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The Silencing of Girls' Talk: Student Perception or Reality?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a research project funded by an Early Career
Researcher grant from the University of Melbourne. The project's aim was to explore
gender differences in ways that boys and girls in secondary classrooms engage in small-
group discussion. Issues of 'showmanship' demonstrated by boys, their vocal
domination, gender loyalty, and discipline issues emerged as major themes in the analysis
of student interview data presented in an earlier paper (Godinho, 2004). These issues
were challenged by an initial quantitative analysis of small-group discussion data.
However, adapted critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 1999; Luke, 1995)
was then applied to the data which allowed opportunities to examine more closely the
discourses taken up by students and teachers, and to interpret how they impacted on
dialogic processes. The videotaping of the small-group discussions enabled the analyses
to provide insights into how discourses compete to construct and position teachers and
students within the small-group discussion framework, and ultimately to silence some
students.

Introduction

The findings discussed in this paper are based on research conducted in Victorian secondary school settings. The study replicated an earlier study in primary schools, which sought to identify gender based differences in student participation in small group discussions. Both studies were grounded in the belief that small-group discussion facilitated by a teacher provides opportunities for students to: hone their discussion skills (Abbott & Godinho 2001; Godinho 2001, Clements & Godinho 2003); develop a foundation for ongoing dialogue (Ritchhart 2002); experience the benefits of becoming a learning community (Roghoff, Matusov & White 1996; Matusov 2000); and provide the necessary space for students to make their thinking visible (Perkins 2003). The focus on teacher facilitation is consistent with a social constructivist paradigm that views students as active learners, who receive leadership and guidance from teachers in the process of working collaboratively to construct meaning (Westgate & Corden 1993; Wegerif & Mercer 1996). The small-group construct best lends itself to the learning community approach in which all participants are expected to play an active role, no one assuming all the responsibility and no one being passive. In a whole class discussion, it is generally impossible to ensure all students engage actively, and the opportunities for teachers to extend and deepen a student's thinking are compromised by the need to give as many students as possible a chance to participate.

The analysis of data from the research with secondary students has three layers: an initial analysis of the student interview data (Godinho 2004); a quantitative analysis snapshot of emergent patterns in gendered use of the linguistic space; and finally a critical discourse analysis of the videotaped discussions. This third layer is a response to interview claims by both boys and girls of the problematic nature of boys' use of the linguistic space in secondary classrooms: their 'showmanship'; their vocal domination; and issues of discipline and gender loyalty that they claimed frequently silenced girls' participation. Conversely, there was no reference by primary students to issues of gender, power and domination impacting on their discussions, or of implicating teachers in the construction of boys' discursive positioning in the class. Therefore it was not deemed necessary to engage a critical discourse framework for the analysis of discussions in the primary settings.

Situating the study within research findings and the literature

Research on gender and education has more recently focused on what Weaver-Hightower (2003, p. 471) refers to in the Unites States as 'the "boy turn" in research on gender and education.' In Australia, the Commonwealth Government has raised concern about boys underperforming at school and has allocated 30 million dollars for school based projects – the largest sum of money awarded to any single educational issue. The funding is an outcome of some key government reports (Alloway *et al*. 2002; Commonwealth of Australia 2001, 2002, 2003; Department of Education, Science and Training 2002), that have resulted in national projects such as the *Boys Education Lighthouse Schools* (Stages 1 & 2) and *Success for Boys* (Stage 3). While it is undeniable that women are still disadvantaged professionally, economically, politically and socially boys are perceived as

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underperforming in relation to girls at the school level, according to the Australian
Council for Educational Research (Cresswell et al. 2002).

It is important, however, that student progress not be generalized in terms of gender-
based achievement (Alloway & Gilbert 1997; Rowan *et al*. 2002). Social and cultural
capital always need to be taken into consideration, as gendered patterns of student
participation and performance are aggravated or moderated by socio-economic status
(Teese *et al*. 1995). Subsequently, Rowan *et al*. (2002) and Collins *et al*. (2000) argue the
importance of identifying 'which girls, which boys?'. In my earlier study of primary
classrooms (Godinho & Shrimpton 2003), an additional question emerged: 'Which
teachers?' Teachers, in this study who were aware that boys sometimes dominate the
discursive interaction, monitored closely the participation of students to ensure more
equitable use of the linguistic space by boys and girls.

Research on gender-based differences in student talk is limited, with studies more
focussed on aspects of quality discussion (Dillon 1990, 1994; Bridges 1988; Edwards &
Westgate 1994; Godinho 2001). Of particular interest to this study is Baxter's finding
that identifies the 'affiliative, cooperative "style" associated with girls in classroom talk
as opposed to the competitive, adversarial "style" associated with boys' (1999, p. 87).
Other studies affirm that girls are considered better at collaborative small-group talk
where interpersonal skills are valued (Jenkins & Cheshire 1990; Reay 1991; Sadker &
Sadker (1994). According to Jenkins and Cheshire, girls are 'careful listeners and
cooperative members of their discussion groups' (1990, p. 261). In a later study, Baxter
(2002) noted boys' failure to endorse ideas introduced or developed by girls, affirming
observations by Jenkins and Chesire and Swann and Graddol (1995), and suggesting that
female subservience assisted in reproducing male-female power relationships. Girls in
Baxter's study conformed to expectations of classroom discourse, whereas boys flaunted
'the rules' to seize the floor.

Such findings support Spender's research in the 1980s which found that by school age
children 'bring to the classroom the [gendered] understanding that it is males who should
have the floor and females who should be the dutiful listeners' (1980, p. 149). Research
in the 1980s claimed that teachers were unaware that girls occupied less linguistic space
in discussions (Spender 1982; French & French 1984; Sadker & Sadker 1985). Somewhat
surprisingly, studies by Swann & Graddol (1988) found that boys, girls and teachers
frequently colluded to allow boys' dominance of the linguistic space, albeit in some
instance quite unconsciously.

From a post-structuralist perspective a focus on the analysis of discourses assumes
particular importance. Gee (1996) refers to discourses as 'identity kits' as they are
instrumental in the ways in which a person engages in speaking, thinking, acting, feeling
and believing. As Foucault (1972, p. 49) maintains, discourses "systematically form the
objects about which they speak", and create knowledge-power relations by their
construction of truths about the social and natural world. Yates (2000), however, has
noted that that feminist literature has allowed girls to be treated with sensitive detail but
has left the boys as 'a more shadowy other'. It is this more shadowy other that this study

will attempt to flesh out so that the boys' engagement in the discussions is more closely scrutinized and illuminated. This brief overview of key literature has highlighted the importance of examining the data to:

- identify differences in ways that boys and girls use linguistic students in secondary small-group discussions; and
- determine whether the silencing of girls, as claimed by interview data is student perception or the reality in this context.

The research framework

While the study focused on qualitative methodology, quantitative methods were employed to increase its robustness and trustworthiness. As Miles and Huberman (1994) attest, there are three good reasons for resorting to numbers: 'to see rapidly what you have in a large batch of data; to verify a hunch or hypothesis; and to keep yourself analytically honest, protecting against bias' (p. 253). Quantitative data analysis was limited to frequency counts of talk-turns and the percentages of linguistic space used by teachers, girls and boys but did not involve statistical analysis and manipulation of variables. Used in this manner, this quantification snapshot served to identify patterns that could then be looked at more closely within the qualitative analysis of the data.

The study of primary school discussions used an analysis framework adapted from Bridges (1988) to determine differences in the ways that discussion skills were applied by boys and girls to explore and construct meaning. (For methodological details and the cognitive framework used in this study see Godinho & Shrimpton 2003). Discussion skills, such as responsiveness and sensitivity to the ideas and opinions of others and a willingness to explore tentative and unformed ideas, are equally relevant to this analysis. However, the framework is insufficient to analyse the disempowerment of girls indicated by the student interview data, and the suspected presence of what Blair (2000) refers to as the '*genderlects*' of girl talk and boy talk – that is en-gendered school discourse patterns.

Critical discourse analysis, located within social scientific research, can be approached in many different ways. My eclectic approach to the analysis has been influenced by the work of Gee (1999) Luke (1995) and Fairclough (2001), who all support Foucault's (1990; 1991) assertion that power is constituted through discourses, and is important in the construction of knowledge and what counts as knowledge. This assumption fits within the feminist post-structuralist perspective (Weedon 1987; Davies 1993, 1997; Allard 2004) that acknowledges the importance of language as a discursive practice, and its involvement in social relations of power, domination and ideology (Fairclough 2001). There is however, no attempt to engage in systemic functional linguistic analysis which is frequently associated with critical discourse analysis. Analysis of the data has simply sought to identify how social practices and patterns of participation have impacted on the small-group interactive processes, and to determine whether the discursive positioning of students has ultimately silenced some girls, as the interview data suggest.

Study design and methods

Teachers were asked to select a text for a small-group discussion based on a topic being taught within the disciplines of English, the Arts or the Study of Society and the Environment (SoSE). Discussion groups were gender-balanced and varied from six to eight students – numbers were dependent on the teacher's preference and the activity to be undertaken. Data was collected from the school sites between August and November, 2004. The methods included: small-group discussions of 20-30 minutes duration; 10 minute interviews with the teacher facilitators; and a ten minute interviews with the student-participants. All discussions and interviews were video-taped, using semi-professional digital audio and video equipment suitable for data collection and CD-ROM development.

School Settings

A cross section of co-educational schools was targeted to seek student representation across a range of socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The three major school categories were included: government, Catholic and independent schools.

Table 1 school settings used in the study

Government School (1)	Traditional inner suburban school. Strong multi-cultural representation. Socio-economic status (SES) of students' families lower to middle range.
Government School (2)	Eastern suburban school. Strong multi-cultural student representation. SES middle to higher range.
Catholic School	Secondary regional college west of Melbourne. Strong multi-cultural representation. SES lower range.
Independent School (1)	Large inner suburban school. SES upper middle to higher range.
Independent School (2)	Co-educational school on suburban outskirts. SES middle to higher range.

Participants

Thirteen secondary teachers were recruited from Years 7-9 across each of the school settings. The teachers were at different career stages, ranging from recent graduates in their early twenties, to those in their mid-fifties with many years of teaching experience. However, it was not possible to attain gender balance, given the predominance of females in the teaching profession. Approximately eighty-one secondary students were selected by the teachers to participate in the study. Teachers were asked to ensure their groupings were heterogeneous and to take student dynamics into consideration. They were also requested to be mindful that the cultural diversity of the students was reflective of their school population.
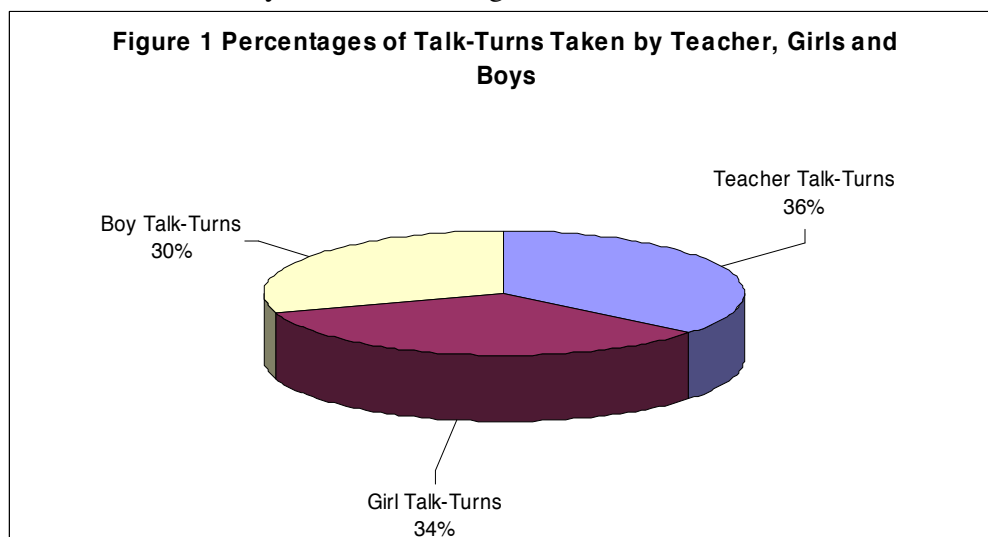
Videotaping

Video-taping ensured a highly accurate documentation of what was said and made visible the subtle non-verbal interactions within the discussions. Video-taping resolved the difficulties of successfully distinguishing between the tonally similar voices of some boys and girls, which can occur when relying solely on audio recordings. Two cameras were used for filming discussions and the interviews. This approach enabled an overview of

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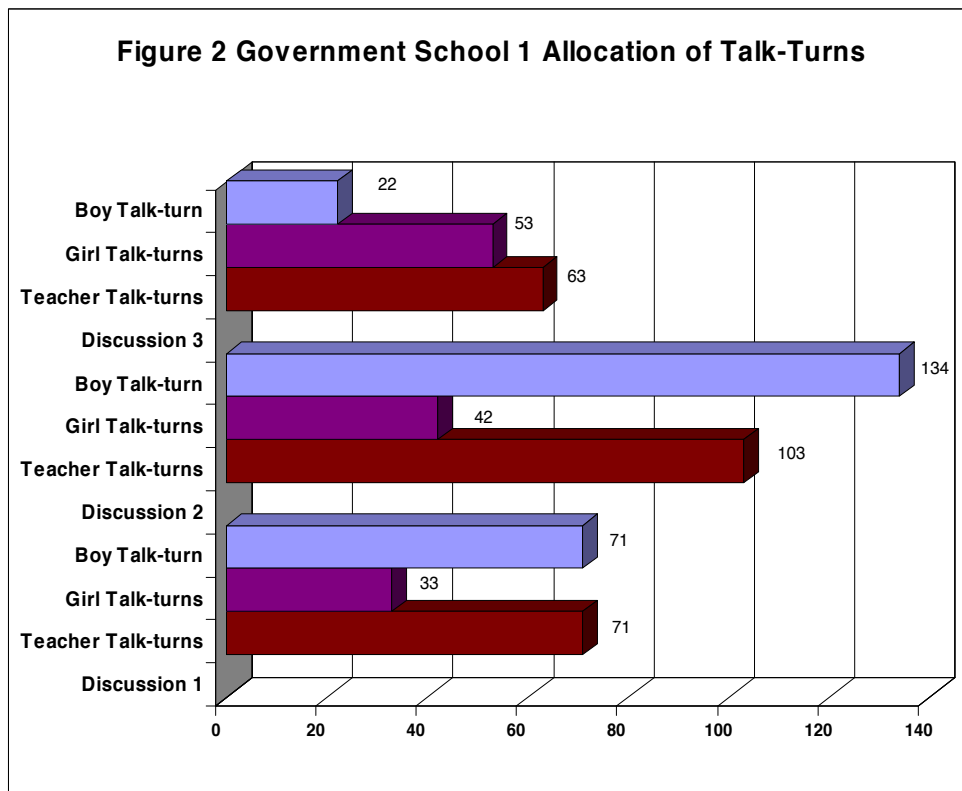26 -27 November, Adelaide.

the group interaction, in addition to close-up shots of individual students. While this was not a natural situation, I believe the impact on the discussion, in most instances, was minimal. This can be attributed to the equipment being limited to two cameras and one set of lights (used only when required). During the course of the filming, the two cameramen and myself were positioned well back from the group. Before the taping commenced, students were familiarized with the equipment and the video-recording process and given the opportunity to interact with the researcher and camera crew and to ask any questions. I have found this approach essential for helping students adjust to the intrusion of additional people and equipment into their discussion space. It meant that once was filming was underway students were less likely to be distracted from the discussion. Interviews with students and teachers occurred immediately after the discussions so that details were still fresh in their minds.
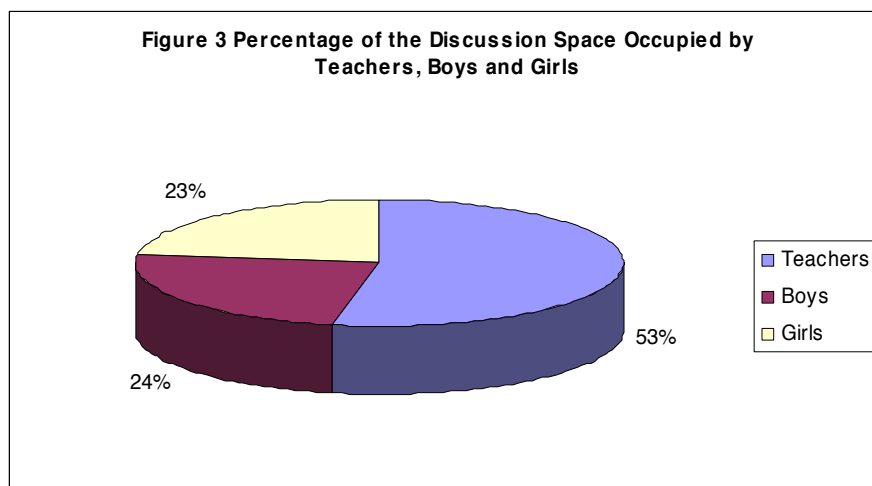
A quantitative snapshot

The findings of the quantitative analysis of the talk-turns taken by teachers, girls and boys and of how discussion space is allocated are inconsistent with student and teacher claims of boys' domination. A talk-turn in this study is defined as a moment in time when a student held the attention of the group, albeit in some instances very briefly. When data from all discussion groups were combined, the girls had four per cent more talk-turns than the boys, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Percentages of Talk-Turns Taken by Teacher, Girls and Boys

Teacher Talk-Turns 36%

Boy Talk-Turns 30%

Girl Talk-Turns 34%

Yet this finding is somewhat misleading as it does not reveal the large disparity in talk-turns taken by boys and girls in some discussions. The breakdown of data from the three discussion groups in government school 1 in Figure 2 exemplifies this point, revealing that in discussions one and two the boys overwhelmingly dominated the talk-turns with a ratio of approximately 3:1, whereas in discussion three the ratio was 2.5 in the girls' favour. With teachers taking one in every three talk-turns very little opportunity existed for the development of dialogic talk where students' build on each others' ideas.

Figure 2 Government School 1 Allocation of Talk-Turns

Frequency counts in Figure 2 simply refer to a moment in time when a student held the attention of the group, but the data revealed nothing about the allocation of discussion space. In some instances a talk-turn is simply a word or a phrase that has little impact on the dialectical construction of meaning. Interestingly, when the space taken up by teachers, boys and girls was calculated on a word count basis, there was only a one per cent variance in the boys' favour. It is the teachers who overwhelmingly dominated the discussion space, as Figure 3 demonstrates.

Figure 3 Percentage of the Discussion Space Occupied by Teachers, Boys and Girls

These findings are simply a snapshot and provide no insights into the students' perception of the domination of linguistic space by boys and the silencing of girls, which the following excerpts from student interview reveal. However, it should be noted that students were generally referring to whole class discussions.

> The guys sometimes get a bit rowdy. They talk louder than girls and always get their word in. (Year 8 girl)
>
> Well, it depends on the subject, but maybe boys most of the time. (Year 7 girl)
>
> Most of the time it's boys, but sometimes it's girls if they're confident...(Year 7 girl)
>
> It tends to be the boys. They are really loud in our grade. (Year 8 girl)
>
> Boys, I'd say, because it's a lot easier… obviously boys have deeper voices than the girls, so it's easier to hear us then. (Year 8 boy)
>
> Boys do dominate, but there are a few odd girls that tend to stand up and really give it a go. (Year 9 boy)
>
> Male dominance in the classroom and in the school is high and everywhere. They just tend to be louder and have more to say than the girls. The girls just tend to calm down after a while and the boys take it further (Year 9 boy)
>
> Boys dominate, definitely, 'cause in today's society, you wouldn't see girls dominate in speech and protest and all that stuff (Year 7 boy). (Godinho, 2004)

Such claims may be suggestive of the students' adoption of a public discourse that views females as professionally, economically, politically and socially disadvantaged, and which they have applied to the school context and the way in which discussion is enacted in their classrooms. The analyses of student and teacher discourses provide the opportunity to probe and explore in more nuanced ways the reality of students' inferred claims of the boys' powerful positioning in a discussion context and the silencing of girls' voices.

Qualitative discourse analysis
Themes that emerged from the interview data and were pursued in the discourse analysis included boys' 'showmanship', their vocal domination, and gender loyalty in addition to the theme of teacher discourses. Given the scope of this paper, the discussion has been limited to exploring the reality of the students' perceptions of boys' about domination of the linguistic space by boys and how the discourses adopted by teachers, boys and girls have impacted on the interactive use of discussion processes.

Showmanship
In the videotaped discussions, the presence of 'showmanship' was clearly affirmed and was unequivocally identified as a discursive feature of the social practices that some boys enacted. While many girls were confident and assertive, even humorous at times, they did not engage in the deliberate attention-seeking behaviour of the boys that disrupted the discussion flow and the development of emergent ideas. The teachers were, overall,

accepting of these behaviours - perhaps a case of 'tactical ignoring'. Baxter (2002) has suggested that males are often constructed as the wittier sex and girls (and perhaps teachers too) are constituted as the approving audience. In the following excerpt, the students are discussing what essential provisions (20 in all) will be taken by a scientist in a mission to protect an endangered species. These provisions must be air freighted in a small 'bin' to a remote island location.

Boy 3: Well, if you've got solar power, like you should bring a solar panel or something like that, so you can charge everything.
Girl 3: But that little bin is gonna end up under water if you carry a massive satellite dish.
Boy 3: Satellite phone isn't like that. Satellite phone…
<Noisy arguing>
Teacher: One at a time, guys!
Girl 3: It occupies space. She doesn't have much space in that little bin.
Boy 3: I'm sure she could put it here. <circles something on his paper>
Boy 1: Satellite phone is about the same size as that <pulls his mobile phone out and shows it to everyone> but just a bit bigger.
<Group smile and laugh>.
Teacher: I didn't see that!
Boy 1: It's not here.
Teacher: I'm pleased to hear that it's not actually here!
Boy 1: *It disappeared.*
Girl 3 <giggling>: Well done, <Boy 1's name>. (Government School 2, Discussion 3)

Here rules are deliberately broken, and waived, albeit given a somewhat difficult situation with the filming of the group discussion. Girl 3 is arguing rationally on the basis of her understanding of a satellite dish and/or a solar panel, yet there is no attempt by the teacher to support her argument or to assist in developing it further. However, the girl is very aware of Boy 1's intention to sabotage her argument and divert attention from it by producing his mobile phone, as her final comment indicates. The rather forced giggling, is acknowledgement of the boy's use of humour and an acceptance of the 'boys will be boys' discourse which is operational here. The bemused expression on the teacher's face is also suggestive of her acceptance of the bravado, humour and risky behaviour associated with 'boys will be boys' discourse.

In the next excerpt, diversion of the discussion by another form of boys' showmanship is demonstrated. Here Boy 4 is relying on 'technology expertise' being identified as a 'boys' thing' which constructs him as the knowing 'other' and privileges him within the discussion. Both the teacher and the girls are clearly very reluctant to challenge the boy's authority on technological issues, to seek further information about how the device functions, or to question the meaning of the word – its name being clearly suggestive of an acronym.

Boy 4: With the EPIRB thing, if you're lost and set it to work and like, the coast guards will come and get you so I think that's the best option. And the batteries last for 4 years. That's another thing.
Teacher: Well, there we go, so that's…
Boy 4: That's no hassle.
Teacher: OK.
Boy 3: What does it use?

Boy 4: EPIRB batteries.
Teacher: So we're taking what?
Boy 4: An EPIRB.
Teacher: We can take one of those or what?
Girl 3: I think it's a pretty good idea, as long as the batteries last long.
Boy 1: The battery is that big, like car battery.
Teacher: What is it again?
Boy 4: EPIRB.
Teacher: I've never heard of it, so I've learnt something. Thank you, <Boy 3's name>.
Boy 4: No worries.
Teacher: That's it. Now, what sort of cooking things will you need, guys? (Government School 2,
Discussion 3)

No one questions the boys' authority on the technology, or asks for some explanation
about how the signals from the EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon)
are picked up. Perhaps this is because the girls have constructed the boys as more
authoritative on technology, consider this a 'boys' thing', or perhaps choosing silence as
a way of more quickly diverting the discussion from a topic which they know less about
than the boys. Girl 3 is supportive of the idea, but does qualify this support by indicating
concern about the longevity of the batteries. This offer of interactional support by a girl is
rarely returned by the boys across the discussions. In this excerpt, the boy's discursive
positioning has empowered him as the teacher affirms when she claims that she has learnt
something from him – her approval clearly 'chuffing' the boy, as evidenced in his facial
expression and body language which attest to his confidence and feeling of power. The
video shows him leaning back, arms crossed, legs outstretched whether a highly self
satisfied look on his face. The shift of focus in the final line to 'cooking things', suggests
that the teacher is eager to disengage from a technological discourse to one through
which she can assert her authority and thereby gain more control over what is being said.

The next extract, from one of the Catholic school discussions, embraces showmanship
through boys acting out in ways that cause the group to laugh and lose focus in what one
girl describes as the 'stuffing around' that boys do. It was one of the few discussions that
diverged from a round table focus so there were more opportunities to observe use of
body movement. Verbal expression by several of the boys in this discussion is mumbled
and incoherent and at many points delivery is reliant on body language and gesture,
rather than attempting to verbally articulate meaning. In this episode, the teacher is
encouraging the students to think about putting a performance together when Boy 3
seizes on the expression 'body language' introduced by one of the girls. Rather than
acknowledge the girl's contribution with eye contact as he speaks, Boy 3 draws his left
hand drawn across his body and simply points in her direction and says, 'That's it', which
makes everybody laugh. There may well have been some sexual innuendo given the girl's
very attractive appearance, but this is purely speculative.
Boy 3: You need to sort of get into the zone.
Teacher: Get into the zone, OK. What about how… You know when we talked about
directing a scene, when we were working on that play, and the director had to have…
What is the director's role in a play?
Boy 2: To set everything up.

Boy 1: To tell you what to do.
Teacher: To set everything up and to tell you what to do, OK.
Boy 1: What positions and stuff.
Teacher: OK, so we also need to think about where we were.
Boy 3: Umm, act, and body, like, stuff…
Girl 1: Body language.
Boy 3: <no eye contact but points in Girl 1's direction> That's it! <group laughter>
Teacher: Uh huh, exactly, so certain lines are better to be done in this way < hand motions>, and when you say this line, I want you to walk over there. That kind of stuff?
(Catholic School Discussion 1)
Again this appears to be a case of tactical ignoring, and the teacher giving this authoritative male behaviour acceptance by viewing it as an enactment of the response she was seeking to elicit from the group. A binary seems to be at play here of powerful boy, powerless girl despite the girl's intellectual input.

Of course showmanship is not definitive of the discourses taken up by all boys, but it was found to be exclusive to the boys in the analysis of the discussions in this study. Bravado, humour, tall tales and transgressing social boundaries were evidenced across the discussions, which given the limitations of the small-group context indicates that much greater liberties may be both taken and tolerated in a whole class discussion when boys have more opportunities to position themselves through showmanship discourses. This way of situating oneself as a male within the discussion, is suggestive of what Blair (2000) has termed a '*genderlect*' of boy talk – an en-gendered school discourse pattern.

Vocal domination and gender loyalty
There are crossovers in the themes of vocal and gender domination themes so the analyses have been combined. There were times in the discussions when either the boys dominated or the girls dominated. It became increasingly evident that both boys and girls were multiply positioned by competing discourses. There were times when girls withdrew to a position of silence and allowed the boys to dominate, as the following extract indicates. However, at no point when girls were dominating the discussion was the teacher observed to be complicit in allowing this to occur, as was evidenced when boys were doing so. When boys sought to join in, they were encouraged, whereas girls were frequently side-lined in favour of the boys' participation. In this excerpt, a girl seeks an entry point when querying the boy's use of the word '*know*' but this opportunity was overlooked and instead the teacher chose to praise Boy 2's contribution. A further opportunity to bring the girls into the discussion occurs when the teacher asks: 'Does anyone agree, disagree, think something different?', but again the opportunity is missed when the teacher fails to signal for a girl to respond, and a boy seizes the moment. Participation in this discussion is determined by boys' assertiveness to take the turn as the number of consecutive exchanges between boys and teacher demonstrate. Conversely, girls appear to be silenced by their adherence to rules of social conduct which oblige them to be good listeners and to wait for their turn to be signalled. Alternatively, the girls' silence may be a discursive position that involves them choosing not to play the power game.

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Teacher: So are we saying that Mr Keating wants the boys to become free thinkers and independent individuals?
Boy 2: He wants to let them **know** that they can become free thinkers and individuals.
Girl 2: Um…*know*…
Teacher: Um, that's good.
Boy 1: Well, maybe he said that because he actually attended this school, maybe his experience at school…He didn't want the boys to make the same choice that he did.
Teacher: Yeah, but where did the Dead Poets Society come from?
Boy 4: Mr Keating, because he went to the school and made the society.
Boy 1: That's what I'm saying. He knows what it's like to be at the school and how you have to conform to your parents, the teachers, the school policies and everything, so he wants to teach the boys that they don't have to…
Boy 5: He teaches them to think for themselves and there might be consequences to doing things that might be not as accepted as other things are.
Teacher: What do you mean?
Boy 5: Like, um, the school was against the Dead Poets' Society. They went along with that and they accepted the consequences by getting into troubles at the end.
Teacher: Does anyone agree, disagree, think something different?
Boy 2: I think we're on the same track.
Teacher: We're on the same track. So let's get back to the Cameron's character. Is he the one exception to Mr Keating's teachings? He's the one that possibly doesn't have any…Mr Keating doesn't have any great influence on him. He hasn't kind of learnt the lesson. Is that what you're saying?
Boy 2: I think so.
Boy 5: yeah.
Boy 3: I think he sort of, right from the start, thinks that it's not something worth listening to, so he didn't really… He just thought that it was something stupid.

Despite the interview claims girls too fell into a pattern of gender loyalty, responding to one another, in ways that allowed them to dominate the linguistic space. In this study, such instances generally happened in those discussions where teachers were using a philosophical, community of inquiry approach (Lipman 1988; Splitter & Sharp 1995). As one teacher stated in her interview:

> …in some class we have more boys than girls, that can also make a difference in the discussion but over time, the girls come out as being not necessarily more outspoken, but certainly prepared to participate quite verbally and the boys are often quite shocked by that. (Government School 2, Interview 3)

In this teacher's discussion group, girls did not have difficulty in accessing their talk-turns and clearly felt empowered. At this point in the discussion, the girls had been holding the floor for some time when the teacher intervened to create spaces for the boys to re-enter the discussion – a concession rarely afforded to the girls when boys were controlling the discussion space.

Girl 2: I think it's like…At the start, you think it's pretty easy thinking about right and wrong but when you actually start thinking about it, it's really confusing 'cause you start to question whether it is right or it is wrong.
Teacher: That's alright, thank you. <Points to Boy 3>

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Boy 3: Well you…It's hard to tell what's right or wrong because it's just that everybody has a different opinion and we will never ever agree.

Teacher: Never ever agree? … so if we think about how a law is made, if we think about morality, or community discussion, that sort of might make law quite interesting to reflect back and see whether you agree or not. But yeah, an interesting point. <Boy 2's name>?

Boy 2: Yeah, I think it's pretty difficult to get everyone to agree on just one concept of right and wrong. 'Cause like, you've got people who say that killing is wrong and yet America just bombed hundreds of innocent Iraqis just to kill out this one guy. And…yeah.

Teacher: So decisions made on national level can be quite different to individual?

Boy 2: Yeah.

Teacher: OK. <Boy 1's name>, is there anything that you thought that was interesting or really challenging?

Boy 1: Ah, not really.

Teacher: Not really? All heard before?

Boy 1: Yeah. (Government School 2, Discussion 3).

It is the more conversational style of the discourses that are generally taken up by girls, their more developed interpersonal skills, and their highly descriptive talk that competes with the boys more direct and less elaborated responses as this final example from an art discussion based on the theme, 'looking in- and looking-out' reveals.

Boy 1: I guess I just brainstorm like the different ways inside-outside can be interpreted, like, as if there were trees inside and windows looking outside, and then it's just different kinds of thinking about it… It's just inside a person and outside…how they express themselves.

Teacher: OK. And the different ways of thinking…how did you do? Can you explain that?

Boy 1: Uh…I don't know…You just keep on thinking about the idea and then just write down the different ways you can look at the topic.

Teacher: Terrific! What have you done, <Girl 3's name>?

Girl 3: I first thought of a person outside in the cold looking in and people doing something like Christmas, enjoying themselves but the person outside is freezing cold, not enjoying themselves nor having a very good life. Then I thought forward a little bit more. I looked on the Internet and I found sketches of hands that show the muscles and the blood vessels so I was thinking about inside our hands. But then I continued with my window idea about looking out to something but also looking inside at the same time. So I created this room where there's a window looking out onto this night sky with the moon shining and the storm going on. You could see the wind blowing the trees and all the branches there. And on the inside it's all peaceful, and there's a drawer just below the window and one of the draws is open and you can see all these different things inside like clothes, personal items, a cat and you can just see what the owner's life is like.

Teacher: OK, good. What about you, <Girl 2's name>?

Girl 2: Well, I exert with a number of ideas, one with a flower coming out of the ground and using actual dirt as some sort of a 3D model. And then I did the brainstorm of looking out, looking in and looking at, and then I went on to the Internet to look at pictures. So on the Internet, I found a dog looking through the window and so I looked at that and I decided to take pictures of just random objects outside and on the canvas I put sort of a big window frame. On the outside I put a picture of people and trees and stuff. On the inside I have someone looking outside so the inside looking at outside thing…

Like Baxter (2002) this study showed, as did the previous extract demonstrated, that while girls may wait longer to find a space to enter the discussion, when they do so they

often speak for extended periods of time. This accounts for the quantitative data that show girls have the same linguistic space as boys, despite claims to the contrary.

In the small-group context, there was not the discipline issue often associated with a whole-class discussion. Therefore some aspects of boys' vocal domination raised in the interviews were not visible. Vocal domination is a complex issue, given the competing discourses that boys and girls access, and their positioning in relation to these. While gender loyalty did prevail, it was a strategy used by both boys and girls, but was subject to teacher intervention in some instances.

Teacher Discourses

As already mentioned in the discussion of the themes, several teacher discourses predominated in the analyses of the discussions: the teacher-directed or the teacher-speak discourse; the 'boys' turn' (Weaver High-Tower 2003); and the community of inquiry discourse (Lipman 1988; Splitter & Sharp, 1995). The study's findings revealed that it was the teachers' positioning with regard to these discourses that impacted most powerfully on the students' use of the interactive discussion space, as has already been evidenced. As one community of inquiry teacher claimed:

> I think it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that the girls actually take on some of those roles but once again, I think it's a matter of encouraging students. So yes there is a domination sometimes by boys but it can also be that the girls can dominate the discussion if the expectations or as one of my classes call it, the group understandings are not laid out…They don't like the idea of rules. The group understandings are laid out and then it also becomes, eventually, the role of the community to say: "Look, you're talking too much", you know, or "You keep interrupting me. Can you not do that ?" (Government School 2, Teacher Interview 3).

In the discussion facilitated by this teacher, the students who had only recently been familiarised with community of inquiry, were asked to recall what they needed to put into practice as a community of learners. Here teachers and students had a shared philosophical discourse, which supported a more equitable use of the discussion space. Students were expected to self-regulate their behaviour and there was an expectation that everyone would be an active member of the group. This resembles what Baxter (2002) refers to as a 'collaborative discourse'.

In the majority of discussions, however, a teacher-centric discourse was noticeable, with teachers generating the discussion questions and determining what would be discussed and by whom, as the extracts in this paper have shown. As one teacher summarised:

> I don't feel like using the word "director" but that's what I feel like I am, but I don't…and I want to feel conscious about not putting words into their mouths. I want them to kind of get it …and to come to some understanding of what we're doing themselves. I mean, I don't mind helping and pushing them along a little bit basically. (Government School 1, Discussion 2).

The notion of dialectics – the construction of meaning through dialogue – was not widely evidenced. For a notable number of teachers, the focus was on keeping the boys engaged, by privileging their position within the discussion. Teachers often appeared unaware of

the slippage of the girls' participation and were seemingly unwilling to challenge the boys' showmanship and their level of participation, often being satisfied with seemingly undeveloped responses. Perhaps this was due to an underlying uneasiness that transferred from a whole class discussion where an aggressive, hegemonic masculine discourse prevails and impacts on student interactions.

> They just sit there arms folded, body leaning back on chair with their legs stretched out and look at you like "Yeah, whatever", that kind of thing. So I think that does have some impact on the kids with less confidence. I'd say that most of the boys have intimidating body language. (Government School 1, Teacher Interview 2)

Such manifestation of power when left unchallenged puts many students at risk – girls and boys alike.

Conclusion

What this paper has shown is the complexity of the competing discourses accessed by boys and girls and teachers, and that there is no conclusive or coherent way in which these play out. Ideologies and the discourses authorised and legitimised within individual classrooms impacted on the student discussions. Despite the quantitative analysis that revealed equitable use of talk-turns and talk space by boys and girls, analyses of student and teacher discourses affirmed the reality of the silencing of girls' voices in many discussion contexts. The findings discussed in this paper, have highlighted the importance of further fine-grained analyses of how teacher discourses can militate against both girls and boys being silenced and/or marginalized in discussions in both small-group and in whole class contexts. There is a real need for teachers and students to be more of aware of their 'identity kits' (Gee 1996) – that is the discourses that define who they are and position them in relation to others. As the student interview data reveal, both boys and girls are uncomfortable with the positions taken up by some boys [and some teachers] that silence girls' voices and limit the ways they are able to engage in a discussion. The findings also raise the inherent danger of creating binaries that categorize behaviour according to sexual alignment that can in effect lead to self-regulating behaviour within these binaries – girls assuming the position of the good listener with fine tuned interpersonal skills who waits her turn and positions herself according to the social expectations (Jenkins & Cheshire 1990; Reay 1991; Sadker & Sadker (1994), and the competitive, authoritative and, sometimes adversarial, positioning of the boys (Baxter, 2002). Students and teachers should benefit from more awareness of how power operates through discursive positioning.

Social critical literacy draws students' attention to how particular discourses can empower them or conversely render them powerless. It provides insights how students can construct and position themselves within a whole class or a small-group environment in ways that allow them to be active and productive participants in a discussion. Consciousness-raising of the responsibilities that all students have when engaging with their peers in a discussion, as advocated by the community of inquiry, should also help nurture attitudes that are more inclusive, tolerant and respectful of others. In conclusion, a small portion of the large sums of Commonwealth money being directed to develop strategies to engage boys with learning and to improve their literacy outcomes, would be

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well directed at projects that support boys to understand their 'identity kits' and by helping them access discourses that will empower them as learners and as responsible democratic citizens.

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