

# **Masculinities and self-representation in adolescent males' lives at school:**

## **Exploring pedagogical possibilities**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I explore how adolescent males represent themselves and picture their role and place in present day society. This research is based on a study conducted in a Year 10 English classroom in an all boys' school. I explored how adolescent boys of different ethnic backgrounds were given opportunities to interrogate dominant forms of masculinities. I found one teacher opening up spaces for students to consider different positions of masculinities through specific texts. In the classroom, I observed how masculinities were played out. I also interviewed students in this English classroom about their responses to and engagement with selected educational texts. The research utilizes feminist theoretical perspectives, which have provided us with alternative ways of viewing and reporting empirical research relating to males and with alternative ways of theorizing masculinities. Despite some success in disrupting hegemonic masculinity discourses, this paper concludes that stereotypes continued to be reinforced despite attempts at dislodging and/or disrupting these beliefs.

### **Introduction**

The main demand on boys from within their peer culture (but alas, sometimes, from teachers) ... is to appear to do little or no work, to be heavily competitive (but at sports and heterosex, not at school work), to be rough, tough and dangerous to know.

(Epstein, 1998, 106)

In this paper I explore how adolescent males envisage themselves and picture their role and place in present day society. In other words, I am exploring adolescent males' self-representations. These representations are investigated through the ways young adolescent males, as readers, construct meanings from representations of masculinity in different texts. Understanding varied representations of masculinities in film and literature is crucial in the field of learning. However, equally crucial is the need to explore how readers make sense and make use of these perceived literary representations in the creation of their own identities. Further, it is crucial to explore how students are empowered through texts to challenge specific types of hegemonic masculinities as described by Debbie Epstein (above). This research forms part of my doctorate which investigates masculinities and the significance of the often-invisible social construct of 'whiteness'. These investigations reveal many complexities of masculinity when interrogated with respect to masculinity's interaction with other social constructs, like social class and ethnicity, and when taking 'whiteness' to be a racial issue.

This research was centred on one site: a Year 10 English classroom being taught by female teachers. Fieldwork was completed within one school year in 1999. Participants were thirty-three 14-15 year old male students and two female English teachers: Marilyn and Christina. The school selected was a private boys' school in Perth, Australia. The choice of school could explain why most boys were, or perceived they were, middle class. Students in this classroom were of varied ethnic backgrounds including Indigenous Australian, British, Singaporean, South African, Indian, Italian, and Australian. Many of these boys identified themselves as belonging to more than one ethnic group.

At the beginning of the school year specific texts were introduced by Marilyn into the classroom. Specific texts were selected to help, for example, deconstruct normative masculinities and in recognition of 'whiteness' as a racial issue. These literary texts were chosen by Marilyn after our initial discussions before the school year had started, and were then used to create spaces for students to question hegemonic discourses and 'norms' but through a less personal, therefore less threatening way (see for example Martino, 1995). These texts—which included *The Inner Circle* (Crew, 1999)—then provided a platform from which to discuss issues surrounding masculinities not only in relation to the texts but also in relation to students' own lives. Within this context, I explored how adolescent boys in this classroom were given the opportunity to interrogate hegemonic forms of masculinities. I found Marilyn opening up spaces for students to consider different positions of masculinities through the selected texts.

*The Inner Circle* is a text that Marilyn used to provide opportunities for deconstruction of issues relating to gender, masculinity, and ethnicity, as well as friendship and emotions. *The Inner Circle* is a story of two teenage boys struggling for personal identity, and the narratives are presented alternatively through the eyes of both boys. This story raises issues such as prejudice relating to an Aboriginal boy from the 'bush', and indifference of the world for a white Australian boy from a divorced family. Neither boys believe they 'fit in' society, but both feel like misfits for their different reasons. They find themselves connected and are able to provide solace for each other through the sharing of their stories. I used *The Inner Circle* as a basis for discussion with the students who are quoted in this paper. I interviewed these boys about their responses to and engagement with the text. Through classroom participation, I observed how masculinities were played out at this particular site. These data are analyzed and used to explore the links between masculinities and issues of self-representation. In this paper I focus primarily on the way available discourses affected students' self-representations of their masculinities. This focus is examined predominantly through narratives from three boys: Kevin, an Indigenous Australian; Tom, an Italian-Australian; and Anthony, an Anglo-Australian. It appeared that stereotypes continued to be reinforced and that the way masculinities were recreated was relational to females, with a tendency to be opposite to females.

During this research I felt it was important to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge created through feminist research. I have particularly drawn on the works of Bronwyn Davies (1989, 1994, 1996), Chris Weedon (1997), Debbie Epstein (1998; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998), bell hooks (1992, 1994), and Pam Gilbert (1998; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). The theoretical perspectives advanced by these theorists provided alternative ways of viewing and reporting empirical research relating to males and an alternative way of theorizing masculinities. A review of literature suggested that in the past, focus of research on females has often 'blamed' them for failures or inadequacies (Kenway & Willis, 1993). This sense of blame was often covertly communicated through policies that were being implemented. However, these policies have not necessarily changed the deeply ingrained discourses that permeate throughout society, and have not necessarily changed either male or female attitudes and perceptions. For example, in society at present, 'power' to make decisions at almost all levels of social institutions continue to reside with males.

A certain promise of power is associated with the name 'male' (Segal, 1999). But more significantly this power resides in particular types of males and not all males. This power issue was evident in the classroom and through the male students' narratives. Drawing on philosophers like Foucault (1981) it was possible to examine the significance of power particularly in relation to the existence and reinforcement of hegemonic discourses. Importantly, feminist epistemology highlighted many issues relating to gender inequality which are significant in respect of gender issues, and also has significant effects on other equity issues relating to for example 'race'/ethnicity. Feminist approaches also contain many postmodernist ideas including the idea that there are many perspectives—multiple truths—in society.

After more than two decades of gender reform which has concentrated on girls—viewing girls as objects of study and in need of changing—it has become increasingly recognized, particularly since the advent of the 'What do we do about the boys' debate (Epstein et al., 1998), that masculinities have been much undertheorized. Recent research has theorized masculinities, calling into question that 'boys' are a homogeneous group as well as questioning the underlying essentialist assumptions of the 'boys will be boys' slogan (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 1999). Greater achievement by females—particularly in previously thought masculine domains—has been associated with the idea that boys have been disadvantaged. This idea has created a new anxiety, a new fear, perceived as a new crisis that boys are falling behind the girls or even failing at school. Learning difficulties of particular groups of boys have also been used as evidence that male students generally are suffering (Gilbert, 1998). This view has often resulted in ideas such as 'boys should be boys', or helping males find their feminine side. These ideas nevertheless retain the dichotomous nature and separation of gender. This dualistic nature of male/female seems difficult to dislodge. The continual references to this dichotomy can have the effect of reducing choices for males while at the same time reinforcing hegemonic masculine discourses.

### **Hegemonic masculinities recreated**

One of my participants, Kevin, an Indigenous Australian, was acutely aware that males and females were treated differently from birth. During one of the interviews, while discussing *The Inner Circle* and the possibilities for male students to act differently and to show emotions, Kevin replied that influences to act 'in a certain way' and 'like a boy' were affecting the way males respond from the day they were born. These influences were often also a way of dividing males from females. While these influences prevailed it was difficult for him or his friends as males to respond in any way that could be associated with being a female. This division between males and females thus becomes normalized:

H.H.: Where do you think that comes from [some boys stopping others from acting the way they want]?

Kevin: I'm not really too sure. We just sort pick up and associate with doing that in sort of real life. Certainly we develop that from our peers and mainly from our parents, through other family members, older brothers and sisters.

H.H.: So the influences are everywhere, home as well as at school?

Kevin: Yes, I mean from the day you're born you're either dressed in blue or pink. From the age of five you've got dolls or you've got toy guns or whatever. And there's already that sort of, sort of, being sort of, what is it [struggling for words to describe what he means].

H.H.: Division, opposites?

Kevin: Yes, division of the two from the day you're born.

H.H.: Encouraged to be one or the other?

Kevin: Yes, and as you get up to Year 10s it's different things, like the sports you play, like the type of music you listen to, the television programs, what leisure activities that you do. There's all that division going up all the way through from when you're a child: for a boy, blue, and for a girl, pink, that kind of thing. And I think it just sort of grows on you. And then there's other influences that come in from your peers and along the way from family members, older brother and sisters, and just acquaintances and other people.

H.H.: Do you think that people are aware of this, or do you think they just accept it as normal?

Kevin: I don't think people think about what sex you happen to be, you just sort of accept it and that's what you sort of think of as 'normal'. I mean for a boy to have blue or for a girl pink, or just different sports. You just sort of think that's normal for one sex to do this, and the opposite sex to do the other thing.

The student here was perceptive of the way males and females were treated differently from birth. This understanding has been highlighted by feminist theories and empirical research (Weedon, 1997): that it is this dualistic nature of male/female that is continually reinforced and difficult to dislodge. It has been shown how ways of thinking in binaries reinforces this dualistic nature of male/female (Davies, 1989). Such a dichotomization suggests that females are a homogenous group and that males are a homogenous group, with the two groups inherently and essentially different to each other. This difference is often read to mean opposite in society and in schools. Feminist writers such as bell hooks (1992, 1994) have highlighted how females are not a homogenous group, and that many differences do exist among females and particularly when also taking issues such as ethnicity and social class into consideration. These differences also exist for males. The recent rhetorical claims that 'boys are now the disadvantaged' ignore much of the theoretical understanding gained by the knowledges created within feminist frameworks. To define females as 'woman' would be just a simplified definition which still conceptualizes "the relation between the sexes in terms of polarity and opposition, and this would be to remain caught in 'phallogocentric', 'logocentric' discourse" (Assiter, 1996, 31). In the same way, to define males with the simple definition of 'man' would similarly reduce males to a homogenous group remaining named within a hegemonic masculine discourse.

The recent movement back towards the notion that 'boys should be boys' could sadly be, as Kimmel and Kaufman wrote: "the cry of anguish of privileged American men, men who feel lost in a world in which the ideologies of individualism and manly virtue are out of sync with the realities of urban, industrialized, secular society" (1994, 263). This idea is sustained by examining the cohort of supporters for this movement, not only in America but also worldwide: middle-class, mainly white, heterosexual, males. However, believing in essentialist theories of gender formation denies possibilities of change or may even deter attempts at change (Buchbinder, 1994). Again it is important to recognize that gender does not only mean female, but is also inclusive of males. The challenge to break the binary, dualistic nature of male/female is possible at schools, but through greater understanding by teachers of the way categories are socially constructed and often rigidly held in place.

Recognition of these socially constructed categories and understanding of this dichotomization is just a first step.

However, males and females are not just becoming male or female, they are also becoming particular kinds of males or females. Indeed, males are becoming *specific* kinds of males and are often not given an opportunity to resist hegemonic masculinity. This idea relating to gender formation can be explored through the previous quoted interview with Kevin. Kevin is an Indigenous Australian and during the interviews explained how his own experiences were very different to a simple male and female opposites. He recognized that males were treated as specific kinds of males, and as essentially different to females, and through discussion showed this essentializing of differences was contradictory to his own lifestyle. However, it was also noticeable that the discourses that were made available to him and thus enabling him to identify himself was also through a lens that positioned whiteness as the norm, whereby certain things 'just sort of grow on you' and are accepted as 'normal'. Thus whiteness is frequently associated with 'colourlessness'. Since what it means to be white is seldom made explicit, it in this way that whiteness redoubles "its hegemony by naturalizing it" (hooks, 1990, 171). These white hegemonic masculinity discourses functioned to erase or hide Kevin's own experiences. His self-representations—which was inclusive of the type of music listened to and of types of leisure activities participated in—became embedded within the white hegemonic masculine Australian image.

### Conflicting discourses

Discourses that reflect gender power differences are still very powerful, yet the students in this class were often aware of new discourses that suggest equity for males and females. These conflicting discourses were apparent through contradictory ideas expressed by these male students. Equity ideologies have slowly been brought into these students' lives, yet not strongly enough to completely erase other ideas. The growing number of 'profeminist' males shows how males have slowly taken up ideas of equity. But, as Michael Kaufman wrote, these ideas still lag behind actions:

Although there are ever-increasing sympathies among men to the ideas of women's equality, and although some institutions have been forced to adopt measures promoting women's equality, there is still a lag between ideas accepted by men and their actual behavior.

(Kaufman, 1994, 156)

This lag is still very visible in schools in Australia. During interviews, male students in this school sometimes seemed unaware of their own contradictory ideologies. This was particularly evident with Tom, an Italian-Australian, when I asked him about females' roles in Australia.

H.H.: What sort of role do you think females have in Australia?

Tom: I see that there is no equality between the males and the females. But I also see that it's not a matter of old fashions, where the female stays home and does the cooking and does this and the male goes out and makes the money. I see the female is very, I can't say fragile but, has her own way sort of thing. And I'd like to keep it. See when I get married I would see my wife as say, if she wants to have a job she can go and have a job. Also when I have a job and I come home after work I mean you can't say that doing the washing or doing the ironing is a feminine thing. I mean it's, everybody does it. Like if when that happens, I would like to tend more towards the female side of

things and let her have a break because I know how much like just look at the female society around these days. Everyone's giving them pressures about doing the ironing. Like not pressures, but it's so common to see the female doing the ironing sort of like. Expect them to do it sort of thing. But with me I sort of like say, go sit down; I'll make a cup of tea. And I'll do it because I know she's been at work all day. She's sort of the same as me, because I would have been at work all day and she would have been at work all day. And so the last thing that she wants to do is start doing the ironing or the washing or doing the cooking. So to give her a bit of a break I'd see myself as helping out and doing it sort of for her or you know helping sort of thing.

Tom's ideas vacillated between new discourses, which stress equity, and old discourses, which stress the essentialist ideology that males and females are basically different. But, at the same time, he also admitted that there is 'no equality' for males and females. Tom mentioned that ironing, for example, was not a feminine role, and that everyone needed to be involved in this type of work. However, at the same time, he understood his involvement as 'helping out' the female. This helping out relates to a different discourse and not from an equity discourse which accepts females as equal partners in any relationship, and where the 'household' duties are no longer a distinctively feminine domain.

As the interview continued and ideas relating to male and female roles were developed, Tom moved further away from representing himself as Italian only and from representational stereotypes relating to ways Italian males treated their partners. At the same time he represented himself within a whiteness discourse which set him apart from non-whites, and more specifically as different to Indian or Asian males. This placed Tom in a contradictory position where at an earlier interview he discussed how Italian males were dominant over their partners, in the same way as he now talked about Asian or Indian males being dominant.

H.H.: Do you think that happens a lot here in Australia?

Tom: It depends on what sort of, whereabouts you come from and what views you have. See, some people it's in their culture to make, let the female do all the cooking and ironing and washing and household sort of things and looking after the family. Sometimes it's a culture, sort of like if you're Indian or if you're Asian or something come from those sort of backgrounds then I think they're more dominant in making the ladies well not making them but sort of you know... It's sort of the female sort of thing; see that more as the female and only the female does that because she doesn't have to work. Because they [males] are working to bring the money in and she's staying home looking after the kids. It's a bit of a cultural thing.

As our conversation continued, Tom's ideas reflected hegemonic heterosexual discourses. His notions about gender relationships remained within a dominant framework where females—in this case his grandmother—stayed at home and looked after the children. Stereotypical descriptions infused his narrative even when he was denying they applied to him and to his family. For example, he suggested that Italian women were 'really large because they like tasting their food'; that Italians have large families; and that Italian women stayed at home to look after the family. Similarly, Tom understood that females do not have to work if they are at home.

H.H.: So what do you think the Italians are like?

Tom: I'm tending towards because the Italians are sort of getting on my nerves if you know what I mean because they make it a bit disrespectful in the female's side. Because through generations and generations I mean, you've seen the movies, Italian movies, where the female always stays at home? You know most of them are really large because they like tasting their food and all that. And they make everything and they stay and look after the family. They have a big family. That's why they stay home and look after the family. But I mean when I was brought up, my dad went out to work my mum went out to work and they took, like I was at a nanny's house. You know a nanny would take care for me, my brother and all that and my sister and all most our other family like our cousins and stuff. They would just like dump all of us children at the nanny's house and they'll take care of us if you know what I mean. But I'm trying, in my life now, what I'm trying to build up to is sort of a different sort of way of thinking if you know what I mean. Like more towards a new way, sort of thing. I'd like to be a person with newer things you know, like newer ideas, different ideas, different views because you know, everyone's individual. And if I feel that I want to have a new view of doing something then I think I have every right to make one... So you don't really have to stay within the guidelines of cultural ways of being Italian where you have to have the female do this and you have to go out to work. So I want to break away from that because I saw my mum and dad were sort of like doing that sort of thing. [So I'd say] oh why are you doing this for, why are you cooking, why don't you just sit down and relax, let dad do that or I'll do that or you do that.

In some ways, these male students were still very much thinking of masculinities within an "ordering of institutional practices" (Hearn & Collinson, 1994, 104). These practices meant "becoming a man was about having a suitable occupation, income and social position, able to support a dependent wife and accompanying household" (Christine Heward cited in Hearn & Collinson, 1994, 104). Being male therefore was akin to hegemonic masculinity and retaining, through the act of marriage, what Bob Connell (1995) called the 'patriarchal dividend' and thus provided a form of power over someone else. Males continue to see themselves as the 'breadwinner', retaining a power which allows them to sit at home and let females take responsibility for the 'less-important' private domain. As such, a discourse endorsing the notion that males support females remains a predominant discourse. Power, however, remains with the male within a hegemonic masculinity normality. These notions of female responsibilities become a restriction of sexuality that Foucault (1981) traced back to Victorian times during which times the family—consisting of father, mother, and children—became the 'norm'.

Christina reaffirmed my impression of the way male students perceived male and female roles, and perceived gender relationships. She also felt that boys treated her as a female first, rather than teacher first, and that they believed their role at times was to protect her despite Christina being their teacher.

Christina: I don't expect them to respect me straightaway either but it's interesting because when I first came they did. They do have this automatic, this almost automatic respect because I'm a female.

H.H.: Because you're a female rather than because you're a teacher?

Christina: Yes, because little things. I can't even pinpoint it. But little things like 'shush, she's trying to talk' or 'move out of the way'. And maybe it is because I'm a teacher or maybe, maybe I'm in that role. But I just get the

feeling sometimes that they really see me as female and see me as if I sometimes might need protection. I know that sounds bazaar but I sometimes get that feeling, particularly Tom or some of the boys. And if I'm out in the playground and some of their mates are not doing the right thing and I'm around they will tell their mates to be quiet or shut up because they're from my classroom and they know who I am, so it's sort of like that. And I see that as protective of me, so that's quite interesting. I sense this sometimes a lot with the boys, particularly the older ones.

### **'You're just like a girl': stereotypes being reinforced**

Hegemonic masculinity discourses predominated and males appeared to police each other within the school by, for example, saying 'you're like a girl' if a male acts in what they consider a stereotypical female way. In this way, stereotypes continue to be reinforced. During one of the interviews with Kevin, he mentioned how he believed some things were considered male and others female. On further questioning, Kevin discussed ways in which male students effectively policed each other and were expected to be like other males, but at the same time not like a female:

H.H.: Do you think it still sort of comes out here, in the boys school, that it's more female or male to do something?

Kevin: Yes, there are people who do like, who are like in the choir or whatever, they do cop a bit of criticism from other boys and stuff. And you know, we still say like there's things where we compare them to a girl. I think you know, even if our mates do something stupid like the way he acts or talks, we'll say, oh you're like a girl, or whatever. I'm not really too sure why we say it's like that. But I think our friends expect us to act in a certain way and when we start acting different to what they expect they get a bit. I'm not sure, but they might get a bit scared or confused. And they sort of say you're acting like a girl you know. It's, I'm not too sure about this.

H.H.: Do you think that's fair?

Kevin: No. Everybody has their right and freedom to think how they want to, to feel the way that they do, and do they want as long as it's OK with the law and that. Everyone should be given the freedom to express their views and feel how they feel. Like if you go back to the classroom situation [referring back to a role-playing incident where a student portrayed a gay person (see Hatchell, 2000)] that was a time when we should have had the freedom to express how we felt about that certain issue.

H.H.: So to what extent do you think you're not allowed to express yourself?

Kevin: I think the main thing that's stopping us from expressing ourselves at times is how the teacher or the person who's the mediator feels about a certain topic. Whereas if they just sat back and listened, sometimes people often when they mediate, to show the example of how the teacher feels about a certain topic, they [teachers] won't touch it and they'll just leave it. Yes, that sort of again makes a person unsure. They're not really educated about that certain issue. They don't really know what's involved with it and whether the side issues arise from that main issue.

When I asked Kevin if he felt there was any possibilities for challenging this, he replied:

I think if you just sort of, get more encouragement from a school. I mean not just here in an all boys' school, I mean at a college school, more involvement between the boys and girls of that, more interaction, get involved in stuff that the girls like and the girls get involved in the stuff that the boys like. You know, you sort of not making the division between the two of you. They [girls] can experience the same sort of things. You learn what the other experience, experience what the male can experience, and what the male experiences the female can experience. You don't sort of get things like sexism and stuff like that.

Kevin revealed how males continued to act within acceptable hegemonic masculinity discourses through acts of policing. Thus a further discourse thrived—whereby males could not express themselves nor express their emotions. Kevin also believed that within schools more encouragement and experience was needed in respect of issues relating to gender relationships to challenge, for example, sexism. In a similar vein, Anthony, an Anglo-Australian, discussed the way it was a lot harder for males to discuss emotions, believing it was more difficult for him than it was for females to discuss such issues. This reference to differences again reinforced a dualistic nature of male/female qualities. In this way, unable to open up because of these reinforced stereotypes, males become 'boxed in' and then just 'get used to it', so that even when they are given opportunities to discuss things like emotions they 'don't really want to'. However, Anthony did feel that significant issues could be effectively discussed through different texts at school. During an interview session, when discussing emotions, I asked if more opportunity could be given for opening up:

H.H.: [Could] boys be given the opportunity to talk about emotions so that they don't feel that they can't talk?

Anthony: Yes, probably to a certain extent because it's a lot harder for boys to be able to talk to their mates about something that's happened. Because it's sort of like, you say that and even though because they're your mates and they won't turn around and go oh yes well done and all this sort of stuff. They won't make a big fuss over it but still, you're known as that sort of person. You are that sort of person that has those sorts of problems, and you're stereotyped as to what that sort of person is like. And I think girls don't really care about what they sort of say. I don't know why that is but they just don't really care about whether they get stereotyped or something. Because they really feel that on a day to day basis I suppose it's the person that they are, rather than not. As a person like gets an image from years and years working at it, like telling people they like sort of stuff. Girls don't really care about that sort of thing. I think not as much. But yes, I think that sort of just boys, probably they need to let their emotions out. Like, even in that book [*The Inner Circle*] that we read. That guy felt a lot better after he could talk about his problems remember. But yes, I think boys need to be a little bit more open because they just get boxed up and when somebody offers to talk to you about those sorts of things, you don't really want to anyway. Because you sort of just get used to it, the sort of thing that you do.

All these participants' ideas had been shaped through prevalent discourses that were available to them. Discourses have a way of shaping identity while constraining and enabling individual actions and thoughts to locate within a "complex web" of these discourses. Texts were introduced into this classroom to highlight specific issues relating to gender and masculinities. Through discussion of *The Inner Circle*, which allowed a range of issues to be explored, students brought up issues of gender and masculinity, as well as issues of friendship and emotions. However, introducing texts alone is often insufficient in

deconstructing dominant discourses. As David Buchbinder wrote: "Even where a text consciously sets out to interrogate the naturalisation of a set of assumptions, there may still remain a residue of gender ideology which is itself not interrogated" (1994, 75). Indeed, there is a need to read against the grain. Informal codes and underlying dominant discourses do not necessarily challenge explicit hegemonic discourses. For example, in reading *The Inner Circle* where the two protagonists are shown to reveal their emotions to each other does not necessarily mean students will take these ideas on board themselves. As Anthony (in the previous narrative) declared, males get used to not talking about their emotions so when they are offered the opportunity to talk they do not really want to. The whole illusion that males are not emotional remains prevalent.

Students are continually exposed to many discourses offering different positionings. How students' subjectivities are shaped from these discourses will be constructed and reconstructed daily (Kenway & Willis, 1993). Subjectivities are further shaped through differences in the relationships of power (Sawicki, 1991) which these discourses make available to students. However, discourses often interweave as students progressively construct meanings for their different situations. Multiple discourses are available to us and we are shaped by the discourses that we embrace. When new discourses are introduced these will need to somehow be built upon the understanding of old discourses. In this way, "any disruptions to old relations of power must necessarily involve attempts to speak and respeak both the old and the new, each with their multiple fractures, their multiple contradictions" (Davies, 1994, 52). The introduction of new ideas, new discourses, does not necessarily mean old discourses are suddenly discarded. As Bronwyn Davies perceptively wrote:

The imposition of another discourse, however powerful, does not automatically rule out the old. Old discourses exist amongst/with the new. Ways of knowing and desiring overlay each other, bump into each other, inform each other. Like the palimpsest of writings on old parchment, where the old was partially rubbed out and the new overlaid on the old, the old can still be seen and shapes, at least in part, how we see the new.

(Davies, 1996, 17)

### **Pedagogical possibilities and limitations**

As I indicated earlier, specific literary texts and questions were introduced in this classroom which allowed for some opening up of particular issues relating to masculinities and whiteness. Texts were initially selected because issues I was exploring could be made explicit and examined by these male students in the classroom. Inclusion of these texts enabled students to relate to their own identities, discuss how they represented themselves, and also begin to understand how they were being represented within the school culture. This was made possible through the introduction of particular texts although, as Marilyn suggested, the issues were of interest but were positioned as secondary to the texts themselves.

H.H.: Do you think you changed your planning or teaching in relation to my issues in particular?

Marilyn: I tried to bring in some things that I thought you'd be interested in through the texts themselves. But not too dramatically no. I didn't really want to make it artificial. I wanted this to be just a typical. But I tried now and then to ask questions; to cover a couple of areas which I thought might be of interest.

Throughout these interviews, however, I found students calling for more space to be opened up for discussion, particularly where students were trying to break from stereotypical images of the Australian male (and this is explored further in my thesis). These students' voices showed issues such as gender, masculinities, ethnicity, and whiteness, needed to be given space to be discussed in more depth within the classroom.

All these issues relate to the creation of their own self-representations and self-identities. In society, support or sympathy for particularly ideas, for example, support for feminist ideals and support for gender equity, does not necessarily mean that a change will occur in behaviour (Kaufman, 1994). Similarly in schools male students may support new ideas in principle or agree to them because that is what they feel the teacher wants to hear. However, this does not always translate into changes in their own ideology or behavior. It has been suggested that "the institutionalized structure of schooling creates the strongest effects on the construction of masculinity" (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, 185), and my experiences in this classroom would certainly support this.

It is important for schools to implement programs or strategies for assisting boys to interrogate and critically reflect on the ways in which masculinity impacts on their lives. Existing programs have tended to rely on a biological essentialist understanding of gender. This often results in the binary nature of gender being accepted as 'natural', with a hegemonic form of masculinity considered the norm for boys. What needs to be understood is that there are many forms of masculinities which may become concealed and not be available to boys. Strategies for teaching boys therefore need to take certain questions into account. These questions need to include how students can become critical thinkers, and more specifically how boys can be encouraged to think critically about hegemonic masculinities.

The issue of hegemonic masculinities is further complicated by the way boys come to understand themselves as certain kinds of boys in relation to what it also means to be white or not white within a school system which is based on a white Eurocentric middle class model. In this way 'race' can play a large but contradictory role in schools by placing students within the binary categories of 'white'/'black' where white is often naturalized. This 'whiteness' is frequently associated with colourlessness and dominant discourses often place whiteness as the norm, so that for white students, their whiteness can be ignored; whereas for students of colour, their 'race' and ethnicity are part of their daily experiences (Jordan & Weedon, 1995). This can become problematic for boys who do not fit into a particular normalized masculine as well as not fit into a normalized white model. Transparency of 'whiteness' as a racial identity further provides 'white' people with a dominant position within society (McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993) and this is then reflected within the classroom. Dominant positioning is often at the expense of 'non-white' students, whereby the options available to 'non-white' students become restricted to either assimilation and thus become part of the 'norm', or to retain at least part of their own culture and be positioned as 'other'. It is crucial therefore for whiteness as well as masculinity to be problematized, and for teachers to acquaint boys with skills to assist them in critical reflection and in understanding how discourses available to them affect their own as well as other boys' and girls' lives. Carefully selected texts have the potential for students to acquire these skills.

Some particularly important issues relating to masculinities and whiteness became evident during my research. For example, it was possible to observe that although Marilyn attempted to keep categories such as 'males' or 'whiteness', fluid and open, this was not always possible. The constraints of school directives and lack of professional guidance to challenge hegemonic discourses still existed, and the challenge to stereotypes was therefore also constrained by school policies. Issues that surfaced, such as hegemonic masculinity, were

considered either not specifically relevant within the classroom lives of these male students or considered less important than, for example, authors' meanings of specific texts. When considering strategies to adopt within the classroom it is therefore important to consider not only whose voice is being heard, but also how other voices are silenced and what positions are being made available to boys. When looking at the education of boys this also means, pedagogically, to not educate boys at the expense of girls, nor to educate at the expense of boys who do not easily fit the hegemonic masculine mould. Even when teaching boys in a single sex environment it is crucial to recognize that relationships within schools affect relationships with both boys and girls outside of the school environment. The teachers' roles become central in how these strategies are accepted and transferred to students. But, importantly, for these strategies to be more effectively implemented it is crucial that support is also provided for teachers.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Exploration of students' narratives through this paper showed that adolescent males in this school were still representing themselves through hegemonic masculine and 'white' Anglo-Australian discourses. Although there was some understanding of these dominant discourses, and some attempt at gender disruption by students, new discourses incorporating equity ideology and multiple masculine self-representations did not completely dislodge old hegemonic masculine discourses. Instead these new discourses often competed with old discourses, and often appeared in a position of lesser importance than older discourses. Continual references to the dichotomous nature of gender which perpetuated the notion that males and females are opposites continued to have the effect of reducing choices for males while reinforcing hegemonic masculine discourses. The wealth of knowledge created through feminist research has enabled me to view and report on these empirical findings in an alternative way. Instead of taking an essentialist viewpoint and accepting that males and females are 'naturally' different, it was possible for males to represent themselves in myriad ways. Grant Webb and Michael Singh called for re-teaching from multiple perspectives when they wrote of the need to:

Focus on teaching the reading skills associated with critical literacy such as identifying gaps and silences in the text. We need to explicitly teach students to re-read and re-write school texts from multiple perspectives, most importantly from the perspective of *the self-critical pro-feminist man*.

(Webb & Singh, 1998, 139).

In this paper I examined how specific texts provided an ideal platform on which to discuss these multiple perspectives and issues, such as masculinities, with adolescent boys. Students' narratives were rich with ideas and often-conflicting perceptions. At the same time, literary texts opened up spaces within the classroom, for example, to deconstruct normative masculinities. School provided opportunities for this disruption and deconstruction and provided a focus for this paper not only on exploring issues of masculinity in adolescent males' lives at school but also on investigating the pedagogical possibilities and limitations of interrupting hegemonic masculinity in the classroom.

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