men or women on the basis of their gender need to be elaborated so that the restrictions of such a gender bind and way of thinking can be avoided (see Davies, 1993; Kenway, 1993).

In order to explore whether boys and girls expressed very different attitudes towards English and whether there was a link between masculinity and poor performance in subject English, I distributed a questionnaire to Year 10 (n=156) and Year 11 students (n=93) at a private co-educational school in the metropolitan area of Perth. The students who completed the survey were of middle-class socio-economic status. The questionnaire basically used open-ended questions which required students to explain their perceptions of English (see Martino, 1994a). The data did indicate that there were differences in the ways in which boys and girls perceived English, which related to their position as gendered subjects and which appeared to influence their performance along gender-differentiated lines. In other words, particular models of masculinity and femininity clearly influenced students' preferences for particular modes of learning which were clearly gender-inflected, and which affected boys' performance and participation in a subject which they felt was suited more to girls.

What was interesting about the boys' responses was that they tended to see English as a subject which was suited more to girls and this clearly affected their learning:

I believe [that English is suited more to girls] because most of the work is about emotions and feelings and girls are more used to this or have better practice at expressing their feelings. (Student 39)

Many boys tended to see English in this way, as a subject which required them to express their emotions, and they clearly felt threatened by this. They did not regard English as manly-it conflicted with the dominant image of masculinity which emphasises being tough, strong, aggressive and in control. To express emotion is perceived by boys as a sign of effeminacy or of being girlish, which is considered to be a put down. Rejecting what is considered to be a feminine attribute is one of the ways in which masculinity is policed and regulated (see Martino, 1994b; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Connell; 1989). It is in this sense that learning for boys and girls is socially regulated, with gender playing a significant role in influencing boys' participation, performance and involvement in a subject which they perceive to require them to develop feminine capacities. In short, the construction or formation of gendered capacities is clearly a factor influencing boys' learning within subject English.

*English is more suited to girls because girls express their feelings ... the texts are all about feelings and they're never action or interesting. I think English is boring and we know how to talk so why do we have to learn more. Also reading is lame, sitting down looking at words is pathetic. Watching TV and playing sport and the computer is way more interesting.
(Student 56)*

What is interesting about this response is the way in which this boy clearly sets sport and computer games in opposition to reading. In fact, many boys tended to compare English and reading to other kinds of activities which they preferred, and rejected English on this basis:

*Boys don't read as much as girls because of sport.
(Student 63)*

Many boys, in fact, rejected reading, perceiving it to be a girls' practice or activity which clearly conflicted with their developing sense of masculinity.

Other boys' stereotyped perceptions of English were based on similar oppositions. They tended to make sense of their participation and involvement in English by comparing it to sport which they clearly valued as the preserve of males:

*I'm not sure about anyone else, but I would rather play footy.
(Student 15)*

I say this stereotypical [that English is more suited to girls] because boys don't read as much because of sport etc.
(Student 63)

English is more suited to girls because boys like sport, heavy stuff but girls' personalities are more suited to English because they are usually more on the quiet side than boys ... I don't actually like the texts I study this year because my personality doesn't fit the stuff I'm studying.
(Student 75)

What is significant about these responses is that they foreground the regimes of learning that are regulated for boys within specific subject areas. Sport is clearly an important part of these boys' lives and their investment in such a practice is related to the model of masculinity they have been trained to value (see Martino, 1994b). Sport clearly confirms these boys' developing sense of what it means to be a man-active as opposed to passive, strong as opposed to weak, tough as opposed to vulnerable, hard as opposed to soft. Through studying English these boys clearly feel that their masculinity is not supported or validated; rather, it appears to be brought into question in a subject which requires them to express their emotions and to behave in unmanly ways. It is clear that further investigation into the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is produced, sustained and regulated through sporting practices in schools is necessary, in order for better understanding of the effects of such a regime of practice on the lives and learning patterns of both boys and girls.

English in many of the boys' eyes was considered to be a passive subject suited to the quiet disposition of girls while the 'heavy stuff' involving physical activity was seen as more appropriate for boys. This has important implications in that it emphasises the role of a particular set of schooling practices through which a particular version of masculinity is sustained-a version of masculinity which clearly appears to be influencing the literacy and learning practices of boys within subject English. The study also highlights that boys from a very early age are socialised or trained to behave, think, act and respond in very specific ways according to a particular set of expectations about what defines manly behaviour. This has led to boys feeling the need to prove their masculinity through denial and fear which are based on a denigration of the other (see Forsey, 1990; Hite, 1981). What this means is that boys from a very early age learn to define themselves as male in opposition to females-females become identified as the other-and the data does point to the effects of such a training in relation to boys' literacy practices within subject English. In other words, through an ensemble of practices, the male body/mind is assigned particular traits and characteristics such as the capacity for strength, the capacity for rational thought, the capacity to wield power, the capacity to be sexually active and the capacity to be in control. Similarly, the female body/mind is assigned oppositional capacities such as the capacity for nurturing and caring, the capacity for emotionality and receptivity to the needs of others, etc.

It is important, I think, to investigate further this ensemble of practices and processes through which certain versions of masculinity and femininity are produced and sustained,

for this clearly has implications for elaborating an alternative set of practices through which alternative versions of masculinity and femininity can be produced outside of an oppositional framework. Is it possible to develop practices through which alternative versions of masculinity can be produced for boys-versions of being which are not based on a denigration of the other? This is necessary in order to address some of the learning difficulties which both boys and girls experience within the current system of gender which is institutionalised in schools through the binary structuring and organisation of the curriculum, as well as through the informal and routinised practices of school officials (teachers, those working at the administrative level, etc) and students in their peer groups (see Mac an Ghail, 1994; Walker, 1988; Wolpe, 1988; Kessler et al, 1985; Danby, 1994).

It seems that boys denigrate traits and attributes which in Western cultures traditionally have become associated with girls. A necessary area of further research would be to trace the historically specific formation of particular gendered capacities in order to map out a typology or grid of the ensemble of localised practices through which hegemonic masculinity has been produced (see Martino, 1995). For instance, how is it that English has come to be associated with particular kinds of capacities that are considered to be feminine? This has also been the case with Maths and the Physical Sciences (see Kelly, 1987). For instance, this is reflected in my study where students tended to value one particular subject at the expense of another and this varied according to the gender of the student. For example, the boys tended to place or to define English in opposition to other subjects which they clearly perceived as more masculine:

I find English hard. It's because there are no set rules for reading texts. It's hard for me to express myself on paper and, therefore, I don't do as well as I do in other subjects. English isn't like Maths where you have rules on how to do things and where there are right and wrong answers. In English you have to write what you feel and that's what I don't like.

(Student 12)

English to me is one of those subjects where it has its ups and downs. Most of the things we do in English are interesting but some get lengthy and make you want to fall asleep e.g. the study of Romeo and Juliet. Also it gets a bit confusing at times because there are no real answers to things. The answer could be a variety of things, you're never really wrong. It's not like Maths or Science where there is one set answer to everything

(Student 20)

Student 12 identifies English as a subject which requires him to express his feelings and he finds this difficult. The reason for this could perhaps be explained in terms of the way in which he has been trained to adopt a particular mode of gendered behaviour according to specific sex-appropriate dispositions that are prescribed for males. His response also points to the effects of a particular teaching practice in the formation of specific kinds of literate capacities in students within subject English and which this student clearly identifies as feminised. It is in this sense that he perceives learning tasks associated with subject English as sex-inappropriate. In other words, it is precisely this perception of

English as a feminised learning practice that leads him to define the subject in opposition to Maths/Science, with which he feels more comfortable because there are clear right and wrong answers. For both these students, subjects are gender marked-English is seen as a feminised learning practice in its association with developing expressive capacities. Moreover, its devalued status for boys is regulated in relation to a validation of maths/science subjects which are considered to be more rational and straight forward in the kinds of learning practices that they promote.

The boys clearly respond more favourably to the learning tasks associated with the maths/science subjects which conform to a male model for processing information and solving problems. These boys feel that in English they are not able to arrive at a definite solution to a problem but rather see the subject as more fluid and indeterminate in its boundaries and requirements. This is perhaps what student 39 means when he claims that English is:

a very laid back subject that concentrates on people's feelings and emotions rather than on fact and knowledge.

Reference

What these responses point to is that particular ways of thinking and gendered patterns of learning are prescribed for students in schools and within specific subject areas. Such ways of thinking, however, are not an effect of biological or hormonal differences, or of language practices for that matter, but of a specific set of social, schooling, teaching and child-rearing practices through which particular regimes of learning become established (see Tyler, 1993; Meredyth & Tyler, 1993). Moreover, it is through such an ensemble of practices that norms for socially regulating learning and gender become established. Regimes of truth are set up within the normative practices that operate within schools to produce particular versions of femininity and masculinity which clearly prescribe specific patterns of learning. It is within this framework that patterns and styles of learning which are set up within specific subject areas and the practices that produce them need to be examined more closely. This issue I think is foregrounded when the above responses are compared with those provided by the girls:

I feel motivated to study in English because it's a fun subject and you have freedom in English-unlike subjects such as Maths and Science-and your view isn't necessarily wrong. There is no definite right or wrong answer and you have the freedom to say what you feel is right without it being rejected as a wrong answer.
(Student 13)

English is a very worthwhile subject because it is different to subjects like Maths which is all numbers and working out things.
(Student 22)

Actually I really enjoy this subject very much ... I think English is the easiest subject for me because for example in Maths, Science you have to know all the formulas etc. where English, you only need to read and answer questions, essays

etc. and I enjoy doing it ...
(Student 64)

These girls see English positively and reject maths and science. They appear to enjoy the freedom that English allows in terms of being able to express their feelings and in not feeling compelled to follow rigid guidelines or formulas to arrive at a definitive answer. We have seen, though, that with boys the converse was true—they responded positively to Maths precisely because it was based on problem-solving tasks which require a definite answer.

i.e. learning style is constructed

Overall, the study tends to highlight the link between the construction of gender and patterns or styles of learning. Regimes of learning have been set up for boys and girls on the basis of their gender, and particular subjects are perceived as gender-inflected and, hence, as requiring specific capacities which are sex-appropriate. More explicitly, English tended to be perceived as requiring capacities which boys considered to be more suited to girls and which conflicted with their view of masculinity. The girls, on the other hand, responded positively to English and to the specific set of relational capacities that they perceived to be endorsed through their involvement in the subject. However, the point is that learning is affected and regulated both for boys and girls within such a system which locks students into defining masculine and feminine attributes in binary, oppositional terms. This also has consequences in terms of perpetuating gender stereotypes associated with particular subjects. It is in this way that a particularly oppressive version of masculinity based on the macho ethic of physical strength, competitive independence, virility and sexual prowess becomes institutionalised via specific technologies and apparatuses which prescribe norms for behaving, learning and teaching within the context specific milieu of the school (see Hunter, 1994). What it means to be a man and how to behave as a man are produced within specific institutional apparatuses and involves a denial of expressing emotions and an avoidance of intimacy. This appears to be at the basis of boys' rejection of English as a girls' subject. In fact, as the following boy's homophobic response indicates, it is boys' fear and rejection of the feminine that plays a major role in defining a particular masculine identity which comes into conflict in their study of a subject which they believe encourages feminine ways of knowing:

English is more suited to girls because it's not the way guys think ... this subject is the biggest load of bullshit I have ever done. Therefore, I don't particularly like this subject. I hope you aren't offended by this, but most guys who like English are faggots.
(Student 81)

This response is quite significant in that it raises important issues about homophobia and the role it plays in the construction of dominant models of masculinity and how this inhibits learning for this low-achieving English student. English conflicts with this student's tenuous sense of masculinity. Moreover, he questions the masculinity of those boys who enjoy English and constructs them as homosexual. Consequently, he suggests that they are effeminate in some way for responding positively to a girls' subject. English

in its association with femininity and feminine ways of knowing leads this boy to reject it as a worthwhile subject. At the basis of such a response is a rejection of the other, based on fear, and it is such a mechanism that leads boys to continually feel the need to prove their masculinity (see Martino, 1994b; 1994c).

Updiction

The important issue that this boy's response raises relates to the role of homophobia in the policing of masculinity for boys. I want to raise several questions which I will take up later when examining more closely the specific schooling practices, processes and technologies that operate in the formation of particular versions of masculinity. How might homophobia affect the kinds of learning and social activities that boys choose to engage in? To what extent is such a mechanism for regulating and producing hegemonic masculinity built into the system through the specific teaching and peer group social practices that produce particular kinds of gendered subjects?

The study into boys' perceptions of subject English is important for a number of reasons within the context of this paper:

- it identifies mechanisms and processes which affect learning on the basis of gender
- it draws attention to gendered patterns in styles of learning and how this might affect learning within specific subjects
- it highlights how the gender-inflected nature of subjects can influence and affect learning for boys and girls on the basis of particular models of masculinity and femininity which they have internalised
- it draws attention to the structuring and organisation of the curriculum at the systems level to highlight how particular bodies of knowledge and learning practices are implicated in social technologies for forming particular kinds of gendered subjects and capacities.

The study also points to the need to move beyond thinking about masculinity and femininity as oppositional categories or sets of traits or behaviours. Strategies need to be developed to encourage students to think beyond such a gender bind and to consider alternative ways of knowing. When alternative and less oppressive models of masculinity are made available, more flexibility will be provided for boys to take up a range of learning styles and ways of being and relating to others which are not based on a homophobic and misogynist denigration of the other. This will also have positive effects for girls.

Traditional masculinity, therefore, needs to be challenged so that both boys and girls can be encouraged to explore a range of ways of learning and being which are not locked into an oppressive binary structure. By targeting the construction of masculinity as an object of critical scrutiny it is possible to elaborate alternative ways of knowing. Once alternative models of masculinity become available, an alternative motivational dynamics becomes possible. In fact, particular pedagogies and reading practices have been developed in an attempt to elaborate less oppressive models of masculinity in the English classroom (see Martino & Mellor, 1995).

At the level of curriculum development and implementation, the answer does not lie necessarily in masculinising subject English or feminising maths/sciences to enhance the learning of boys and girls respectively in these subjects. This will only serve to reproduce a gendered set of cultural dualisms. More work, however, needs to be done in developing alternative bodies of knowledge in an attempt to reconstruct the curriculum (see Kenway, 1993). Kenway claims that a restructuring of the curriculum needs to take place for girls to ensure that their participation and success in the non-traditional school subjects are enhanced. Moreover, she claims that the curriculum needs to be restructured in such a way that it does not impose upon girls a single model of learning. Her approach is not one unlike that elaborated by Mellor and Patterson (1994) and Martino and Mellor (1995) in relation to developing specific reading practices in the English classroom, in an attempt to train students to develop particular critical capacities and competencies for reading gender, which we claim are necessary to elaborate less oppressive models of masculinity. Similarly, Kenway advocates an explicit pedagogy designed to teach students particular skills which are not necessarily tied to a binary structuring of gendered capacities. She claims that those educational practices that benefit all students across all school subjects and which contribute to the 'making of a compassionate and humane society' are the ones which should be endorsed. Her focus on the level of institutional practices and pedagogies, I think, is important in the development of alternative technologies which will produce different effects in terms of student learning.

This point about institutional practices and apparatuses in their capacity to produce particular kinds of learners and forms of learning is also taken up by Licht and Dweck (1984) and Walkerdine (1989), in their focus on the production of gendered patterns of success and failure in students' learning behaviours and orientation. Licht and Dweck (1984), for instance, take up the issue of learned helplessness with regard to girls' tendency to attribute their failures to lack of ability, while boys tend to attribute their learning difficulties to lack of effort. The study demonstrated that, relative to boys, girls appeared to have less confidence in their ability to succeed and that this affected their self-esteem. Moreover, they claim that it is more likely that teachers will themselves attribute boys' poor performance to a lack of effort or motivation, while accounting for the errors that girls make as an indicator of insufficient ability.

Walkerdine (1989), in fact, examines the apparatuses and technologies which have led to the production of femininity as poor performance. She claims that historically females were considered to lack the capacity for reason and she explores the complex network of practices and pedagogies which led to the production of such a truth. What is important about both studies is that they highlight the very significant ways in which teachers' practices and their positioning of students can influence and exacerbate learning. Such studies emphasise the role of teachers and pedagogies in their capacity to produce patterns of success and failure which have detrimental consequences for girls in terms of reinforcing learned helplessness and inhibiting their performance.

Bannister's work (1993) is also useful in developing a theoretical framework for theorising the ways in which gender differences and patterns of learning are produced through an ensemble of teaching and learning practices in schools and how the

apparatuses of developmental psychology and objects relations theory have produced 'a regime of truth about learning'. Bannister's work is important in drawing attention to ways in which particular truths about learning have been produced through specific practices and assessment techniques. She reviews studies which document the differences between boys' and girls' performance on particular modes of assessment-boys' superior performance on multiple-choice items is set against girls' superior performance on open-ended forms of essay writing tasks. She claims that such studies have been used to establish a truth about gender differences in cognitive styles of learning. This point is important because it draws attention to the processes-the practices and techniques-by which certain claims about the learner and his/her capacities become established as 'truth' (see Walkerdine, 1989).

Bannister critiques the ways in which feminist researchers such as Harding have drawn on object relations theory to explain differences in the ways males and females respond to science. Her point is that the learner or child is produced through the normalising practices of developmental psychology and Piagetian theories of cognitive development. What constitutes learning is informed by particular psychological theories which create an apparatus or an ensemble of techniques and practices for producing certain truths about the learner and learning. This also clearly relates to ways in which learning difficulties are produced as either socially constructed or physiologically determined through the normalising practices informed by particular theories about learning (see Nichols, 1995). In other words, learning difficulties are produced within particular regimes of practice. Bannister stresses the need, therefore, to examine closely the ways in which teaching and learning practices in specific localised contexts operate to produce certain patterns of learning and gendered attainment. She makes the point, for instance, that boys' superior achievement in science could be the effect of teachers' biased expectations and perceptions. She shifts the focus from examining the differences in learning styles between male and female students to exploring the processes by which such differences are produced. Thus, she advocates a focus on teaching practices and pedagogies in their capacity to produce particular kinds of learners.

This also relates to one of the major points made by Wolpe (1988) in her study about the effects of schooling which have produced particular truths about boys' impact on girls' educational outcomes. She claims that such feminist educators as Arnot (1984), Mahony (1985), Spender and Sarah (1980), and Weiner (1985) have provided simplistic monocausal explanations of boys' behaviour in relation to how it affects girls' performance in schools. She stresses that stereotypical views of girls as quiet and passive, and of boys as the problem, have been produced within a regime of practices which target boys in too simplistic a way. The effect of this is to block out the various ways in which girls can be disruptive in their refusal to learn. She claims that within a regime of feminist educational practices certain stereotypes about girls' and boys' behaviour in schools have been reinforced with boys' noisiness, demand for teachers' attention, need of discipline and sexual harassment of girls becoming the object of critical scrutiny. The effect of such research has been the establishment of a regime of truth about boys' behaviour as a whole group which ignores intra-group differences which are influenced by a range and ensemble of practices. This relates to the point made by Gilbert and Gilbert (1994) in

relation to the effects of the group principle when undertaking research into the gender dimensions of educational disadvantage. What needs to be targeted, therefore, when undertaking study into the effects of masculinity, is avoiding falling into the trap of reinforcing gender stereotypes, while examining the processes by which differences within groups of boys and girls are produced and how particular versions of masculinity and femininity are regulated.

Masculinity and learning: regimes of practice

In his ethnographic study of masculinity, Mac an Ghaill (1994) explores the ways in which dominant models of masculinity are produced in schools through specific regimes of practice. His study is important for a number of reasons:

- it details the specific normalising processes and practices by which particular versions and hierarchies of masculinity are produced
- it details the various ways in which masculinity is policed for boys through the mechanisms of homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality and misogyny, and highlights both the social and educational costs for boys of such a regime of practice
- it explores the interplay of class, race and gender relations in the production of particular versions of masculinity
- it develops further understanding about the effects of masculinity on patterns and styles of learning
- it explores the interplay between sexual and gendered practices within the context of the peer group network and how this relates to specific patterns of gendered learning.

In focusing on the social practices of working class heterosexual peer groups, Mac an Ghaill explores the range of masculinities formed within a particular school settings according to the interplay of intra-class variations and ethnicities. This work is important in the context of this paper on learning difficulties and the construction of gender, in that the effects of a macho style of masculinity are explored in terms of regulating learning for boys. Those boys who resisted such versions of masculinity were ridiculed, while others adopted such a masculine code as a defence against the class domination of the school. The 'macho lads' who were clearly the low achievers had learned particular anti-social behaviours such as truancy, coming late to lessons, refusing to answer teachers in class, etc., as a means of resisting and contesting the class-based authority of the system. Through such social practices and within the specific context of their peer groups, a particular macho version of masculinity was produced for these boys which was organised around conflict with the institutional authority of the school. The system set up an apparatus of disciplinary surveillance for policing and controlling these boys' behaviours which only appeared to exacerbate already existing learning difficulties and the boys' low levels of literacy. In fact, Mac an Ghaill suggests that these boys adopted an

aggressive macho style of masculinity in response to their failure and, hence, as a means of achieving an alternative status in a system which denies them access to particular cultural capital. What is important about this case study is that it draws attention to the ways in which a particular version of masculinity was enforced and sustained for these boys in terms of assigning a feminine status to academic work and achievement. Any association of academic work for these boys signalled effeminacy and on this basis they denigrated the academic achievers by referring to them as 'dickhead achievers' and by questioning their masculinity. A hierarchy of masculinities is set up within such regimes of practice in which boys create an inferior group of the 'not so real boys' (see Arnot, 1984).

Kessler et al (1985) also frame the production of working class masculinities in similar terms to Arnot and Mac an Ghail, claiming that resistance to school (in this case, for a working class boy, Bill) is stiffened by a need to protect a bruised sense of self and to assert masculine claims to authority and personal space. However, Kessler et al also raise the issue that while resistance for a working-class boy confirms his masculinity, similar behaviour among working-class girls only serves to call into question their femininity. This relates to a point raised earlier in terms of how disadvantage for boys and girls is regulated differentially within a specific regime of gendered practices which have a normalising effect in regulating the production of masculinity and femininity. Attention is also drawn to the regime of sporting practices within a ruling-class school which produces and reinforces a particular macho version of masculinity based on aggressive competitiveness and physical toughness. Those boys who are unable to play sport or who prefer not to are derided. Those relegated to study, non-violent games, debating and similar kinds of activities are ridiculed by the footballers and labelled 'Cyrils' which is an indicator of effeminacy (see also Wolpe, 1988).

double-
bind

Connell (1989) also elaborates on the demarcation of masculinities in terms of a hierarchised pecking order within the context of the peer group of an urban working-class high school. He also sees the assertion of an aggressive masculinity on behalf of working-class boys through sporting practices as an effect of and a response to their institutionalised failure. What is significant about such studies is that they highlight the role of sporting practices and class relations in the policing and production of particular versions of masculinity and how this prescribes a particular regime of learning for boys. Moreover, through specific case studies the ways in which schools arbitrate among different versions of masculinity and femininity are also explicated:

... the school as an institution is characterised at any given time by a particular gender regime. This may be defined as the pattern of practices that constructs various kinds of masculinity and femininity among staff and students, orders them in terms of prestige and power, and constructs a sexual division of labour within the institution.

(Kessler et al, p42)

Such a gender system as has been explicated in this paper clearly has an impact on both boys and girls in schools in terms of the regimes of learning which it establishes.

While I am conscious of not wanting to fall into the trap of blaming teachers or of offering monocausal explanations of their practices in terms of their effects on learners, it is important to stress that teachers themselves are produced through an ensemble of institutional practices. This relates to Mac an Ghail's discussion, for instance, about the role of teachers in positioning academic achievers as effeminate through heterosexist jibes, thereby sustaining a particular gender regime. He also draws attention to the ways in which the public/private dualism is reproduced within particular subject areas such as English which is considered to be a feminine subject. He quotes one student who sees English as split in terms of boys engaging with the rational side of English while girls do all the 'emotional stuff'. The point is that by focusing on what teachers, students and other school officials do and say, it is possible to begin to situate their practices and how they affect learning within the wider context of specific kinds of apparatuses and technologies for producing particular kinds of learners (see Bannister, 1993).

The policing of masculinity

Through a close examination of the peer group cultural practices, Mac an Ghail (1994) also documents the ways in which masculinity is circumscribed and policed for adolescent boys within schools. What is important to note is that within peer group networks, boys continually felt the need to compete with one another and to assert their masculinity. This was achieved through a process of labelling and teasing of those boys who fell short of the dominant expectations of how men should behave. In fact, a particular hegemonic heterosexual version of masculinity was asserted in this way in terms of a separation from effeminacy or homosexuality (see Holland et al, 1993). Through the mechanism of homophobia, boundaries for boys were marked out and in this way their masculinity was policed. The effects of such practices for boys is a form of emotional illiteracy. The boys interviewed by Mac an Ghail claimed that there was no safe space for them at school within which they could talk openly about their feelings. This represents an attempt on behalf of boys to distance themselves from any association with femininity for fear of being labelled a 'poof' and having their masculinity questioned. This sexual boundary maintenance is also sustained for boys across other sites such as the family and the workplace, and intersects with other variables such as race, class and ethnicity (see Walker, 1988).

The policing of masculinity within the overall context of boys' learning does require close attention for a number of reasons:

- it draws attention to the normalising practices which regulate boys' behaviours
- it highlights the need to consider the role and effects of homophobia in regulating specific kinds of capacities for boys such as learning to express their emotions and to deal with conflict resolution in non-violent ways.

I have attempted to address this issue because I believe that it is important in a discussion of the effects of hegemonic masculinity in terms of how boys are socially regulated and how this might affect their learning practices in schools.

Conclusion

Overall, in this paper I have attempted to elaborate a post-Foucauldian framework (see Hunter, 1987, 1994; Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1989; Martin et al, 1988), within which to discuss the formation of specific kinds of gendered learning capacities and practices. This framework offers the possibility of thinking about gender and learning as being produced within the context of a materialist set of normalising practices and apparatuses. In framing issues around boys' under-achievement in English and their low levels of literacy, as well as focusing on the effects of specific practices within schools in their capacity to influence certain patterns of learning, my purpose has been to elaborate a sound theoretical basis for developing interventionist boys' work practices and strategies which will consolidate the existing Girls' Education Strategy as outlined in the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97*. By focusing on the gender system in terms of the ways in which versions of masculinity and femininity are institutionalised through specific regimes of practice, what becomes possible is a mapping out of the limits and possibilities of an alternative set of practices designed to improve the educational outcomes of both girls and boys. It is in this sense that the role of gender in influencing the formation of and research into specific learning difficulties can be made the object of critical scrutiny.

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