

**KED02056**

**Title: It's More Than a Game: Little boys, masculinities and football culture**

Word count:

Approximately 7400 words

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- **Submitted for full paper refereeing for AARE 2002**

## Abstract

Through a description of a study into children's (young males) informal peer group relations this paper illuminates the interrelatedness of the gender and (hetero)sexual binaries underpinning boys' dominant understandings of masculinity and how these binaries parallel with their understandings of, and investments in, football culture. This paper foregrounds, through a snapshot of the study's data presented as a narrative, the significant role football played in providing a vehicle through which the boys could successfully perform, validate and perpetuate a desired masculinity as epitomised by physical dominance and violence within essentialist perceptions of gender and (hetero)sexuality as difference and opposition. Through feminist poststructural analysis which enables a theorising of masculinities as fluid, tenuous and often characterised by contradiction and resistance, the paper argues the importance of interrupting and re-working these understandings and explores practical ways through which these binaries might begin to be deconstructed in the sphere of early primary education. Within a framework of social justice, underpinned by anti-sexist and anti-homophobic principles, ways through which schools can facilitate the development of more affirmative but equally legitimate understandings and embodiments are explored.

## Young boys and football culture

Recent research with young boys in the primary school setting has illuminated the significance of football in the social construction and negotiation of hegemonic masculinities (Renold 1997; Skelton 1997: 2000; Swain 2000). This research is generally consistent with the literature on sport and masculinities (Fitzclarence, Hickey, & Matthews 1997; Kidd 1990; Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990) in that it seeks to problematise elements of the masculinity culturally exalted (Connell 1995) within competitive male-dominated sports such as football. Within these studies football, "positioned at the top of the playground hierarchy in terms of membership and space domination" (Renold 1997: 8), is seen as providing a highly legitimate and visible arena for young boys to perform, achieve and maintain a conventional form of masculinity (Renold 1997; Skelton 1997: 2000; Swain 2000). The cultural and social capital associated with the successful achievement of this form of masculinity is also said to provide boys with more ready access to privileges than other groups (Skelton 1997: 2000). In this sense, young boys regard football ability as a "major signifier of successful masculinity" (Epstein 1998: 7). As Swain (2000) notes, a good footballer is a 'real boy' who is practicing to be a 'real man'. While Skelton (1997) and Swain (2000) in particular note the positive elements of this successful masculinity in terms of developing boys' fitness, physical strength, competition, discipline and adventurousness, these commentators express their concern that football encapsulates opportunities for exercising many negative elements of hegemonic masculinity (Skelton 1997) such as emotional neutrality, power and domination (Swain 2000) and the active subordination of other masculinities and femininities (Renold 1997; Skelton 1997: 2000; Swain 2000).

The research of Renold (1997), Skelton (2000) and Swain (2000) while focused on younger boys is consistent with significant work in the area of masculinities and adolescence (Mac an Ghail 1994; Martino 1999; Connell 1995: 2000) in terms of positioning sport, but in particular football as constructed, performed and defended in relation to 'other' masculinities and femininities. As Swain (2000) and Renold (1997) argue, investment in the masculinity hegemonic within football culture, invariably involves young boys engaging in stigmatising and marginalising anything considered 'other to the hegemony'. Football, thus, is seen as a legitimate arena for the exclusion and denigration of girls, which Renold (1997: 13) argues normalises "the official view (regulated by media, particular teachers) of girls' exclusion from such sports" and other boys (who don't measure up to the hegemony) through associating them with the 'feminine' (and as therefore less than 'masculine'). Within this frame of understanding and consistent with Mac an Ghail's research with adolescents (1994),

Swain's (2000) study with young boys (aged 10 and 11) illuminates how, through the discourses of football, subordinated boys are feminised by their lack of skill and competence and "subjected to homophobic abuse as the hegemonic group acts within the cultural imperative of heterosexuality" (Swain 2000: 95).

The cultural imperative of heterosexuality, as endorsed through sexual harassment and homophobia - a major feature within the masculinities literature (see Connell 1995: 2000; Mac an Ghail 1994; Martino 1999), is also a strong theme within the younger sphere of Skelton's (1997: 2000) and Renold's (1997) research. Skelton (1997: 2000) talks of the taken-for-grantedness of heterosexuality within her work as defining the type of maleness boys are expected to exhibit. Within football culture, she illuminates how a patriarchally defined heterosexuality, which reflects broader structural inequalities of gender and sexuality, provides boys with the discourses and practices to dismiss as deviant any masculinity alternative to the hegemony (Skelton 1997: 2000). Within the context of football culture Renold (1997) and Skelton (1997) also talk of how young boys take up this patriarchally defined heterosexuality to denigrate and subordinate girls and women. Here boys use these discourses to legitimate and reinforce their masculinity through heterosexualising girls and women and positioning them as objects and possessions to be used, evaluated and discarded at will (Kenway & Fitzclarence in Skelton 1997; Renold 1997).

This paper explores how particular images of football culture intersect and impact on the understandings and practices of a group of young schoolboys - specifically how these images are implicated in the boys' construction, legitimation and performance of a desired heterosexual masculinity. The aims of this paper are: to foreground through narrative the significant role football played in providing a vehicle through which the boys could successfully perform, validate and perpetuate their negative perceptions of femininities and their collective masculine embodiments of physical dominance, aggression and violence; to contribute to the growing but relatively limited research literature in discussing the primacy of (hetero)sexualities in shaping boys' constructions of gender and perceptions of masculinities, and to propose a way forward in terms of exploring how gendered and heterosexist practice within the early primary sphere might be challenged and reworked.

### **The study**

It is against this backdrop that I present a case study of a young male peer group at a primary school in a provincial city in Tasmania, Australia. 'Banrock' Primary School is situated in a middle class socio-economic area with an enrolment ceiling of approximately 300 students from a diverse range of familial structures and socio-economic backgrounds. The paper presents elements of a broader study (Keddie 2001) which illuminated the potency of early primary peer culture in shaping and regulating hegemonic understandings of masculinities which were supported by a range of gender(ed) and sexual dualisms.

Based on the central belief that forms of dominant and dominating masculinities are overwhelmingly reinforced in groups (Browne 1995; Connell 1995), the study orientated around an interrogation of peer group 'meanings' through exploring collective understandings of masculinities within the context of intensive 'affinity group' (Mackay 1993) sessions over a six-month period. Consistent with Mackay's work with affinity groups, this method of grouping individuals of similar interests promoted group cohesion, discussion and the identification of shared and contradicting stories, ideas and meanings. To this end, the method was applied to explore the socio-political dynamics of the boys' peer group. Through a variety of age-appropriate stimulus prompts (Keddie 2000), twice weekly group sessions foregrounded the dominant and collective dynamics and understandings of the group: 'Adam', 'Matthew' and 'Ravi', (eight years), 'Justin', (seven years) and 'Jack' (six years).

## **Theoretical and methodological focus**

The study's methodological framework was strongly underpinned by the tenets of feminist poststructural theory. Drawing on feminist readings and interpretations of the poststructural concepts of subjectification through language and discourse, the study's central focus was concerned with foregrounding how social power, embedded in the language and discourse of the boys' peer group, was exercised in the (re)constitution of the group's gender(ed) subjectivities. This lens made visible the ways through which the dominant practices and understandings of a boys' peer group shaped and regulated its subjectivities to "make more possible some ways of being, and not others" (Davies in Mac Naughton 1998: 160).

As a feminist researcher, the theoretical principles underpinning poststructuralism were personally significant because of their potential to be politically generative. Specifically, these principles offered a way of exposing taken-for-granted ways of seeing and enabled oppressive and restrictive subjectivities to be re-thought and re-worked to explore alternatives to dominant and dominating ways of being. Particularly important in this regard was the poststructural principle referring to the discursive constitution and (re)production of an individual's subjectivities through language and social practice, and the belief that subjectivities and meaning are never fixed and unitary but fluid and precarious - discursively (re)constituted each time we think or speak (Weedon 1997). Through an examination of power and the production of meaning and subjectivity through language and discourse, human realities can be seen as a construction - a cultural product (Sarup 1988). Thus, the ways in which our realities are constructed within hierarchies of power can be explored and deconstructed to expose the ways in which particular groups are oppressed and marginalised (Kamler, Maclean, Reid & Simpson 1994). Against this backdrop, the poststructural dynamic view of the subject offered a way of conceiving 'gendered' subjectivities as amenable to change through the reconstruction and use of alternative language and discursive processes.

## **Gender binaries**

Within the context of the seemingly mutual exclusivity of gender positions in the primary school (Lowe 1998), the study's methodological framework drew on feminist poststructural explanations of binary thought systems to theorise and analyse the boys' ways of being male (Davies 1993; Fuss 1991; Weedon 1999). To this end, the use of, and investment in, the oppositional gender binary boy/girl (boy-like/girl-like and the associated binaries) was interpreted as the primary way boys construct meanings and ideologies of masculinity: that is, in critical opposition to essentialist interpretations of femininity and being female. In this regard, the 'first principle' of masculinity, cannot be understood without reference to its relational principle, femininity. Thus masculinity is defined by what it excludes: femininity.

## **Sexualities**

It is not only gender identities which are involved when 'boys will be boys', but also sexual ones. The policing of masculinities and femininities assumes the inevitability of heterosexual relations. (Epstein & Johnson 1994: 205)

The boys' oppositional conceptualisations of the masculine/feminine polarity were also taken as necessarily enmeshed within their understandings of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. As Sedgwick (in Seidman 1993) and Fuss (1991) point out, the construction of hetero/homosexual codes work to inscribe the masculine/feminine oppositional polarity. The study's feminist poststructural framework thus drew on aspects of gay poststructural theory as useful tools for understanding and analysing the boys' masculinities. Gay poststructural theory positions the hetero/homosexual binary as discursively produced (Weedon 1999) and

"structuring the very core modes of thought and culture of Western societies" (Seidman 1993: 131). Fuss explains the regulation and establishment of heterosexuality with reference to Derridean metaphysical understandings of definition through oppositional exclusion:

For heterosexuality to achieve the status of the 'compulsory', it must present itself as a practice governed by some internal necessity. The language and law that regulates the establishment of heterosexuality as both an identity and an institution, both a practice and a system, is the language and law of defence and protection: heterosexuality secures its self-identity and shores up its ontological boundaries by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachments of its contaminated other, homosexuality. (Fuss 1991: 2)

Elements of gay poststructural theory were seen as particularly useful in theorising: the relationship between gender and sexual binaries; the imperative of compulsory heterosexuality and the high instances of homophobia in schools (Martino 1999; Pallota-Chiarolli 1997), particularly the oppression of boys perceived as female-like or effeminate and, by inference, 'unmasculine'.

The following narrative, constructed from the boys' affinity group sessions and my own observations, was fashioned through selections of data I interpreted as 'critical moments' in the group's negotiations of power in their collective production of meaning.

### **It's More Than a Game**

In building a relationship of confidence and trust with the boys, most of my outdoor interactions with them involved playing football. The boys were 'footy mad' and would regularly bring their footballs to school to play with during class recess. After a few weeks of inviting myself into the boys' footy games, I was often greeted at the beginning of each day with "You playin' footy wiv us today Ms. Keddie?" by an expectant football-clutching boy.

Football at Banrock Primary was easily the most popular sport in terms of participation. During break times hundreds of boys of varying ages and skill level would flock to the large grass oval to play. Only a few girls were involved in this game at any one time and even then only in a peripheral sense and only within the younger sphere of early primary. Many of the games seemed to be a complete shambles, with the boys ignoring the school's 'no tackling' rule, hurting themselves through falling over each other to get the ball, monopolising the ball once they had possession of it, and arguing over rules, whose 'go' it was and who was on whose team. Most of the time they couldn't agree on anything much and ended up scrambling for the ball and kicking it anywhere and any way they could, often declaring after each kick "that's a goal!" The boys were fiercely competitive and had a real problem sharing the ball. Once in possession, the ball, more often than not, remained tightly clutched to the boy's chest as he ran wildly to his imaginary goal. Invariably another stronger and more determined boy would prise it away from him before he could attempt to score. This usually involved some force, with both boys ending up tangled within a habitual wrestle roll, clutching and squashing each other until eventually the stronger one managed to snatch the precious ball away from its winded possessor.

Nevertheless, the breathless smiling faces of the children, red with exertion and excitement told me that, despite the conflict, the boys clearly enjoyed the physical nature of the activity. Even when they were physically hurt they would almost proudly show off their 'injuries', or compete for sympathy feigning injuries, lapping up all the attention they could muster.

During our group sessions football was often a topic of conversation. Football banter usually centred upon the boys' attempts to 'outdo' each other, whether it be proving who the best footballer was in the group, whose team sucked the most or whose favourite player was the most skilled. Those players in favour were described as "tough ... men of steel" who didn't cry. These players were elevated to the status of "legend", "hero" and "champion". Those players not in favour were described as "weak" and "sooky" and denigrated as "poofers", "wimps", "sissies" and "girls".

Adam, the most vocal group member was forthright in explaining why he liked football. During one of our group sessions he explained: "Cos y'can bash de shit out of people. It's a man's sport," he clarified. "Y'get muddy and come into de classroom and ya sweatin' like hell ... yeah, boys like dat sorta stuff..."

Matthew, Justin and Jack seemed to agree with Adam. Jack and Matthew, for example, told the group that they too liked football because "you could hurt people and make blood go on them."

Similarly, Justin declared that he loved the "blood rule" and "shoving and tackling" boys for the ball.

The boys also told me on many an occasion that they liked football because you got "lotsa girlfriends". Adam and Justin informed the group that playing football "gets you really good chicks 'cos dey think your butt's cute ... yeah y'have to have a cute butt and lotsa girlfriends if you're playin' AFL."

Adam made his point by grabbing a ruler and placing it between his legs, gyrating his hips forward and back, amid laughter from the other boys "ya get sexy women," he grinned. He explained that girls were impressed with footballers who were hurt: "dey watch ya and den you show off ... yeah and when you've got de blood rule, all de girls go 'Oh geez that would've hurt', so den y'get all de attention and y'look more sexier."

Matthew agreed he told the group that he also loved football because you could "get sexy women."

Adam and Justin were cautious however to define "really good chicks" in the following way:

"Britney Spears isn't too bad. She's okay," Adam told the group.

"Yeah," laughed Justin.

"...but chubba chubs, cross out," Adam continued firmly while drawing an imaginary cross in the air.

"Yeah, chubba chubs and stupid gutses," Justin agreed.

After asking Adam what chubba chubs were he looked at me and responded by standing up from his chair bending his arms up, blowing his cheeks out and stomping on the spot, "oogga chucka oogga chucka," he sang while the other boys laughed in amusement.

"Really fat people," Justin explained to me with a grin.

Adam and Justin went on to clarify that they didn't like "fat girls" - they liked "thin" girls with "sexy legs".

Within the context of discussing football the boys often talked about their 'success' with girls. For example, Adam told us more than once:

"The 'A' man always gets the chicks!"

Adam enjoyed talking about his 'girlfriends'. He reported having "heaps of girlfriends ... Jessica ... Zara, she kissed me in kindergarten, oh I've had lotsa girls who've kissed me."

Matthew however, was teased for bragging about the number of girlfriends he had.

"Matthew would say 'e's like got ten thousan' girlfriends!" Ravi told the group on one occasion.

"He can tell more whoppers evry day!" Justin agreed.

"Yeah," added Adam, "and 'e says 'I've got thirty two girlfriends', an' then 'e goes nah, 'I got this many', an' he shortens it one week and d'next week ten times it and then he'll go lower, higher, lower, higher."

Ravi was also teased but not for bragging about girlfriends - he was teased by the other boys because he didn't like football - he thought it was too violent.

"Once I saw um one of the Fremantles um he was um runnin' 'round with the ball and he put his hand out like that and he grabbed one of the Bulldogs and um grabbed 'im by the head an' slammed 'im down an' um and they're always hurting people," Ravi told the group. "It's very bad. I don't actually like football ... I like soccer."

On this occasion Adam interrupted Ravi, "Don' talk about soccer! Soccer's a girls' game cos when someone kicks 'em in de leg they go, 'Ah ha my leg'" he explained to the group while dramatically holding his leg yelling in pretend pain.

"Yeah, soccer's silly! It's a girls' game," Jack agreed.

"Ravi's a girl then!" Justin exclaimed.

"Yeah a sissy!" Matthew added.

"Hey Lucy, what's ya name again?" Adam interrupted with a laugh. "Oh yeah, dat's right, Rowena!" he enthused as Justin, Matthew and Jack joined his laughter. "You're a sissy, you're a girl ha, ha, ha. You play soccer!" sang Adam in insistence.

### **Interpretation:**

The major theme I would like to focus on within this narrative relates to the boys' use of football culture as a legitimate vehicle through which they can perform a particular brand of 'powerful' masculinity. Consistent with studies of a similar nature (see Skelton 1997; 2000; Swain 2000) this masculinity can be described in positive terms as promoting physical skill and strength and positive social interaction such as friendship and teamwork but it can also be described in negative terms in the sense of providing a context where physical domination in the form of violence and the marginalisation of femininities or effeminacies are not only acceptable but par for the course. It is important to note here that the performance of this brand of masculinity cannot be understood without a contextualisation within the boys' peer culture. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the potency and dynamics

of this culture in shaping boys' masculinities (see Keddie, 2001: in press) in any depth, it is critical to situate this snapshot of the study's data within a peer culture which provided the boys with a context for the performance, indeed amplification of a brand of masculinity mobilized around physical dominance, violence and aggression within understandings of gender as difference and opposition. With this as contextual background, the following interpretation illuminates the metaphysical binaries underpinning the boys' understandings and embodiments of masculinity and how these binaries parallel with, and are legitimated by, their understandings of, and investments in, football practice and culture.

### **The boys' understandings of football culture**

The opening descriptive paragraphs of the narrative illuminate the boys' love of football. This activity, at least during the football season, dominates these boys' lives. Consistent with Renold's research (1997) it seems that at Banrock, football is also positioned at the top of the playground hierarchy in terms of membership and space domination. While my descriptions of the boys' games characterise the disorder and conflict, it is clear that football provides them with real pleasure and excitement as well as a context for social and physical development. The boys particularly seem to enjoy the physical experience of their football games. In this regard, it can be said that football is one area which provides the boys with a vehicle through which they can enact bodily expressions of masculinity (Lingard & Douglas 1999).

Within understandings of football as a highly competitive arena, however, where bodily expressions of masculinity mark physical difference and prestige (Lingard & Douglas 1999), the boys' love of physical exertion and competition can be interpreted as translating into associating football with physical domination and violence. This is evidenced in the dominant understandings about football within the group. Specifically, the boys' bravado concerning their pleasure in "bash(ing) de shit out of people ... hurting people and making blood go on them ... blood rule(s) and shoving and tackling". This dominant group understanding might also be seen as entirely consistent with familiar characterisations of the footballer as brave warrior - a 'legend', 'hero' and 'champion' who sacrifices his body and fights courageously in battle against his opponent - his embodiment of strength and domination underpinned by the desire to win at any cost (Kidd 1990; Whitson 1990; Miedzian 1991).

### **Constructing and maintaining the oppositional dualities of gender and sexuality through football culture**

Within Derridean theorising (in Sarup 1988), the boys' consensus regarding the value of football and violence might be seen as setting up the 'first principle' of the 'unmarked' category: masculinity within the masculine/feminine binary from which the boys define acceptable or desirable, strong and courageous masculine behaviour - behaviour which elevates you to the status of "legend", "hero" and "champion". As Adam explains "boys like dat sorta stuff..." Through the gendered lenses of the boys' bipolar thinking Ravi's preference for soccer over football later in this narrative can be seen as constituting him as 'other' to the group's valorisation of football and he is differentiated as oppositional and inferior and referred to as 'girl-like' and weak. The boys' ridicule of Ravi as a "girl" and a "sissy" ... "Hey Lucy, what's ya name again? Oh yeah, dat's right, Rowena!" and his preference of soccer - belittled as weak and non-courageous as well as "silly" and "a girl's game" can be seen as (re)legitimizing the 'superiority' of the 'strong' and 'courageous' half of the gender binary at the expense of girls or 'girl-like' things. In this sense, and in resonance with Renold's (1997) argument that football is seen by boys as a legitimate arena for the exclusion and denigration of girls, the boys' investments in football and violence can be seen as validated because they see these investments as exclusionary of, and superior to, females and 'female-like' behaviours. This works to (re)affirm dualistic perceptions of gender, through an



exaggeration of the perceived differences between the groups 'boy' ('boy-like') and 'girl' ('girl-like'), and define perceptions of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviours along essentialist lines.

This strategy of legitimation may also be seen as inscribing the masculine/feminine oppositional polarity through a privileging of heterosexuality within the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Sedgwick in Seidman 1993; Fuss 1991). One can see the cultural imperative of heterosexuality (Mac an Ghail 1994; Swain 2000) both informing the boys' feminisation and homophobic denigration of Ravi as a girl and a sissy because he does not subscribe to the group's masculine 'ideal', and their feminisation and homophobic denigration of players who do not display the desired masculinity and who thus are 'girl-like' and homosexual ("poofers", "wimps", "sissies" and "girls" rather than "legends", "heroes" or "champions"). This positions not only an oppositional masculinity as central, and superior to 'femininity', but also a patriarchal and convoluted.

The cultural imperative of heterosexuality as further inscribing the masculine/feminine polarity seems even more central in examining the boys' objectification of females within this narrative. In tandem with the work of Renold (1997) and Skelton (1997) the boys' use of the 'readily available' discourse of objectifying females by regarding them as objects of possession is further evidence of this oppositional thinking in terms of positioning a patriarchal heterosexuality central by reinforcing the binary of males as 'powerful' and 'superior' and females as 'powerless' and 'inferior'. This discourse seems to be governed by the boys associating attention from girls and girlfriend acquisition with male power and status, and in this regard, is used as a form of self-legitimation. Thus, attention from girls and acquiring or collecting "lots of girlfriends" are seen as desirable. As Adam tells us: "the 'A' man always gets the chicks ... I've had a heap of girls who've kissed me." Indeed, it is football which is seen by the boys as providing "really good [thin and sexy like Britney Spears] chicks ... sexy women" and "lots of girlfriends." The boys also seem to associate female attention with bravery, physical dominance and violence. "When you've got de blood rule, all de girls go 'oh geez that would've hurt', so den y'get all de attention and y'look more sexier," Adam remarks. It seems then that, consistent with Kenway and Fitzclarence (in Skelton 1997), the boys view the availability and dispensability of 'lots of girlfriends' as essential to their highly revered image of the successful footballer: an image in which they see demonstrates so many of the traits to which they aspire.

Within Derridean theorizing it can be seen that the principle terms masculinity and heterosexuality constitute superiority and privileged status within gender and sexuality binaries, with the secondary term serving as inferior - the 'superior' term's identity depending on the exclusion of the other (in Sarup 1988). To these ends, the boys' masculine subjectivities are interpreted as defined and (re)legitimated by what they exclude: femininity and homosexuality; and are actively maintained through positioning girls and women and boys and men, who don't measure up, in binary opposition as inferior and 'other'.

Based on these dualistic binaries, the boys can be seen as constructing inflexible gender and sexual boundaries which clearly differentiate between 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' masculine behaviour. The boys' investments in the physical domination and violence of football can be seen as framed within their efforts to differentiate themselves as oppositional to their heterosexist perceptions of females and 'female-like' behaviour. Within this inflexible frame of understanding and in strong resonance with Renold's research (1997), football can be seen as reinforcing the constraints on boys experimenting with other ways of being male.

### **Contextualising the group's dominant discourses within the gendered and heterosexist assumptions of sporting culture**

The group's dominant understandings cannot be seen in isolation from a contextualising within sport as an institution which transmits particular understandings of masculinities. The peer group's dominant understandings promoting violence, physical dominance and heterosexist perceptions of females and 'female-like' behaviour may be seen as consistent with many of the values and norms transmitted through the male-dominated culture of competitive football. In particular, the boys' perceptions of football culture seem to underpin, indeed legitimise and validate, their dominant understandings of masculinity.

While violence in sporting culture is officially condemned, the necessarily 'hard' and 'aggressive' nature of these sports (Hickey & Fitzclarence 1997) prompts clear associations between competitive sports and violence (Miedzian 1991). Certainly, the boys consistently make associations between football and violence. "Y'can bash de shit out of people," (Adam's comment about why he likes football) exemplifies this association and the boys' awareness that in sports 'winning' equates to physical domination. Adam's comment, and many similar expressions he and the other boys make in reference to the competitive arena of football also demonstrates an awareness that these boys see sport as a legitimate arena to enact aggression and violence and promote male supremacy (Kidd 1990; Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990). In this regard, it can be seen that the boys' differentiation as 'superior' to anything 'soft', 'weak', and in their perceptions 'girl-like', is legitimised on a massive scale in reference to sporting culture's glorification of physical strength and dominance.

Sport is not just a symbolic signifier of male competence but assists in the embodiment of hardness, particularly of external muscular hardness. In male sport there is a competitive pitting of the brute force of one's body against the brute force of others, creating both a carapace for the self and a knowledge of one's own force and bodily competence. To win is to momentarily become the hero whose sureness of body can be taken for granted. To be is to be powerful, and anyone who is not, is flawed. (Davies 1993: 95)

### **A way forward**

Davies' (1989; 1993) work with young children on the critical analysis of dominant understandings or storylines offers valuable insight into the ways children can disrupt and rework restrictive notions of gender. While acknowledged as being far from a simple task, because these dominant understandings and individual subject positions are highly contextual, contingent and fluid (Davies 1993; Kamler, Maclean, Reid & Simpson 1994; Renold 1997), Davies' philosophies and strategies are presented here as critical starting points. Davies advocates making the skills of critical deconstruction within a feminist poststructural framework accessible to children through links to their lived and imagined experiences. By engaging with these skills, she argues, children can recognise the historical and cultural specificities of language and meaning and thus make visible the "constitutive force of what is said and what might be" (1993: 200). Through catching "discourse in the act of shaping subjectivities," her empirical work demonstrates that children can identify the constructed nature of cultural patterns and engage in "a collective process of re-naming, re-writing (and) re-positioning themselves in relation to coercive structures" (1993: 200).

It is the facilitation of these skills of deconstruction, through exploring the illegitimacies of discourse that this paper posits as central in boys learning to come to terms with the potent and often destructive nature of their dominant storylines. Learning these skills and drawing on these resources will enable boys to position themselves within alternative and empowering discourses and storylines (Davies 1993). Davies' poststructural work with young children is testimony to their (frequently underestimated) capacities in exploring complex

issues and understanding "different ways of looking, listening, writing and telling new stories" (1993: 197).

Davies' (1993) research offers generative possibilities for working with dominant masculinities, particularly in the early primary sphere where these understandings are still fluid. This fluidity constitutes the potential for exposing, calling into question and reworking taken-for-granted assumptions underpinned by gendered and heterosexist discourses. Central to the "opening up of a different kind of agency" (Davies 1993: 199), the narrative illuminates the boys' willingness to explore their pleasures, emotions, 'irrationalities', investments and competencies within their social worlds. Although only a snapshot of the study's data is presented here, it can be seen that the discursive and affirmative (read socially just) spaces from which to begin such questionings and "invent what might be" (1993: 200) already exist in Ravi's resistance to the group's dominant storylines. This can be seen as a legitimate avenue through which to explore alternative and less oppressive ways of being, most significantly because it stems from a different interpretation within the group and is thus relevant to the boys. Davies (1993) notes that identification and legitimation of convincing alternative subject positions are critical in encouraging boys to resist familiar, and perhaps more convincing, dominant and dominating modes of being.

Resonating with Maclean's research (1999) with young children's peer groups, it seems that Ravi possesses the intertextual strategies to take control in the construction of his subjectivities. His affirmative positioning within the group suggests that he is able to see the "textual staging of knowledge" and "lack of innocence" (Lather 1991: 13) in the group's dominant understandings of violence and aggression and use his personal resources to position himself against their constitutive power. Ravi's critique of football reveals a socially just argument which might be used as a starting point to 'talk out of existence', or at least posit alternatives to accepting a revered masculinity built on brute physical strength and combative violence. In this regard, the validity of alternative positions (beginning with Ravi's) can be opened within the group through exploring the multiple ways through which discourses within football might position and marginalise others. As Reid (1999: 170) argues, "the feminist poststructuralist recognition of different standpoints and different ways of seeing increases the potential for different ways of enacting." In making transparent a plurality of standpoints, the potential for alternative knowledges to generate "affirmative identities" (Seidman 1993: 134) becomes possible. Through poststructural lenses, 'critical moments' of political struggle can be recognised (Weedon 1997) and deployed to generate opportunities to re-interpret, challenge and redefine dominance.

In facilitating the analysis of how different perspectives and interpretations create a proliferation of meanings and position individuals in hierarchical ways, the socio-political power framing particular understandings may be revealed (Davies 1993). For example, subsequent to an identification of how football might marginalise or exclude others, possible intentions, investments and emotions underpinning the perpetuation of dominance can be explored. The marginalisation of females and homosexuals through heterosexism and homophobia in male-dominated sport might thus be called into question through exposing the particular 'non-innocent' intentions fashioning these discourses, such as desire to maintain and perpetuate male supremacy. In foregrounding how individuals are marginalised through particular invested positionalities, uncritical and indiscriminate 'otherings', such as the all-pervasive football slurs of 'girl' and 'poof', can begin to be disrupted. To quote Davies (1993: 159):

(Children) need to discover the way in which the cultural patterns constantly repeated in stories are taken up as their own, becoming the thread with which life is woven and desire is shaped. They need to see the author as a person with intentions and ways of understanding that are expressed through shared

cultural symbols, assumptions, connections, images, metaphors and storylines. They need to see that while on the one hand, authors cannot guarantee meanings because of the active way in which their texts are read, their intentions may nevertheless be discernible and might be called in question.

In light of the study's interpretation concerning the primacy of compulsory heterosexuality in shaping the boys' dominant and repressive understandings of masculinities, specifically the interrelated and mutually reinforcing positions gender and (hetero)sexual dualities play in the boys' defining their very being (Altman in Seidman 1993), facilitating this analytic with young males would necessarily involve deconstructing the binary of compulsory heterosexuality. Consistent with other work in this sphere, in the "context of developing conventional gender roles" (Epstein & Johnson 1994: 170), the boys can be seen as enacting a particularly rigid masculine heterosexuality (Mac an Ghail 1994). It can be seen that playing with and constructing sexualities are significant aspects of gender(ed) construction for young children, and in the case of young boys, this gender(ed) construction embodies the use of (hetero)sexuality as a potent source of 'power over' females in the form of domination and even violence. It can be seen, thus, that the cherished notion of children as sexual innocents, which continues to underpin early childhood/primary philosophy and curriculum in terms of, among other things, the "vehement exclusion of sexuality from the formal curriculum," is very misleading (Epstein & Johnson 1994: 217). More importantly, subscribing to this cherished notion, in terms of ignoring or failing to challenge heterosexist practice, can be seen as constituting and legitimating patriarchal heterosexuality as normal, and everything else as deviant, and in this sense, a particularly narrow misogynistic and homophobic masculinity is endorsed usually under the rubric of 'boys will be boys'.

Thus, given the wealth of distorted knowledge the boys possess in this area, arguments pointing to the irrelevancy, immorality or perversion of exploring sexualities in early childhood are not only ill-informed and out-dated, but may unwittingly perpetuate these distortions by leaving them unchallenged (Bickmore 1999; Misson 1996; Redman 1994; Epstein & Johnson 1994). As Skelton's research (1997) points out, the inability or unwillingness of schools and teachers to articulate or intervene in relation to boys' active use of violent/sexualized practices manages, by default, to sanction them. Against this backdrop a clear warrant exists for demystifying these issues in the early childhood classroom. For it can be seen that children are learning "very negative" lessons about sexuality in the school's informal contexts (Redman 1994: 147). Thus, as Connell (1995), Martino (1999) and Pallotta-Chiarolli (1997) argue, we cannot address masculinity effectively unless we address homophobia, heterosexism and homosexuality.

Numerous opportunities exist within many of the key learning areas of the formal curriculum to address the issues of homophobia, heterosexism and homosexuality (Davies 1993; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995). Within a framework of social justice, and drawing on the principles of Davies' work, in relation to teaching children the skills of recognising the socially constructed nature of socio-political discourse, restrictive notions of gender and sexuality can be challenged, deconstructed and reworked. As the narrative illuminates, children experience their own issues of marginalisation within informal school contexts. Within the formal curriculum, the exploration and deconstruction of these issues can be relevantly and generatively located within areas such as social studies and health. Within the areas of language, drama and art, these issues might also be explored, for example, by examining the exclusion and silencing of women, homosexuals and lesbians from mainstream history. Through inclusion and legitimation of works from 'marginalised' groups, taken-for-granted normalities informing children's binary thinking can be challenged and called into question.

Through exploring social categories such as marriage and family, educators can facilitate a foregrounding and deconstruction of heterosexual centrality in the social worlds of children. Through discussions of love and relationships, for example, children as young as four and five have been found to work together, from the perspectives of their own experiences, to define and explore notions of marriage and family to be inclusive and accepting of multiple structures and differences (Casper; Cuffaro; Schultz; Silin & Wickens 1998). These definitions however have been found to firm into more rigid and exclusionary understandings by the time children are the ages of six and seven (Casper et al. 1998). The significance of representations and talk about children's families within the formal curriculum in early childhood/early primary education would seem to present an opportune and relevant starting point for exploring and (re)working restrictive notions of gender and sexuality with children (Casper et al. 1998) if we are to promote the legitimacy of diversity and encourage the acceptance, rather than the marginalisation, of difference. While teachers and parents "want to protect children from knowledge of the social world that they themselves find discomforting" (Silin in Casper et al. 1998: 94), Bickmore points out:

Discussing sexuality with elementary students is risky - but necessary - because of its very importance to their personal and political lives. The need for student-centred instruction (on meaningful issues) does not diminish simply because the students' experiences are socially volatile. Children build the autonomy and the confidence for handling difficult questions, attending to contrasting viewpoints, and making decisions, by doing so, in the protected but pluralistic space of the public school. Carefully designed education about sexuality, including homosexuality, can provide such an opportunity. Otherwise we abdicate responsibility for children's safety and their inclusion in democratic society, leaving them to sort through unreliable sources of information on their own. (1999: 20-21)

Moreover, in countering the de-sexualisation of schooling early in children's formal education (Epstein 1994) in open and honest student-centred ways, some of the embarrassments and difficulties in exploring the sexualities of future adolescent classrooms may be prevented. The degree of de-sexualisation of schooling that arises from teacher embarrassment and discomfort in facilitating the exploration of sexualities might also be alleviated through specifically focused initial and in-service teacher education initiatives (Mac an Ghail 1994).

The centrality of the boys' social, emotional and physical investments in bodily expressions of masculinity, and the study's association of these investments with dominance and violence, clearly warrants exploring with boys in the pursuit of alternative forms of masculine embodiment. The challenge here, in disrupting these investments, is to promote equally desirable and valued avenues through which boys can physically express alternative forms of masculinity. Given the media saturation of combative male-dominated sports and the adulation of football stars, this is clearly no easy task. To work from Davies' (1993) suggestion, however, in 'tapping into' boys' existing patterns of desire, affirmative pleasures of the boys' physical expression may be identified and channelled into non-violent and self-empowering physical activities. In resonance with many commentators on sport and masculinities (Hickey & Fitzclarence 1997; Kidd 1990; Lingard & Douglas 1999; Messner & Sabo 1994), it is important neither to come across as 'sports bashers' (Whitson 1990) nor to suggest banning football (Renold 1997; Skelton 2000) - attitudes which have been found to be counterproductive in channelling boys' physicality into less violent pursuits. To these ends, Whitson (1990) emphasises the significance of promoting the positive aspects within sport such as strength, skill, physical expression, grace and cooperation. To refer back to Davies' (1993) notion of tapping into the boys' experiences, one can glean from the narrative, that while the boys privilege a combative form of embodiment, which must be questioned

(Lingard & Douglas 1999), they also derive much pleasure from embodying some of the affirmative aspects to which Whitson refers.

Against this backdrop generative spaces do, at least potentially, exist from which to promote 'legitimate' alternatives to combative sports such as football. Indeed many boys place more value on intrinsic satisfaction and aesthetic creativity when experiencing their physical embodiments of strength, endurance and skill as expressed in non-combative sports such as tennis, running, swimming, rowing, diving and gymnastics (Lingard & Douglas 1999; Messner & Sabo 1994; Whitson 1990). Affirmative possibilities are also argued to arise from boys' involvement in female-dominated sports such as netball, where girls' skills will often exceed those of boys (Kenway in Lingard & Douglas 1999) and mixed sports which provide boys with a different means of conceiving a particular game (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998).

Schools can assist this process of legitimating alternatives to combative and competitive sports by raising the profile of non-combative sport and other forms of physical expression such as dance, gymnastics and drama (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995). As Skelton (2000: 16) points out:

...at least in some cases, the centrality of football to a school's ethos and status has more to do with the school itself than the desires and preferences of the boys [and in this regard] schools might consider how the 'game' is constructed and played out in their own locations in order to address wider structural inequalities.

In the school context boys can begin to think positively about alternatives to a combative dominating masculinity and "to imaginatively know ways of being which might replace the existing ones" (Davies 1993: 200). This might be achieved through, for example: the greater allocation of public space and social recognition within schools to dance, gymnastics and non-contact physical pursuits such as the 'Super skippers'; the greater celebration of success and achievement in dance and music events such as Australia's national Rock Eisteddfod challenge; and the greater promotion of school drama productions and particular role-models who derive their status from artistry and grace.

The incorporation of anti-sexist and anti-homophobic principles into formal documents such as existing school policies, within broader structural support systems is seen as critical in enhancing the effectiveness of challenging restrictive notions of gender and sexuality (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995). Within supportive departmental and school infrastructures, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic principles and objectives "will (come to) inform what we teach, why we are teaching it and the methods used in that teaching" (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995: 69). In this regard, reform will be supported within a whole-school social justice framework and not simply be characterised by ad-hoc initiatives within an over-crowded curriculum.

In challenging restrictive notions of gender and sexuality, school initiatives, alongside celebrations such as NAIDOC and International Women's Day, might include recognition in assemblies, newsletters and school activities, of World AIDS Day or Lesbian and Gay Pride Week (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995; Patrick & Sanders 1994). Other whole school consciousness-raising initiatives to challenge homophobia and break down stereotypes might include the display of anti-homophobic posters, the public and positive recognition of famous people who identify as homosexual or lesbian or the invitation of gay guest speakers (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1995). In an early childhood context, the implementation of this social justice framework might be part of the class constitution and include anti-sexist and anti-homophobic 'rules' discussed and incorporated within prohibitions of 'name calling' or the use of 'put-downs'. Against this backdrop of openness, acceptance and empathy, students can access and appreciate affirmative and diverse knowledges about alternative ways of

being. Within this framework heterosexism and homophobia might be effectively deconstructed and 're-written' in generative and creative ways within themes of social justice, marginality and discrimination.

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