Practising Gender: The Production of Identity by School Children

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University
May 2003
I certify that the thesis entitled:

**Practising Gender: The Production of Identity by School Children**

submitted for the degree of: **Doctor of Philosophy**

is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis in whole or in part has not been accepted for an award, including a higher degree, to any other university or institution.

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Abstract

The thesis utilises ‘practice theory’ to argue that the self is not only an effect of social practices but also a technique for action and develops an alternative way of explicating and conceptualising the constitution of the self within the micro-practices of routine, everyday life. This is in contrast to a general tendency within ‘practice theory’, ‘constructionist’ and ‘discursive’ approaches towards a determinist conception of the self. The thesis explores this conceptual framework in fieldwork focussed on formation and production of gender-identity among young school children and offers a new perspective of gender-identity in the classroom.

The thesis provides a fourfold contribution:

(1) It provides insights into how in the classroom, children take up (conventional) gender differentiated conduct and dispositions in order to forge both their identity and the establishment of a social order based on gender. This gender order is not simply imposed on them by teachers but is actively constructed by the children. The thesis provides insights into how the children in the classroom seize and appropriate the practices of gender for their own ends. These ends, I argue, are the construction of their gender-identity, and the establishment and maintenance of a ‘matrix of intelligibility’.

(2) It offers a close-up illustration of how gender construction is negotiated and contested between girls and boys. This is characterised as largely a struggle for enablement — the power to be and to do — rather than as a struggle of one gender over another.

(3) It develops an analysis of classrooms as productive sites, as ‘complex strategical situations’ in which the participating agents — the teachers and students—deploy and utilise available resources in their ongoing construction of the world. This suggests that that the social world is not as unitary and totalising as ‘constraint perspectives’ within practice theory often imply.
(4) It proposes methodological perspectives and strategies for researching empirically the day-to-day production of gender and for capturing that complex and often elusive process ‘in flight’. It shows the value of an ‘ascending analysis’, one that does not foreclose findings on the basis of a pre-existing theoretical position, and the rich potential of ‘flashpoints’ as a way of illuminating ongoing and often ‘unremarkable’ and therefore unnoticed practices of gender production.

The theoretical terrain explored a range of theorists on the self not usually brought together, including Butler, Rose, Foucault, Giddens and Garfinkel and Schatzki. These theorists share in common the perspective that social practices rather than the agent or social totality are the ontological basis of the social world. It is argued that the self is constituted in its enactment and the thesis pursues Foucault’s (2002) question of how the self participates in its own subjectification.

The empirical focus of the thesis examined the activities of children at school for insights into how they participated in the making of their gender-identity. The research addressed the questions:

(1) To what extent do children construct their gender-identity and what kinds of encouragement do they receive for this?

(2) To what extent did the children seem to be appropriating gender practices and inciting the making of gender-identity in the classroom?

(3) To what extent can the classroom be viewed as a site of gender contestation and borderwork?

Using the concept of ‘flashpoints’, — significant or poignant moments in the classroom — classroom activities were observed to catch gender-identity production ‘in flight’ and to describe how the children seize upon moments to make gender salient. Year Three
children in five classrooms in two Victorian schools were observed during English communication and literacy lessons. Individual interviews with teachers in the participating schools and group interviews with the children from the classrooms were undertaken to amplify the observations.

Much of the children’s behaviour can be interpreted as their efforts to make gender salient in social interactions. Gender-identity production and gender ‘border work’ (Thorne, 1993) and contestation appeared to be a major activity and preoccupation of the children, even in the face of teacher’s attempts to encourage a gender-neutral environment. The children were often more active than the teachers in imposing the ‘gender agenda’ identified by Evans (1988).

Overall, this thesis contributes to the development of the theory of subjectivity and identity formation. Social practices are not imposed and individuals seize upon social practices to further their own ends. It is through these routine, everyday activities that social practices are reproduced. The study provides an avenue for understanding the actions of children and the operation of gender power and border work within the classroom.
Acknowledgement

There are, of course, many people to who have contributed in so many ways in what after all is a social endeavour. I wish to thank all of you. Nevertheless, I wish to particularly thank and express my gratitude to the following people: Professor Tanya Castleman and Dr Julie McLeod who, particularly in the case of Tanya, patiently supervised and shepherded an at times erratic student who wanted to run off in all directions. I also thank the staff and students at the two schools and the principals who gave me advice along the way.

I also wish to thank my colleagues and friends at the School of Information Systems who provided great support, even if they, like me, couldn’t work out how I came to be labouring with a sociology thesis in an Info Sys school.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife Deborah who has had to carry much as our lives and families grew and prospered while I was ‘working on the thesis. And, finally, the boys….
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The rise of postmodernist critique has seen the ‘decentring’ or ‘death of the subject’. This has been famously and evocatively put by Foucault (1973) in The Order of Things:

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some vent of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility…were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of classical thought did…then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea (Foucault, 1973: 387).

In this statement, Foucault views the subject as a temporary, modern phenomenon in time. Moreover, the self is a construction, derived and itself created in discourse and other social practices. As the discourse changes, so the self gets washed away.

It is well established that the constitution of the self is modern, Western, and recent. Dawe (1978) traces the rise of the individual to the collapse of medievalism. In medieval times, ‘individual’ meant ‘inseparable’ and to describe a person was to describe the group of which he or she was a member. Prior to the emergence of the self, an individual would refer to their doings and sayings in reference to their family group. God was the centre of the universe. However by the time of the Reformation, man had replaced God at the centre.

Rose (1996: 187), following the historian Dodds (1973), suggests that the classic notions of the subject were far different from current notions where the subject was considered an assemblage of soul, will and intellect while agency was understood as the intervention of the gods. Geertz (1979) argued that the:
Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures (Geertz, 1979: 229).

The work of the cultural psychologists (e.g. Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Stigler, Shweder and Herdt; 1990) also support the notion of the bounded self as a particularly Western notion. Others have argued that the self is fragmentary (Bradley; 1996), decentralised (Sampson, 1985, 1989) and empty (Cushman, 1990; see also Gergen, 1984).

Within these arguments four issues can be discerned: there is (i) the ontological status of the self, whether it is elemental or derivative; (ii) the conception or epistemology of self, that is our knowledge or understanding of the self; (iii) the experience or phenomenology of the self; and (iv) the problematisation of the self, the historical rise in experiencing the self as problematic.

I adopt a constructionist or practice theory perspective which argues that the self is constituted in, and instantiated by, discourse or social practices, the doings and sayings of people. The self is not discovered through introspection but is, as Rose (1996) suggests, an invention. It has no independent existence. This suggests not only the temporary nature of the self—the self exists only so long as people believe in it—but our conception of the self is actually part of its constitution.

Foucault’s image of the face drawn in the sand is a bleak and passive one. This inert face has no power whatsoever over the tide of history and has no agency. In contrast to the analysis suggested by this image, I wish to explore the degree to which the self does have a form of agency and participates in its own creation. As Hartsock (1990) recognises, the subject provides an important political effect:

Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorized? Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect (Hartsock, 1990: 163-64).
Foucault came to recognise the importance of this issue and it became the central project of his later work:

I am interested...in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of the self; these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group (Foucault, 1986: 11, cited in McNay, 1994: 154).

The subject is in this case active and the question has become one of how the subject constitutes him- or herself: ‘how the human being turns him-or herself into a subject’ (Foucault, 2002: 327).

Foucault’s question is the central underpinning theme and driving force of this thesis. However, while I find Foucault’s concern compelling, I am less sure of his approach or solution. Foucault, as McNay (1994: 146) argues, appears to retreat into an ‘elitist and amoral aestheticism’. His work does not appear to be grounded in the everyday experience of ordinary people and I share the scepticism expressed by Hartsock (1990) of the postmodernist position.

Foucault (1984) recognised that his own work focussed on limit and transgression. I will argue below that much practice or discourse theory is similarly inclined. As I shall show, the predominant practice theory approach to social science has been critical in its attempts to identify the limits, and pose questions about how subjects of certain sorts are developed, and how people are disciplined and imposed upon. Practice theorists attempt to identify the constraints, impositions and power of gender, of class and race, of governmentality and other global mechanism of control (Foucault, 1976; 2002). Such studies are important, but the focus upon constraint often leads to a view of the subject as passive, an effect like the face in the sand that may well be erased by the impersonal forces of the sea.

Such approaches fail to consider adequately the positive and enabling aspects of power, and the matter of how people appropriate social practices for their own ends.
Foucault (1978) recognised that power was both positive and negative and I argue in this thesis that the theoretical means to consider the way in which ‘the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion’ is through a consideration of positive power or enablement. This thesis seeks to explore is how subjects seize and appropriate and use social practices for their ends and the creation of their selves. It is, in this respect, a study of positive power and its relation to the self.

To explore the ‘flat and empirical little question’ of how the human being turns him- or herself into a subject (Foucault, 2002: 337) requires an empirical investigation. I wished to explore how this might be achieved in the micro-practices of everyday life, how in those practices, the human being constructed a world and a place in it.

The idea of the self as constituted in, and comprising, a myriad of social practices is one that can be difficult to untangle, and is amorphous in nature (Giddens, 1991: 52). To investigate this I decided to focus on one social practice that is intimately bound up with the self — gender. As I discuss in Chapter Three, the current, modern self is a gendered self. Gender is more amenable to empirical study as it provides a better focus than the amorphous self. By investigating the production of gender-identity, insight can be gained into the process of subjectification and the construction of the self. My aim was to see how the gendered self is produced in everyday life and towards what ends. To study this empirically I chose to consider young children and the production of gender-identity in the classroom. The key framing question has been whether gender-identity is imposed or given to the children or whether they are active participants in the production and formation of their gender-identities? By examining this question, the nature of the construction of the self can be considered.

To begin, in Chapter Two, I attempt to outline the fall of essentialist theories of the self and the rise of the practice theory approach to the self. I have adopted from Schatzki (1996) the term ‘practice theory’ to cover a range of theories that view social practices, processes and discourse as the fundamental elements of social organisation. From within the broad territory of practice theory, I consider the two key recent approaches to the self that are developed in Nikolas Rose (1996) *The Inventing Ourselves* and in Anthony Giddens (1991) *Self-Identity and Modernity*. Rose (1996) approaches the self from a Foucauldian perspective and examines how
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the self is a product of subjectification, the product of global techniques of control and understanding. Giddens (1991), on the other hand, puts forward the view of the self as an outcome of intersubjectivity, of social relations rather than calculated strategy.

The key issues that emerge from this study of Rose and Giddens concern the emphasis placed on the twin concepts of enablement and constraint, positive and negative power. In particular, I argue, as others have, that there is an overemphasis on constraint in the postmodern literature and this has led to a determinist view of the self (McNay, 1994). This can only be countered by considering the enabling qualities of the self, and conceiving of these as providing a position from which to stand and fix or set reality. Elaborating and understanding this process is the key theoretical concern of this thesis. To what extent can the self be considered an effect of social practices and to what extent is the self an appropriator of social practice?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to observe the self as a generic phenomenon as the representation of the self is likely to be context specific, generated to achieve specific ends in the routine here and now, even as it has some longitudinal biographical integrity (Giddens, 1991). Butler (1990) points out that the self and gender are intertwined. Gender is an integral part of the self. The self and gender have had parallel developments within practice theory, and intersect in Butler’s work (Butler, 1990; 1993). The term ‘gender-identity’ reflects this intersection and I use that term to describe the construction and presentation of the gendered self. Gender-identity, that aspect of the self where gender is salient provided a focus for my empirical work.

In Chapter Three, I explore the theoretical development of the concept of gender, paying particular attention to the development of the practice theory of gender. Like theories of the self, theories of gender have moved from essentialist notions of an intrinsic quality of a person, to the practice theory approaches of Connell (1987, Butler (1990) and West and Zimmerman (1987). In common with much practice theory of the self, these theorists, with the possible exception of West and Zimmerman (1987), put forward a constraining theory of gender. Gender is viewed as a regulative regime in general (Butler, 1990; 1995) under the power of masculinist
hegemony (Connell, 1987; 1995). I argue that while an analysis of hegemonic masculinity can be a useful orientation, it often becomes an explanatory and descriptive crutch and produces a ‘descending analysis’ from which ‘anything can be deduced from the general phenomenon of domination’ (Foucault, 1976: 100). While finding strong theoretical scaffolding, the work of Butler and Connell do not provide an adequate account of the how the regimes of gender are enacted in the micro-practices of everyday life.

The ethnomethodological approach to gender by West and Zimmerman (1987) offers a way out of these problems. This approach suggests that gender is not solely imposed as a regulative regime but produced in order to make sense out of, and proceed in, the world. Gender, in spite of the limitations it imposes also enables and fixes certain aspects of one’s self and one’s place in the world. Gender, in this sense, is not given but must be actively cultivated, incited, and disciplined. Using the terminology of Rose (1996), the subject must participate in their own subjectification.

As West and Zimmerman (1987) argue, ‘doing gender’ is often a virtually seamless routine performance. Based on the work of Cahill (1986) and Lee (1998), I argue that ‘doing gender’ — being able to present one’s self as gendered — is a basic social competency skill. Presenting one’s self as appropriately gendered constitutes and demonstrates social competence. Children therefore are likely to be motivated to perform gender but they may not be as accomplished as more experienced and adult performers. Children are still ‘learning’ about gender and this provides an opportunity to observe how the children actively engaged with gender. My question became one of identifying the practices by which children have gender imposed on them as well as the practices in which they actively participate and incite their gender.

Many researchers have examined gender-identity and gender relations in schools. In Chapter Four, I discuss aspects of this research literature in relation to primary schooling. This literature has focussed heavily on how the education system and teachers foster or tolerate the reproduction of conventional gender-identity and relations and hegemonic forms of masculinity. In this chapter, I draw upon the work
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of Walkerdine (1990) and outline an alternative interpretation of this literature. This alternative is to suggest that the classroom is complex situation of contestation, differentiation, enablement and constraint. In the case of the children, this struggle for power is not necessarily one of power over someone or some thing but of power to do things — it is a struggle for enablement.

Chapter Four also elaborates my research questions, namely:

(i) To what extent do children construct their gender-identity and what kinds of encouragement do they receive for this?

(ii) To what extent did the children seem to be appropriating gender practices and inciting the making of gender-identity in the classroom?

(iii) To what extent can the classroom be viewed as a site of gender contestation and borderwork?

In Chapter Five, I discuss methodological approaches that are congruent with practice theory. The key practical problem was how to empirically explore in a disciplined and careful manner the production of gender and how to identify instances where it might be clear that the children were active participants and were taking opportunities to express and cultivate their identities and to glimpse the seams of an otherwise seamless production of gender-identity. This was achieved through focusing on ‘flashpoints’, which are understood as significant or poignant moments where classroom activities were observed to catch gender-identity production ‘in flight’. I outline my method of observing Year 3 children in five classrooms in two Victorian schools during English communication and literacy lessons. This chapter also sets out how I conducted individual interviews with teachers in the participating schools and how group interviews with the children from the classrooms were undertaken to amplify the observations.

Chapter Six reports my observations of the children in their classes and the interviews with the teachers and children. The observations and interviews suggest that the classroom cannot be adequately or accurately characterised by an intended or
unintended imposition of views on unwitting children. Rather, it appeared that the children were far more likely than teachers to incite and cultivate gender-identity in the classroom. Teachers could be characterised as being reasonably conscious of gender as a “barrier” to children and tolerated and, at times, discouraged the conventional gender activities of the children. On the basis of the observations, I argue that the children sought out and enacted gender behaviour for their own purposes rather than as the result of coercive imposition from, or strong encouragement by, the teachers. The findings suggest a muted power struggle between the girls and the boys in the classroom, one which was reflected in the seesaw like way in which the children participated in discussions and segregation. Although more attenuated than the observations of Thorne (1993), it would appear that borderwork and a struggle for gender space occurs within the classroom.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I consider the implications of my analysis of classroom observations and interviews for the theory of the self and gender. I argue that the observed enactment of gender-identity by the children is part of the ontological work the children are undertaking in order to make sense of the world and their place in it. This ontological work is at times contested between genders and this contestation centres on enablement – power to do things and the capacity to act. This provides an alternative view to that of constraint as the prime mover or determinant of action.

Such a viewpoint of power provides an antidote to the deterministic and passive picture of the self often inferred in both traditional and neo-Foucauldian accounts of the self. The self, I argue, is not simply an effect of subjectification but is born in a maelstrom of both enablement and constraint, within a complex strategical struggle of power relations. The children resist and appropriate resources in the classroom as part of their reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991). This is not simply a process of reproduction of a given social structure imposed from without. Nevertheless it may be argued that it is precisely through such power struggles that structure is reproduced. Subjectification is but one force in that maelstrom as the agent strives for power to be and to act and the self is thus formed.
CHAPTER TWO

Practice theory and the making of the self

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

T.S. Eliot

Introduction

The idea of the self within Western philosophical traditions has a long history (Levin, 1992). In common parlance, the self is the ‘real me’, that part of ‘me’ which can be gained through introspection and meditation (Gergen, 1984). Recently, however, this idea of the self has come under sustained philosophical questioning (Giddens, 1991; Levin, 1992). Rather than being conceived as an essence, the self has become increasingly viewed as a social creation or assemblage without any necessary underpinning unity (Gergen, 1994; Rose, 1996). The self that was once held dear as the prime mover of the individual is said to exist only in its performance and is as fragmented or unified as the social circumstances obtain.

The self is known and conceptualised under a variety of names: self, self-identity, self-concept, ego, mind, subject, individual, personal identity, social identity, subject and so on (Levin, 1992; Bradley, 1996; Rose; 1996). Levin (1992) argues definitions are also prescriptions and each term and its usage provides a particular view on the self. The self may refer to the ‘type’ of person you are (Rose, 1996: 4) and to one’s sense of personal uniqueness (Harré and Gillett, 1994: 102). Bradley (1996: 24) describes it as ‘our sense of ourselves as unique individuals, how we perceive ourselves and how we think others see us’. Giddens (1991) suggests that the self is
‘amorphous’ and uses the term ‘self-identity’ to refer to ‘what the individual is “conscious of” in terms of self-consciousness’ (Giddens, 1991: 52).

What I am interested in for this thesis is the relationship between ‘type’ and ‘uniqueness’. That is to say, I am interested in whether or not the development of personal or self-identity — ‘uniqueness’ — is part of the same set of processes of constructing sameness or recognisable similarities of attributes, qualities and performances, what Rose (1996: 4) refers to as ‘selves of certain types’.

In this chapter, I shall outline the conventional approaches to the self in psychology and sociology. I shall then discuss the postmodern critique of the self and the self’s fall from being the key actor, mediator and building block in society and its replacement by a socially constructed and decentred process. The focus will consider the question that if the self is no longer an ontological given, then how is the self constructed or accomplished? How is the self wrought, disciplined and incited or called into being? What role does it play in social practice? Is it simply a ‘conduit’ or effect, or is the enactment and emergence of the self a key part of ongoing social practice and its reproduction?

Theories of self as social accomplishments are often known as social constructionism (Burr, 1995), social constructivism (Henwood, 1996) or practice theory (Schatzki, 1996). In the following, I use the term practice theory to stress the primacy of social practices and the commonality of social ontology across a family of theories that utilise the concept of the self, agent, subject and gender as a composition of overlapping, interweaving and (at times) contradictory social practices.

The chapter considers the two major practice theory approaches to the self: the work of Rose (1996) and Giddens (1991) on the invention or construction of the self. Rose’s (1996) key question is how and why particular kinds of selves rather than a random assortment of more or less similar, more or less fragmented and unified, selves arise. Rose attempts to discern an order to the construction of the self. Giddens (1991) conceives of the self as a reflexive project. The self is not only a product of social practice but is also the result of individuals drawing on and appropriating social practices for their own ends.
Practice theory, I argue, conceives of social practices and power as both enabling and constraining. Social practices not only restrict what is possible or intelligible in a given society but they also make intelligibility possible. Foucault (1978: 90-96) argues that power is both positive (enabling) and negative (constraining). His own work, however, focussed mainly on the constraining qualities of power and practice (Foucault, 1984; McNay, 1994). Many, such as Rose (1996), have explored the constraints of self and social practice generally. However, a fuller account of the self must also consider the enabling qualitative of social practice and how selves actually seize upon and use social practices for their own ends. Drawing on the work of Garfinkel (1967), I argue that while people are constituted in social practices, social practices work to make the world intelligible.

Conventional approaches to the self

Over a substantial part of the twentieth century, mainstream psychology largely ignored the self (Gergen, 1984; Bruner, 1990). Behaviourism had not only no need of a self but of any cognitive process that was ‘inside’ the head of the human subject (Skinner, 1989; 1990). Within psychology, while behaviourism held sway, notions of self could be safely put to one side as unscientific folklore. The self was seen simply a superstition. However, the rise of the cognitive revolution in the 1950s in the US led to a resurgence in the interest in the self (Bruner, 1990). Cognitive theory allowed the scientific researcher to infer cognitive processes ‘within the skull’ (Harré and Gillett, 1994). The self, or ‘self-concept’ came to be seen as an important organising principle of the presentation of the human subject. Through careful experimentation, researchers could identify the structure of this self-concept and its influences on the processing of stimuli (Bruner, 1990; Harré and Gillett, 1994).

Over the 1980s, the concept of the self in psychology had something of a renaissance. Hazel Markus and her colleagues have been key figures in the development and explication of the self-concept (Markus, 1977; Markus and Nurius, 1986, Markus and Wurff, 1987; Markus and Cross, 1990; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Markus’ work, and similar approaches, attempt to understand the internal
structures of the self that mediate between incoming perceptual stimuli and the behaviour of the person. At the core of the self is an abstract information processing device. Incoming information is compared, contrasted, stored and acted on according to existing self-relevant criteria and structures such as templates, prototypes, self-concepts etc. that the person has acquired and embellished in daily interaction. The self-concept is the device by which all, or at least most, external information is mediated. Thus, because everybody has a different and unique self-concept, they will store and process information differently and consequently act differently.

The renaissance of the self as a unitary concept in mainstream psychology proved short lived. The empirical investigation of the self suggested a fragmented and context dependent self. There then emerged the view within cognitive psychology that the self-concept could not possibly be robust enough or flexible enough cover all the possible representations of self exhibited in the myriad of experiments. There increasingly appeared to be no theoretically or empirically coherent unitary organiser of stimuli, no whole. The idiosyncratic and unique features of one’s self-concept completely overshadowed any attempt to identify the universal features of the underlying model. Markus and Nurius (1986) suggested that the self was a bundle of more or less independent self-schemas that are ‘on-line’ according to, and dependent upon the context. What the person said of himself or herself and how she or he behaved was heavily, even totally, context dependent.

Markus has since argued that the ‘pure self’ cannot be extracted from the interpersonal context and has attempted to develop the concept of self through the social psychology of Mead and Cooley (Markus and Cross, 1990). She has also begun to argue that the ‘autonomous’ self was a Western cultural construct and that Eastern understandings of self were different (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Cognitive theorists of the self, including Deaux (1993), Reid and Deaux (1996) and more recently Turner (Turner and Onarato, 1997), have began to move away from a unified notion of mind or ‘self-concept’ that can be inferred from behaviour towards notions of a person having a range of context-dependent self-identities. For example, Turner and Onarato argued there was an inherent cognitive function that categorises
information into similarities and differences and the outcome of this cognitive functioning is dependent upon the social context. Applied to the self, the individual may categorise or differentiate according to social category membership in a context-dependent manner. For example, where gender is salient in a social context, then people will characterise themselves according to gender, while in other circumstances people will categorise themselves according to some other category. As Turner and Onarato (1997: 19) state, ‘Self-conception is a dynamic process in which enhanced relative salience of one or other level actively changes self-perception and consequent behaviour’.

From within mainstream psychology the observable variations of the self and of identity and context dependency of behaviour appeared to have outstripped the concept of the ‘bounded’ self. From the autonomous, organising and mediating self-concept promised by the ‘cognitive revolution’ (see Bruner, 1990), the self has fallen in mainstream psychology to something of a binary information processor categorising according ‘social salience’. This function is far more dependent upon situation than the bounded, autonomous self. The self no longer mediates or chooses: but different selves arise as a result of the situation and the social cues that obtain. The unified self-concept no longer covers all the variations in its performances.

Within sociology, an important approach to the self has been that of symbolic interactionism. This approach originated in the work of Mead (1934) and further developed by Blumer (1969). The importance of the self in symbolic interaction is most clearly developed in the case of what Denzin (1995) terms ‘traditional’ symbolic interactionism. Traditional symbolic interactionism is similar to the cognitive psychology approach that viewed self-identity as the key aspect of negotiation in social encounters. Here the self is viewed as a multi-layered phenomenon that describes or reflects the many aspects or forms of the self that are played out in interaction with others and become part of the biography of the person. Within an interaction, a person’s self-identity or self-meanings are negotiated and shift and emerge as the person negotiates the task at hand (Denzin, 1995). Who we are is the result of this negotiation. We may bring the baggage of our past, our conceptions of ourselves, the meanings we place on things to an interaction but these
things will change, develop or regress and new things will be incorporated as we engage in social interaction.

In this way, symbolic interactionism attempted to cover both the continuities and discontinuities of the mediating self. However, as Markus and Cross (1990) and Howard (2000) observe, there has been an increasing consensus between the sociology of the symbolic interactionists and that of the cognitive social psychologists. The problem is why should the self be seen as in some way autonomous and an independent adjudicator when it appears to be so dependent upon social interaction and cultural prejudice? The emerging view was that far from being an organiser, the self is itself dependent on the social situation for its qualities. The self is more a chameleon than a stable entity or concept.

The self and the action frame of reference

The autonomous self has also paid a central role in the social ontology of a major sociological perspective, namely, the action frame of reference (Berger and Luckmann; 1967; Silverman, 1970; Berger, 1971; Dawe, 1978). The action frame of reference takes the view that the individual person is the fundamental analytical unit and society is best understood as consisting of individuals and their interrelations. Society and social interactions are built upon the individual perceiving, understanding and acting in the world. The action frame of reference attempts to explore the subjective meanings of actors in the created world of the actors. An individual’s actions, understandings and mental states are critical and through negotiations, cooperation and conflict, norms and rules emerge to govern people’s conduct (Schatzki, 1996).

The action frame of reference rests upon an assumption or understanding of a more or less unified, coherent and autonomous self to direct, negotiate and act in this world. Subject to the critique of the self as fragmented and subject to vagaries of social forces, the action frame of reference loses considerable explanatory force.
The critique of the self

The conventional understanding of self in sociology and psychology proved to be a difficult subject for empirical study. The idea of the bounded self as an autonomous whole may have been shaken by conventional psychology and sociology but the very idea of the bounded autonomous agent, or a subject or self that mediated and controlled action, had come under a sustained attack over the twentieth century. Freud first brought the idea of a fragmented, divided self to popular attention, arguing that the self was a house divided and that some important things were hidden in the darker recesses (Freud, 1962; Lacan, 1966; Rose, 1996). By the beginning of the 21st Century, Freud’s trio of id, ego and superego has become a crowd of strangers that comprise the human self.

The critique of the self as a bounded autonomous agent controlling and mediating action comes from a variety of philosophical, ideological and historical or empirical sources. As I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the autonomous self is a particularly Western and modernist idea. As an historical notion, this lends weight to the argument that the self is not universal but a particular idea of human being developed at one point in history. Rose (1996: 5) argues the idea of the self was shaken by this experience.

Ideological critique

The historicity of the self raises the questions as to whether the bounded self is more an invention than a discovery. As a discovery, the self is an enduring truth arguably discovered in the West. As an invention, it suggests that the concept of self is a set of ideas and techniques put to use for a various purposes and as an invention, the concept stand or falls on its use value. The ideological critique of the self argues that not only is the self an invention, but that it is also one that has subjugated rather than liberated many people. Its ‘use value’ is on balance, or perhaps evenly totally, repressive. Both Rose (1996) and Gergen (1984; 1994) have argued that ideological and feminist critiques have been at the forefront of the critique of the self. Feminist
critique in particular has argued that the universal subject has been the disembodied male. Rose, drawing upon Gatens (1991), suggests that while the universal subject is an ‘owner of his person and capacities’ the female is dependent. The autonomous, coherent and independent self is said to be a ‘continually repeated, motivated, and gendered act of symbolic violence’ (Rose, 1996: 6). Whether explicitly or implicitly, the concept of self was said to privilege men over women, West over East, North over South, white over black.

The critique of ideology argues several important points. Firstly, there is no pure, unsullied self. It is a masculine or feminine self, an ethnic self and so on. Secondly, there is a recognition that the processes of identification can limit and constrain as the works on stigma and labelling demonstrate (Becker, 1966; Goffman, 1968). Whether or not such constraint or repression is as total or as dominating as some authors suggest remains an open question. Thirdly, it signals an emergent intellectual ‘loss of faith’ with the self. If the self is an invention then it must be used and remain in currency as a concept or it will be lost in the tide of history. The ideological critique may be a harbinger of that loss.

**The rise of the fragmented self**

As I have described, conventional approaches to the self found it empirically difficult to observe the unified self. Over the past decade, many have begun to argue that the self is fragmented and experienced as such (Bradley, 1996). Others have suggested that the self is empty (Cushman, 1990). Unified selfhood and direction is becoming difficult to obtain. Giddens (1991) cites the psychoanalyst Erikson to sum up a historical change in the experience of self:

> [T]he patient of today suffers most under the problem of what he should believe in and who he should — or, indeed, might — become; while the patient of early psychoanalysis suffered most under inhibitions which prevented him from being what and who he thought he knew he was (Erikson, 1950: 242, cited by Giddens, 1991: 69).

Gregg (1991), Giddens (1994) and Beck (1992; 1995) all argue that the fragmentation, emptiness and loss of direction is a response to loosening community and class ties, what Giddens (1994) refers to as the post-traditional order. The self
has moved from being a given by society to something people are individually responsible for creating. Fragmentation is one outcome of this change.

**Philosophical critique**

The major philosophical critique of the self focuses on the issue of representationalism. Over the twentieth century, the representationalist view of the mind has been under consistent philosophical critique (Harré and Gillett, 1994). Representationalism refers to the alleged ability of the individual, the ego or self to ‘take in’ the world and represent that world in the mind. Conventional approaches to the self such as cognitive psychology and symbolic interactionism, but also the action frame of reference, are founded upon the notion of representationalism. The self cannot be autonomous unless it sits in some way separate from the world and contemplates and cogitates before acting in the world; that the individual in some way takes in the world of sense data, cogitates upon it and through some mechanism performs some unique action ‘caused’ by the person themselves. Representationalism holds the view that the perceiver of sense data must take in or interiorise the data to interpret and understand the data.

Wittgenstein (1953) provided a major and influential critique of representationalism (Palmer, 1987; Coulter, 1989; Harré and Gillett, 1994). Wittgenstein argued that having a picture of the world in one’s mind is of little use; one simply had a picture, the problem to be solved, so to speak. Someone has to comprehend that picture. To posit, say, a comprehension function does not solve the problem, something still has to read that function. The problem is one of infinite regress (Palmer, 1987). Gergen (1984; 1990) points out that there is an under-theorised notion of free will often smuggled into individualist ontological accounts to avoid this regression.

The critique of representationalism undermined the notion of the independent self and argued that the very possibility of an independent mind gazing out and taking in the world was problematic. The self could not be so autonomous of the world.
**The challenged self**

The empirical and theoretical consensus across many disciplines seems to be that the self is not the stable, organising and bounded entity that gazes out from within but a far more fragmented, provisional and situationally dependent set of organising processes (self categorisation theory) or even epiphenomenal products of social practices. The self has fallen from its heights. Rose argues that the self is now a ‘challenged self’.

At the very least, within social theory, the idea of the self is historicized and culturally relativised. More radically, it is fractured by gender, race, class, fragmented deconstructed, revealed not as our inner truth but as our last illusion, not as our ultimate comfort but as an element in circuits of power that make some of us selves while denying full selfhood to others and thus performing an act of domination on both sides (Rose, 1996: 5).

The unity of the individual can no longer be presumed as a given. The key problem is simply that if the subject is fragmentary and context dependent as suggested in the overview of the self above, then it is neither sufficiently unified nor is it ontologically prior to the interactions in which the self is represented. There is no necessary reason to believe that the individual is a unified whole and many, commencing perhaps with Freud (Rose, 1996), have suggested that the individual is internally fragmented. Just as with the alleged unity or fragmentation of society, it may be also suggested that the level or degree fragmentation or unity of the individual is an empirical matter and one which may vary from society to society and individual to individual (Bradley, 1996).

Human beings behave the way they do, have particular identities and personalities and so on because they participate in the world. It seems difficult then to base a social ontology on the individual *independent and prior to such participation*. What a human being is, and becomes, is a story of engagement and participation with the (social) world. What forms part of the human being are the social practices — the ‘doings and sayings’ — and the individual does not stand independent of these practices. In a similar vein, Giddens (1991: 51) argues that intersubjectivity precedes
subjectivity. That is to say, through and by the participation in the world of others, the subjectivity of the individual is born.

The notion of the self may now be placed in its historical and cultural context as a particularly Western and modern notion of the human. The self, the ego or the subject has no special ontological status on which social theory can be based. The self or individual is not a firm basis to build a social ontology and the critique of the self has seriously undermined the action frame of reference that assumes or requires a more or less integrated acting subject that is prior to participating in the world.

The critique of the self and the undermining of the action frame of reference does not however signal the resurgence of holistic or social totality approaches to social theory such as structuralism or functionalism. Social totality is the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, where society, whether it is conceived in functionalist or structuralist terms, is unified according to its emergent properties and determines or specifies the operation of the elements of the system, including human action (Giddens, 1979: 50).

In a similar manner to the critique of the self, there is no necessary reason to consider that society is in some sense unitary or bounded. A very similar argument to the critique of the self also applies to social totality approaches. Society comprises of a range of specific, fragmented and local phenomena that cannot be neatly tied up in a system governed by systemic principles (Schatzki, 1996: 2). The nature of the social world cannot be described by sets of general laws and axioms—the social world is too complex, tangled and transitory. Any social activity is provisional and locally produced. Consequently, social theory cannot be based upon holist ontology that informs or regulates people’s actions. The degree to which the social world is more or less bounded or fragmented cannot be presumed. Moreover, particular conceptions of society valorise some aspects and not others, thus the structure perspective is not immune from ideological critique. Finally, there is no particular standpoint that can ‘objectively’ observe, categorise and theorise nomothetic, generalised laws of society. All standpoints or positions are partial and incomplete. Such approaches are ‘totalising’.
Society cannot be understood as individuals acting in social space nor can individuals be seen to be acting according to some social law or requirement of society. The longstanding debate as to whether the individual or society is ontologically prior in sociology has led to an impasse—both positions are dead ends—and a range of theorists have attempted to move past that debate. It is to these theorists and their work on the self that I now turn.

**Something one does: The response of practice theory**

The critique of both the individual and society represents the postmodern critique. The theoretical problem is how to move past these two ‘wrecks of history’. One of the most promising approaches is that of ‘practice theory’ (Schatzki, 1996). ‘Practice theory’ is a term coined by Schatzki to link the work of a diverse group of theoreticians who have attempted to overcome the impasse to modern social theory represented by totalisation on the one hand and subjectivism on the other. Schatzki’s list of theorists includes Wittgenstein, (1953), Bourdieu, (1977), Foucault (1978), Giddens, (1984) and Butler (1990). To this list, I also include the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel (1967) and the Foucauldian approach of Rose (1996).

All share explicitly or implicitly the view that social practices form the basic building blocks from which social phenomena such as agency, subjectivity, identity and arguably social structures are derived. As Giddens (1984: 2) states of his theory of structuration, ‘[t]he basic domain of study of the social sciences…is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality but social practices ordered across space and time’.

It is useful to consider this statement as one of the key defining features of the practice theory approach. Giddens (1984) argues that the experience of the individual actor — the self — is not the basic ‘atom’ of society. In this Giddens, along with all practice theorists, states that the self or subject has been ‘decentred’. This means that the organising individual can no longer be considered as being ontologically prior to the social practices in which the individual engages, but neither can the social world be considered prior.
The second defining feature of practice theorists is the focus on process—what happens—rather than what is. The social world is not a series of objects in social space either being moved by nomothetic laws (structuralism) nor is it (pre-existing) individual entities moving in social space (action frame of reference). For practice theorists, the world is constituted by and constitutes interweaving contradictory and convergent, overlapping social practices.

Social practices are the ‘temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings (Schatzki, 1996: 89). By enacting social practices people instantiate and reproduce those practices. Practice theorists conceive human activity not as a series of discrete acts but, borrowing from process philosophy, as a ‘continuous flow of lived through experience’ (Giddens, 1976: 73). Schatzki (1996) drawing liberally from Wittgenstein, argues that life must be considered as a ‘continuous flow of bodily activity’ where ‘mental phenomena are episodes in an unfolding process of life’ (Schatzki, 1996: 26). Such a view requires a reconceptualisation of human action from a set of discrete, step-by-step acts to one of a continuous flow of conduct (Giddens, 1979: 55). It is from this continuous flow of conduct that the social world, the ‘doings and sayings’ of social practice (Schatzki, 1996), the discrete acts, selves, minds and gender and so on are constituted or instantiated.

A third defining feature is the practice theory perspective on human agency, free will and determinism. Human agency is mainly associated with the action frame of reference where the subject or self possesses free will as opposed to the objectivist and determinist forces of societal totality approaches. However, the decentring of the subject means a changing perspective on the idea of human agency. Human agency does not derive from free will or the human mind but is itself a product of social practices. As Rose (1996: 189) observes:

The human is neither an actor essentially possessed of agency, nor a passive product of cultural forces; agency is produced in the course of practices under a whole variety of more or less onerous, explicit, punitive or seductive, disciplinary or passional constraints and relations of force. Our own ‘agency’ then is the resultant of the ontology we have folded into ourselves in the course of our history and our practices.
Coulter (1989) working within the ethnomethodological tradition puts a similar position thus:

The approach to mind, the mental, the subjective and the individual being proposed and defended here is radically sociological in the sense that it places practices – actions, activities, interactions – rather than persons at the centre of its analytical attention, treating personal attributes (of mind, of character, of experience, etc.) as instantiations of, derivative properties from acculturated, public conduct comprising the matrix of social affairs (Coulter, 1989: 6).

On the other hand, human action cannot be predicted according to various laws. Rose (1996: 35) believes this is so obvious that the complexity and unpredictability of social practices is such that no theory of human action is necessary. People will always resist and will always come up with new ideas for the very reason they have a unique trajectory. Butler (1995: 135) argues similarly that:

To be constituted by language is to be produced within a given network of power/discourse which is open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citation from within, and interruption and inadvertent convergences with other such networks. ‘Agency’ is to be found precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed (cited in O’Malley, Weir and Shearing, 1997: 511-512).

For each of these practice theorists, the variation and complexity of social practice and the actor within it cannot be contained or predicted. Where a phenomenon is unpredictable and for which no causal laws or explanations can be found, except perhaps ex post facto, it is difficult to assert that the phenomena was determined. Determinism also suggests some form of compulsion. However, as Coulter (1989) points out, we must ask in what sense a subject is compelled? He argues that a person cannot be compelled or forced to think certain things, to experience things in a particular way. Giddens (1976) also argues that the ability to act otherwise is a key aspect of agency.

Human action cannot be compelled from some social law and as Schatzki (1996: 53) concludes ‘bodies are not passive objects seized by social practices’ and ‘the
expressive body cannot be locked into the traditional dichotomy of free will versus determinism’.

**The performance of self**

The practice theory approach to the nature of self is to suggest that the self is not *things that one is* but *things that one does*. The self does not reside anywhere other than in its performance, its instantiation and its accomplishment. That social practices are ontologically prior to the individual actor is a difficult concept. The nub of this conceptualisation is to move from a substantalist and Cartesian view of the actor moving in space and time – a classical mechanical view of physics, whereby we argue about the relative forces on the object or actor or the self-propelled action of the actor, to a process where both the actor and the social world are in a continuous state of flux and becoming. In such a view, both the person and the society are instantiations of ongoing social practices.

Psychological structures — our hopes, dreams and fears, our selves — are in such a view not objects but ‘expressive displays’ (Shotter, 1995) ‘how life goes for us’ (Schatzki, 1996). Most importantly, there is nothing behind that reality, no homunculus; *the expression is the reality*. From such a view, people’s feelings, insights, cognitions and attitudes are not psychological phenomena that direct our behaviour. What people say or do does not point to, or refer to an inner psychological reality, *the words, or more generally discourse, are that psychological reality* (Harré And Gillett, 1994). Psychological phenomena come into existence as ‘expressive displays’ or ‘performances’ (Harré and Gillett, 1994). Discourse is not the manifestation of mental activity working things out behind discourse; rather, our talk *is* the psychological phenomena (Harré and Gillett, 1994).

The picture that emerges from within practice theory is a fragile, potentially fragmented, shifting and contingent subjectivity. Rather than the reasonably robust autonomous and bounded self acting in the world, the self is much more contingent and ephemeral, constituted in interaction and its interaction.
Given this seemingly fragile contingent self, the question must be asked as to why the self is not experienced in this fashion and why people can recognise a continuing personality in others (McAdams, 1995). The self is not routinely experienced as fragmentary and deeply troublesome. If the self is merely enacted and performed, how is this apparent continuity and characteristics to be explained? How is this achieved? Practice theory has something of a ‘Hobbesian problem of order\(^1\)’ with respect to the self – the question is not so much why does the self appear so fragmentary but why does it appear so unified and ordered? I shall now turn to consider two practice theory approaches to these questions of the constitution of the self: the approach of Nikolas Rose (1996) and that of Anthony Giddens (1991).

**Practice theory and the making of the self**

Of those scholars following a practice theory approach, Nikolas Rose (1996) and Anthony Giddens (1991) have both provided important insights into the making of the self and what I have identified as the ‘Hobbesian problem of order’. As the thesis progressed, my theoretical framework developed by comparing their approaches to the self and by contrasting their perspectives on the constraining and enabling qualities of the self.

**Rose and the making of the subject**

Nikolas Rose’s (1996) approach to the making of the subject is set out in his work *Inventing Ourselves* and is an important contribution to the way in which the self made. Rose like other practice theorists argues that the self is a ‘bricolage’, contingent, cobbled together and assembled. The focus of Rose is on how ‘subjects of certain sorts’, that is, people with particular dispositions and characters are produced and brought into being and how given our composition of relations of

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\(^1\) Cf. Talcott Parsons (1951) who set for himself the problem of resolving the ‘Hobbesian problem’ of social order (Rex, 1962).
power and discourse, we are so constructed that we appear and act as if we are unified, bounded individuals:

If our current regime of the self has a certain ‘systematicity’, it is, perhaps, a relatively recent phenomenon, a resultant of all these diverse projects that have sought to know and govern humans as if they were selves of certain sorts (Rose, 1996: 5).

Rose draws substantially on the work of Foucault and a consideration of his work is also an engagement with the work of Foucault. Rose argues that, like Foucault, he is attempting to explore ‘the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience; that is as something that can and must be thought’ (Foucault, 1985: 6-7, cited in Rose, 1996: 11, emphasis added).

Rose, following Foucault, argues that the reason for experiencing ourselves as unitary, the ‘certain systematicity’, is the result of the processes of subjectification.

If we do not experience and relate to ourselves as movements, flows, decompositions, and recompositions, this is because of the location of humans on this plane of organization that concerns the development of forms and the formation of subjects, within assemblages, whose vectors, forces and interconnections subjectify human being, through assembling us together with parts, forces movements, affects of other humans, animals, objects, spaces, and places. It is within these assemblages that subject effects are produced, effects of our being assembled together. Subjectification is thus the name one can give to the effects of the composition and recomposition of forces, practices, and relations that strive to operate to render human being into diverse subject forms, capable of taking themselves as the subjects of their own and other practices upon them. (Rose, 1996: 171 emphasis added)

Subjectification is the range of techniques whereby human beings come to experience themselves as selves. Rose attempts to identify ‘the regimes of knowledge through which human beings have come to recognise themselves as certain kinds of creatures, the strategies of regulation and tactics of action to which

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2 From a practice theory perspective, ‘discourse’ can be used interchangeably with ‘practice’. In general, however, I prefer the term practice, firstly as it includes both doings and sayings. Secondly, the usage of the term ‘discourse’ may also be more restricted to a particular set of practice theory approaches that provide an amount of autonomy to practice that is separate to the people who engage in those practices.
these regimes of knowledge have been connected, and the correlative relations that human beings have established with themselves, in taking themselves as subjects’ (Rose, 1996: 11). Rose’s own project is to explore the role of psychology in the constitution of the self, that is, how the ‘intellectual techniques’ of psychology change our relations to ourselves.

Subjectification is an outcome of the ways in which we try to understand, order, change and simply interact or relate with our fellow human beings. Through our everyday lives and through the machinations of others, be they advertising executives, bureaucrats, labour processes and so on, each set of contradictory and complementary techniques, assumptions and requirements of the human produces the human self. Selfhood is an effect, ‘a distributed outcome of particular technologies of subjectification’ (Rose, 1996: 187).

From this perspective, the self is ordered and continuous insofar as the techniques of subjectification so produce it and the task of the social scientist is to identify those relations and techniques. Rose does not, however, consider reflexivity in his account. That is, he does not adequately consider and theorise how people seize and appropriate social practices for their own ends, how people accomplish selves to achieve their goals. This suggests within Rose’s theorising a form of determinism where the self is little more than an eddy in the stream of the social practice with no influence over its continuation or on the affairs of the world.

**Giddens and the reflexive project of the self**

Giddens (1991) places reflexivity as central to his account for the continuity and constitution of the self. He argues that a major characteristic of the human agent is reflexivity, that is the ability to monitor one’s behaviours and thoughts, to give an account of the one’s actions, emotions and thoughts and to change their actions in response to this monitoring and account giving.

According to Giddens, the human subject engages in the continuous on-going nature of the world in a routine and unreflexive manner until the ‘reflexive moment’ when
the individual is called to account. The individual is asked to account for his or her actions in some way. The subject may then provide a rationalisation — their own particular understanding of how things stand and then on the basis of his or her account change the action. The act calling of an account may also change the context itself. Moreover, the reflexive moment itself constitutes and creates the self.

Giddens argues that the ‘identity’ of self requires reflexive awareness (Giddens, 1991: 52). Our understanding and knowledge of ourself and the ‘truths’ of ourself need to be maintained, monitored and created.

Self-identity in other words, is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual (Giddens, 1991: 52).

Self-identity is an account of oneself — to oneself and to others. As an account, it is a narrative, a story we develop, maintain and change. Like other practice theorists, Giddens posits no essence or foundation. However, there are two important aspects of Giddens position. Firstly, the self is not a simple effect of social practice. Through the reflexive moment, the self is routinely created and acts in accordance with the circumstances. Self-identity as narrative permits the empirical possibility of continuity and coherence of self-identity — in simple terms, the continuity of the self is subject to the ability of the storyteller. Secondly, the level of continuity and coherence is a social outcome. The ability and necessity to provide a coherent or continuous self-identity to monitor the self is influenced by social demands and prevailing discursive possibilities and impossibilities. The self is intelligible and accountable in the terms of the given society. It is this intelligibility and accountability that forms the basis of how subjectification occurs.

Giddens argues that without a coherent autobiography, the self is fractured and fragmented. The biographical account of self, according to Giddens, ‘cannot be wholly fictive’ but must integrate events in the external world and ‘sort them into an ongoing story of the self’. It rests on the ability ‘to keep a particular narrative going’ (Giddens, 1991: 54, emphasis in original). The person who is incapable of
integrating their experiences into a coherent and more or less stable biography that is acceptable either to themselves or to others experiences this as extremely disabling.

Other constructionist writers have also suggested that the self is a form of narrative (Freeman, 1993; Gergen, K. and Gergen, M. 1983; Gergen, M 1994; McAdams., 1993, 1995). However, following Gregg (1991), it is important to recognise that the self cannot be reduced to narrative. Gregg (1991) argues that narrative implies a representational logic that may not be present in the construction of the self (see also Atkinson, 1997). There is no necessary reason to assume that the self is logical or fits into a story or a narrative form. Secondly, Giddens’ view of ontological security suggests that there are deeper motivational and existential issues of the self than scripts and story lines.

The self for Giddens forms part of the ‘protective cocoon’ or ontological security that provides the sense of order and continuity. He argues that, not only do we live in a social world that is continuously and contingently produced, but that we also have some knowledge of this. Consequently there is an existential fear that its collapse may not be not far away. Giddens (1984; 1991) points out that we have considerable emotional investment in ensuring a consistent and stable world. While the social world may appear to be taken for granted and appears to be independent of the people within it, it is constructed and produced by people.

For the social world to be wildly inconsistent, for people to act in a more or less chaotic fashion, would mean that we could not understand others and we would not know how to act, what was appropriate etc. This suggests we must look carefully at how social interactions are made consistent and how inconsistencies are ironed out as misunderstandings, incompetence, or as naïveté.

In contrast to Rose, Giddens provides an important personal and individual reason for an attachment to a self and its continuity. The constitution of the self is not simply an effect of social practice, intended or otherwise, but is a reflexive project that involves participation and emotional engagement with its construction and ongoing continuity. Giddens (1991) refers to this participation and engagement as the reflexive project of the self. As a project it is a goal-oriented ‘work-in-progress’.
While Rose stresses that the self is not a passive recipient (see page 21, above) he does not theorise or elaborate on its participation.

It is at this point that the differences between Rose and Giddens are most stark. Rose focuses on the techniques of subjectification and relations of power while Giddens considers how the reflexive subject stitches together these techniques into a patchwork self. The divergences, I would argue, are differences of perspective and different emphases on the twin notions of constraint and enablement within practice theory. In order to proceed towards the development of a theoretical framework, it is first necessary to discuss the twin concepts of constraint and enablement and the differing emphases Rose and Giddens place on these concepts.

**Practice theory and constraint and enablement**

For practice theorists, social practices constrain and restrict possible actions but they also provide the basis for action. Within practice theory, the themes of enablement and constraint respectively refer to the opening and closing of possibility. Some things are made possible through social practices whilst others are foreclosed.

Enablement and constraint are two sides of the one coin: to be able to engage successfully in one set of activities, for example, will foreclose the ability to undertake other activities (see also Martin, 1982). It refers to the positive and negative aspects of power. Foucault (1978) argued that power was positive, that is to say constitutive and productive, as well as negative. For Foucault, power was a ‘multiplicity of force relations’ that not only constrained but also provided the ‘condition of possibility’ (Foucault, 1978: 92-93). The operation of power does not only oppress, it also transforms, opening up certain possibilities, foreclosing others.

Power is not necessarily the domination of one over another. For Foucault, power is immanent in, rather than exterior to, human relationships. ‘It is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a given society’ (Foucault, 1978: 93). Complex situations have opportunities and impossibilities. Things that can be done,
said and conceived and things that cannot. Power refers to the openings and closures for the ‘complex strategical situation’.

Giddens argued similarly that power constrains and enables:

As I have strongly underlined, power is never merely a constraint but is at the very origin of the capabilities of agents to bring about intended outcomes of action. Each of the various forms of constraint are thus also, in varying ways, forms of enablement. They serve to open up certain possibilities of action at the same time as they restrict or deny other (Giddens, 1984: 173-174).

Social practices simultaneously enable and constrain. They are productive and repressive. The techniques of subjectification may imperfectly produce the subject for the wants, desires and designs of others; the subject is caught in the net of social practices such that some thoughts, wants and ways of being are unintelligible. However, social practices are appropriated and seized on by the subject to further his or her ends, as Giddens argues ‘to bring about intended outcomes of action’ (Giddens, 1984; 173).

**Constraint and subjectification**

To consider the notion of the constraining qualities of subjectification, it is useful to examine Foucault (1984). While Foucault argued for the concept of positive power, his principal concern was with negative power (McNay, 1994). Foucault (1984) saw his work as a continuation of the Kantian project of the critique of reason and his aim was to identify and transgress the limits of reason. ‘The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible limitation’ (Foucault, 1984: 45) and seeks to give impetus to ‘the undefined work of freedom’ (Foucault, 1984: 46). He characterises his work as ‘a philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon our selves as free beings (Foucault, 1984: 47).
In this light, Foucault’s work is a political and ethical critique of the limits of the present, the purpose of which is to uncover our present limits and to provide the possibility for their transgression (see also Miller, 1993: 318). Foucault’s work has, as Habermas (1986) suggests, a normative thrust (see also Dreyfuss and Rabinow, 1986). For Foucault, this is a positive ethos. His focus is on the limits of the self, how subjectification constitutes the acting self this way rather than that way, a subjectification that produces the ability to do certain things but not others. Foucault’s project is one of identifying the limits of possibility, the ‘rules of the game’, of what can and cannot be thought.

Hoy (1986) suggests that Foucault sees his project in terms of a chess game. Foucault is interested in identifying and describing the rules and possible or permissible moves of the game. From this view, Foucault is primarily interested in what can or cannot be said, thought, desired, or experienced. He is interested in the limits set on the players. He is only interested theoretically in how the players take up, appropriate and utilise various strategies at their disposal insofar as it provided an empirical basis for the underlying discursive regimes – the rules and etiquette and possibilities of the game. His focus is on the constraining aspects of social practices, the questioning and destabilising of existing practices and the possibility of making new social practices. The focus is rarely on the investment people have in, and the appropriation and reappropriation of, the existing practices.

Foucault’s approach yields the form, the contours, and the shape (Rose, 1996: 23) of the constitution of the self. Rose (1996) follows both Foucault’s normative and methodological approach and reveals the assembling power of ‘psy’ and governmentality and forms a powerful critique of the hitherto unexamined relations between the processes of governmentality, the social and psychological sciences and the constitution of the present self. ‘Psy’ is what Rose (1996) refers to as…

This normative emphasis on limits and constraint with little attention to enablement and positive power can lead to the accusation of determinism. McNay (1994: 103) argues that, for Foucault, ‘subjects are understood as arbitrarily constructed and manipulable docile bodies rather than as persons with the capacity for autonomous experience and action’. The subject is a purely determined category. According to
McNay, what is required is a theory that does not simply focus on the body but also upon the ‘complex of often-contradictory amalgam of legal, social and psychological constructs’ (1994: 103).

The focus on constraint in Foucault’s work also reveals a tendency towards a dominatory power (McNay, 1994). Giddens argues that Foucault viewed the disciplinary power of total institutions as a paradigm for all social relations. Using the work of Goffman, Giddens demonstrates that the point of total institutions is their separation from the ordinary and their difference from ordinary social relations. While they have many elements in common, total institutions cannot be taken as paradigmatic of all social relations (Giddens, 1984: 155-158). Consequently, Foucault treats disciplinary power as being more encompassing and powerful than it in fact is. In addition, as McNay (1994) observes, Foucault fails to adequately consider power from the position of the subject. Even in total institutions, inmates find ways to resist the disciplinary power of the authorities.

Failure to take into account any other knowledges — such as prison subculture or customs inherited from the past that those in control may have encountered or come into conflict with — means that Foucault significantly overestimates the effectiveness of disciplinary forms of control (McNay, 1994: 101). From such a position, the self can appear as oversocialised. Notwithstanding Foucault’s criticisms of societal totality, his emphasis on constraint produces a self that looks very much a production of, and a dupe of, exogenous forces.

This extended discussion of Foucault sheds light on the work of Rose. Rose (1996) shows a similar lack of attention to, or appreciation of, the positive or enabling aspects of power. The ideological critique of the self focusses on the constraining and oppressive qualities and attributes of the self. In the following quotation Rose (1996) identifies the positive aspects of self — ‘the ambiguous gifts’ — but more clearly expresses and emphasises the oppressive aspects:

In this fragmentation and these refusals, we have been forced to recognize that national, racial, sexual, gendered, class identities have, historically, been created most typically by those who would identify us in the service of problematizing,
regulating, policing, reforming, improving, developing, or even eliminating those so identified. Of course, such identities have often been embraced by those so identified and turned back upon the regimes that have created them. But to declare ‘I am, that name’: woman, homosexual, proletarian, African American — or even man, white, civilized, responsible, masculine — is no outward representation of an inward and spiritual state but a response to that history of identification and its ambiguous gifts and legacies’ (Rose, 1996: 39).

Rose’s focus is on how subjects are produced, on the devices of identity production, not on how those subjects appropriate such techniques, such selves for their own purposes. Rose does not consider how the self, puts such devices to its own ends.

There is also a tendency in Rose’s terminology towards determinism. Rose tackles the question of determinism by pointing out that agency is not required to account for resistance and variation. However, on a number of occasions, Rose uses determinist terminology. Rose (as we have seen on page 25 above), states that he, like Foucault, is interested in what can and must be thought. That something must be thought appears determinist. It would seem that the regimes of truth delimit not only that which is possible but determine what must be thought. Foucault sometimes has a tendency towards hyperbole and this may be an unfortunate phrase, but it is a phrase repeated by Rose.

Rose’ view of the subject or the self as an effect reflects a major strand of postmodernism where the subject and agency is an effect of discourse (Rose, 1996: 187 see also Butler, 1990; Lather, 1994). The language of cause and effect — determinism— can easily creep into theory and it is possible that this is the case here. Certainly, the steps are small where it is easy to move from the view that the self is produced in discourse to one of stating that the self is produced by discourse, to finally to the view of the self as an effect, or caused by discourse. This slippage may be partly due to an almost exclusive focus on the constraining qualities of subjectification.

Discourse often takes many different meanings in the literature, but here, discourse is most usefully, and as a general case, considered as the doings and sayings of people; viz. social practice.
Finally, Rose’s project may describe the array of intellectual techniques of
governmentality and subjectification but there is little about how they are taken up or
deployed in the day-to-day lives of people. It is all very well to know the range of
possible and permissible moves in chess but there is a vast gulf between such
knowledge and knowing how the game is actually played. It is a vexed point
whether it is methodologically possible to map the contours of possibility without the
consideration of the actor’s reflexivity and participation.

People may enact self and gender not simply because of constraint and oppression
but because such enactments achieve certain ends, or open up certain possibilities.
As Coulter (1989) argues (see page 22 above), there is no compulsion on the part of
the subject, consequently the ‘causality’ that we should be concerned with is not
‘nomological causality of the physical sciences but the commonplace causality of
compelling reasons’ (Coulter, 1989: 35).

It is one thing to identify, contest and potentially transgress the limits of thought, the
limits of our self-constitution, it is another to study what happens in the everyday.
As Giddens (1991) has suggested, one may argue that the world dissolves under
philosophical scepticism, however, this has been known for centuries. The point is,
how do people carry on in the face of such scepticism, how is our world and
ourselves fabricated continuously and often so effortlessly?

The self as enablement

In the previous section, I attempted to identify the limitations of a sole or primary
focus on the constraining qualities of subjectification. In this section, I develop the
notion of enablement further. However, I stress that enablement does not replace
constraint. Nor do I wish to imply a symmetry since the possibilities of enablement
do not necessarily balance the confines of constraint.

One source of enablement is that of resistance and appropriation. The techniques of
subjectification, the intended designs of the planners, administrators and the
advertisers can be appropriated and used for purposes other than or at odds with the
original design. Prisoners, slaves and the dispossessed can and do use such techniques for their own.

The techniques of the self are, also used for ontological security and as a bolster against existential fear (Giddens, 1991). However, the reflexive project of the self also provides an epistemological and methodological standpoint for the individual. A coherent self provides a place from which to stand and to make sense of one’s own and others actions. To have no such sense would be very disabling. The issue is to consider this enabling aspect of the self without putting the self ontologically prior. To develop this point, I turn to the work of Garfinkel (1967; 1990). Giddens (1984) also drew upon the ethnomethodological approach of Garfinkel to develop his views on intersubjectivity and ontological security.

Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology

Garfinkel developed the ethnomethodological approach to sociology in response to the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons (Coulon, 1995). Ethnomethodology has often been aligned with phenomenology and interpretivism. Hood-Williams and Harrison (1998), for example, believe that ethnomethodology is a universal subjectivist theory. This is a major misreading of the ethnomethodological approach. However, this may be the case why other practice theorists, with the exception of Giddens, have not systematically addressed his work.

Garfinkel uses the term “ethnomethodology” to ‘refer to the rational properties of indexical expression and to other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life’ (Garfinkel, 1967: 11). By indexical expression, Garfinkel is referring to the non-representational nature of language. As Heritage describes it, ‘human resources are undoubtedly approximate. Rather than standing in straightforward correspondences with states of affairs, they seem on the contrary to locate fields of possibilities’ (Heritage, 1984:

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4 Conversely, ethnomethodologists do not appear to have taken up (with the exception of Giddens’ work e.g. Hartland, 1995)) other practice theory approaches. Coulter (1989: 2,7) endorses and sympathizes with ‘Foucault’s project’ and identifies a similarity in the ethnomethodological and Foucauldian approaches in an endnote.
147). It is the situation, context and norms that fix the meanings of words not some inner meaning.

While Garfinkel’s work is strongly influenced by the phenomenology of Schutz, his intellectual debt, as his work on non-representability suggests, is equally influenced by the anti-representationalism and anti-subjectivism of Wittgenstein (Heritage, 1984; Coulter, 1989). Garfinkel has argued that:

meaningful events are entirely and exclusively events in a person’s behavioural environment….Hence there is no reason to look under the skull since nothing of interests is to be found there but brains. The ‘skin’ of the person will be left intact’ (Garfinkel, 1990: 190).

The ethnomethodological focus in not upon nor does it assume a self. The focus is on the logic and practice of human conduct (Coulter, 1989).

For Garfinkel, as for other practice theorists, the social world is not a set of objective social facts or forces but a socially constituted or accomplished world. People, however, behave as if the world was made of objective facts. In Foucauldian terms, such objective facts are fabricated truths and Garfinkel is interested in their ongoing fabrication in everyday life. Garfinkel argues that in the social world our ability to take for granted and to perceive and render as normal the world of our daily life was the ‘natural attitude’ (Garfinkel, 1967). The natural facts of life, the massive number of facts about the social world that ‘everybody knows’:

Furnish the ‘fix’, the ‘this is it’ to which the waking state returns one, and are the points of departure and return for every modification of the world of daily life that is achieved in play, dreaming, trance theatre, scientific theorizing, or high ceremony (Garfinkel, 1967: 35).

For Garfinkel, then, the human subject routinely and continuously undertakes this ‘ontological work’ of constructing the world in their everyday life. In contrast to the constraint approach of Foucault where there is a tendency towards viewing the subject as a recipient of regulatory discourses external to the subject, Garfinkel places the ontological work of the subject more centrally and thus suggests a far more participatory role in the construction of facts and truths.
It is Garfinkel’s treatment of norms that not only provides the opportunity for the self to participate reflexively in its own creation and the social world. Norms for Garfinkel are standardised expectancies that people ‘discover, create and sustain’. They provide the reference grid and constitute the material of daily life. In contrast to most theories of action, Garfinkel argues that norms do not guide, regulate, determine or cause conduct but ‘are instead reflexively constitutive of the activities and unfolding circumstances to which they are applied’ (Heritage, 1984: 109, emphasis in original). As Heritage (1984) points out, standard theories of action assume that actors are cognitively equipped to recognize situations in common and, once the situation is commonly recognised, the application of common norms enables, or causes the actors to produce joint actions. Each situation is predefined, or ‘pre-constituted’.

This is the same problem of representationalism referred to above (p. 17) and forms the basis of his critique of a regulatory approach to norms. How can the human subject recognise and then appropriately reiterate regulatory practices and norms? How can the human subject identify the ‘true norm’ in any given instance and enact the appropriate performance? For example, as Connell (1987) argues in his critique of sex-role theory, people do not comply with sex roles or normative expectations all the time. How does the subject pick out the true norm? No two circumstances are the same, yet the correct application of the norm requires a rule such that if a set of circumstances obtain, then such and such a norm should be followed. However, for this to work, the actor must have an extremely large set of rules to fit every circumstance, including a set of rules that determine the applicability of certain rules in the given circumstances. As Heritage states:

Even if we provisionally accept the (Parsonian model), we find that the ‘world’ which must be necessarily be co-ordinated with such an actor is an impossible one. For it is a world requiring limitless specification…The normative theorist finds that there is no end to what the participants must know, and know identically, if they are to grasp their circumstances adequately and act appropriately (Heritage, 1984: 114).
Garfinkel argues on the contrary that norms and maxims of conduct are the ‘materials through which the “whatness” of conduct is possible’ (Heritage, 1984: 109). Norms provide a grid for experience. Norms make possible communication and understanding, not because of their intrinsic meaning or because of any sanction, but because they are used methodologically as indexical expressions and tools for communication. Garfinkel argued that the norms and ‘maxims of conduct’ serve as a relative ‘benchmark’ or ‘mooring point’ from which to judge and make sense of human action. Heritage (1984) uses the example of a simple normative expectation of returning a greeting to illustrate the nature of norms. Where a person fails to return a greeting, the initiator may conclude, depending upon the context, that he or she was not heard, that the respondent is still upset from yesterday, is a rude person and so on. Thus if the norm is to ‘return a greeting with a greeting’, failure to do so signals that something is amiss which might require further investigation. Deviation or breaches of normative expectations signal to interlocutors that ‘something is up’ and draw attention to something less commonplace.

Normative accountability is the ‘grid’ by reference to which whatever is done will become visible and assessable. And, subject to this condition of visible accountability, conduct undertaken for whatever objectives will tend to become designed and shaped responsively to the constraints imposed by this visibility. In this sense, normative accountability can best be viewed as organizing, channelling and, in a sense, ‘domesticating’ the ways in which interests may be realized (Heritage, 1984, 117).

Norms are the grid of intelligibility, the ‘devices of meaning production’ (Rose, 1996: 25 see also Coulter, 1989) and the cultural matrix (Butler, 1990). Norms, maxims of conduct and social practices generally, can be seen from this perspective as important ontological devices that people employ in their everyday life in pursuit of their interests. It is this sense that norms are enabling.

I further suggest that the constitution of the self, its subjectification, is enabling. The existence of a sufficiently consistent self that accomplishes a variety of attributes is a normative standard. A person who cannot or will not ‘behave’ may be treated as a lunatic, lacking competence, socially inept, a weirdo and so on. Such a person would find it difficult to participate in the world and interact with others. This is not because of any belief in the ‘sacredness’ of the rules but the threat to the normative,
socially constructed order – the intelligibility matrix. As Giddens (1991) observes, the natural attitude keeps out ontological insecurity.

The conduct of the self provides intelligibility to both the individual and to others in interaction. Subjectivity emerges from intersubjectivity (Giddens, 1991: 51). The self is not developed first and next the individual begins finding others, but the self is developed as a result of, and a means to, interaction. As Wittgenstein (1953) pointed out in his private language argument, it is shared language that has access to both the private self and the public.

Garfinkel (1967) argues that it was not reverence to the norm in question that is breached but to the particular case in question: a case of why are you making life difficult for me, now? A person confronted with another whose self changed inconsistently or spontaneously may be so bewildered that any meaningful communication may be impossible.

It is in this sense that the self is enabling. Without a self of a certain sort, social interaction would, as it currently stands, be impossible or very difficult. These are compelling reasons (Coulter, 1989) at the level of daily, routine interaction for the accomplishment of the self. The socially normative standard is also a benchmark or mooring point not only in social interaction but also for the individual. It provides an intelligible basis from which the individual can also act and to give an account of him/herself. To be unable to provide an account to oneself or to others would not only be a demonstration of incompetence but also deeply disturbing. Thus, one’s self is not simply a product of social processes but a critical part of the human participating the world. As an intelligible basis from which to act and judge in interaction, it forms part of the matrix of intelligibility, part of the grid of experience.

The practices of subjectification do hem in the possible and are thus constraining. Rose (1996), provides an important contribution to understandings of the assemblage of the self through his understanding of the effect of psychology, that is to say how the discipline moves, shapes and invents particular modes of self and how the ‘diverse projects’ produce a ‘certain systematicity’. We must now turn our attention
to the site of their invention, where those modes are enacted, appropriated, departed from and returned.

Certainly, the practices of subjectification provide considerable insight into this process, but how does this work in the day-to-day encounters and what other processes are involved? Such a project pulls the work of Foucault into the sociology of the actual, the world as it is lived and articulated, rather than one of critique. As such, I view the work of Giddens and the ethnomethodologists such as Coulter (1989) as, in principal, complementary rather than antithetical to Foucauldian-inspired approaches.

My interest is on how the self is accomplished and how the individual participates in this accomplishment. As such, the focus is not on the ‘permissible moves’ of the self but on the ‘compelling reasons’ (Coulter, 1989) for the human to turn her/himself into a subject and to accomplish self. My interest is on how the self emerges from intersubjectivity and participates, appropriates and seizes social practices and thereby achieve ends and reproduces itself—ie turns itself into a subject—and thereby sustains and reproduce other social practices.

My question is how this occurs. It is a ‘flat and empirical little question’ (Foucault, 2000: 337) directed to ‘the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject’ Foucault (2002: 327). How do we bring this self about, how it is ‘conjured’ or fabricated from social practices? What are its relations to other social conduct and regimes? How is the self as a series of techniques used, how does it enables and how does it constrain? How the self is the self-accomplished?

How the self is accomplished begs an empirical study, not only a theoretical exposition or development. An empirical study can also work in a hermeneutical fashion in the development of theory. However, my key reason for an empirical study is one of temperament. Developing a theory of self without empirical investigation is like developing a theory of swimming without ever getting wet. It

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5 Such an approach may be seen to beg the philosophical issue of the human state prior to the emergence of the self. Schatzki (1996) following Wittgenstein argues that this prior state consists of ‘natural reactions’ of the body from which the human being, including the self is reflexively drawn out.
can be done, but it is more challenging and exciting to confront one’s theory in reality.

The problem for developing an empirical study of the self is that the self, is, as Giddens (1991: 52) suggests, an ‘amorphous’ concept. People can talk about their selves but this too suffers from developing a narrative account and a rationalisation for a life history. Ideally, such an approach requires a longitudinal approach (Gregg, 1991). However, my interest is in the micro-practices of accomplishment rather than accounts. Foucault (1978; 2000) addressed this empirical problem by focussing on particular practices associated with the self such as the practices of sexuality. One approach is to focus, like Foucault, on a particular set of activities where the self is heavily implicated, salient or can be inferred.

Butler (1990) has argued that gender and self are inextricably linked and it is difficult to imagine a self without a gender. Hofstadter (1985) suggests that a report of a ‘person’ walking down a street is a human being without a face; the term ‘person’ in this instance is a placeholder. The practices of gender are implicated in the practices of self and gender is likely to be central to the reflexive project of the self. The advantage of exploring self through gender is that gender provides a greater focus than the amorphous self. By observing the practices of gender, I am also observing the practices of self. In the following chapter, I shall outline the key theoretical approaches to gender and develop this viewpoint further. Perhaps not surprisingly given the close links between gender and self, the theoretical developments closely parallel those of the self.
CHAPTER THREE

Gender and Identity

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to show that the self and gender are so closely bound that the practices or performances of gender are important constitutive elements of the self. The enactment of gender, I argue, may provide an important and early ‘fastening point’ in the ‘matrix of intelligibility’ discussed in the previous chapter. Because gender is an important constitutive element of the self, the study of the formation of gender-identity provides an avenue for tackling the practices of the self empirically.

The development of the concept of gender demonstrates a remarkably similar trajectory to the understanding of the self. Indeed, according to MacInness (1998), the concept of gender, as opposed to sex or sex category, arose in the time of Enlightenment. In this chapter, I will firstly trace the development of the understanding of gender from the 1960s to current-day practice theory approaches to gender. This theoretical development parallels that of the self. Gender, too, has moved from notions of essential difference, where one’s sex or gender is something shared in common with those of the same sex, to one in which gender is understood as a far more fragmentary and less unified construction and human accomplishment.

The chapter will then consider three practice theory approaches to gender: R.W Connell’s (1987) hegemonic masculinity approach; Judith Butler’s (1990) performativity approach; and West and Zimmerman’s (1987) ethnomethodological approach. Gender, particularly in the work of Connell and Butler, is considered
primarily a force of constraint. The questions and concerns that arise concerning the agent’s participation are also similar to those addressed in the previous chapter. Do people participate in and appropriate gender? Should such appropriation be an important aspect in the constitution of gender? I again return to the ethnomethodological concept of normative standards as a fastening point in the matrix of intelligibility to consider the enabling qualities of gender.

Drawing upon Butler (1990), I argue that gender is a constitutive ‘element’ of the self. The set of social practices that constitute gender are also part of, and overlap with, the social practices that constitute the self. This suggests that through the study of gender-identity construction and formation, the accomplishment of self can also be understood.

The (rise) and fall of essentialist gender

The fall of essentialist and substantialist notions of gender closely parallels those of the self. This is not surprising given that they draw upon similar theoretical approaches. Perhaps more surprising are the parallels in the empirical difficulties identifying essentialist gender. The recent history of gender has been one of discussing and demonstrating the importance and centrality of gender to social science (Chafetz, 1998). Theory has moved from being gender blinkered or gender blind towards the view that gender matters are pervasive throughout all theory. Thus while the ‘founding fathers of sociology’ were silent or virtually silent on matters of gender and gender inequality, gender is now widely acknowledged as a field of study in its own right (Tong, 1989; Chafetz, 1998; Weedon, 1999). More importantly, however, our social practices, our modes of discourse and interaction, are also seen to be imbued with gender relations and relations of power.

Initial, mainstream approaches to gender were that of ‘sex difference’ research (Eisenstein, 1980). As West and Zimmerman (1987) point out, in Western society, the accepted cultural perspective on sex and gender is that men and women are natural
categories with different behavioural and psychological temperaments and dispositions. Sex difference research assumed that underpinning men and women’s behaviour was an underlying coherent cluster of traits and attributes that differed between genders. It also believed that those traits could be reasonably and unproblematically measured e.g. Anastasi, 1965). Up until the late 1960s, most empirical work on gender followed this ‘natural attitude’ and focussed on the identification of sex differences (Macoby and Jacklin, 1974; Ashmore, 1990).

Sex difference research has been subject to strong methodological and theoretical criticism (Macoby and Jacklin, 1974; Eisenstein, 1980; Crawford, 1989; Ashmore, 1990). However, not only has mainstream psychological testing been unable to identify consistent and consequential differences on a wide range of psychological traits and attributes, but there is also a tension between sex difference minimisation (e.g. Macoby and Jacklin, 1974) and sex difference maximisation in the feminist and theoretical literature (e.g. Gilligan, 1982).

In a major review of sex difference research, Ashmore (1990) finds that the one largest gender difference was ‘throw velocity’. He further points out that the current traditional difference in verbal ability and spatial ability of girls and boys had declined or disappeared. A review of the vast psychological attributes investigated by sex difference researchers and arrayed by Ashmore leads to a conclusion of similarity between gender rather than difference. The differences arrayed appear as trivial, culturally produced or both. Grady (1981: 632-633 cited in Crawford, 1989: 131) perhaps best summarises the overall findings by noting that: ‘psychology is replete with inconsequential, accidental, and incidental findings of ‘sex differences’.

This debate between minimisation and maximisation continues (see Crawford, 1989). The important point is that it is not (only) the empirical approaches and methods of mainstream psychology that are at fault, but that, like the self, the nature of gender is too diverse to be captured empirically as a set of dichotomous, stable and coherent traits or attributes. *Just as the presentation of the self is too diverse for unifying ‘self-concept’,*
the actions and behaviours of people cannot be adequately captured by a ‘gender’ or ‘sex’ concept. The activities, abilities, skills and portrayals by men and women is simply too complex, overlapping and contradictory to be simply encapsulated by gender as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. If boys and girls, women and men, can perform activities to the point where they are indistinguishable, then it would seem that gender is not an inherent disposition that limits the person performing the task when necessary.

The rise of sex role theory

Sex difference research fell into disfavour during the 1970s. Ashmore shows that the very influential critique of sex difference research by Macoby and Jacklin (1974) was highly cited while the ‘extensive and detailed critique’ by Block (1976) of Macoby and Jacklin went virtually unnoticed (Ashmore, 1990: 492). Gender research — and gender politics (Connell, 1987; Ashmore, 1990) — had moved to sex role theory.

Sex role theory derives from the work of Parsons and Bales (1955) who were interested in how people became accommodated to the functional requirements of society. This was perhaps an inauspicious beginning for a theory of social change. The key advantage is however, that sex role theory argues that how each person and gender behaved is the result of socialisation, rather than ordained, genetic destiny, and thus mutable.

Sex-role theory argues that people internalise a ‘sex-role identity’ in accordance with their biological sex and take on prescribed sex-roles in their day-to-day activity. The mechanisms as to how sex-roles are internalised or learned vary from theory to theory. Perhaps the most influential has been the social learning approach which argues that people acquire and perform sex-typed behaviour through observation, indoctrination and conscious learning (Edley and Wetherall, 1995). Children are rewarded for sex appropriate behaviours and they eventually acquire those behaviours. Thus, it could be argued that while women did do the cooking and cleaning and maybe even some like
doing so, this was the result of social learning rather than a genetic disposition and that what can be learned can be unlearned and changed.

Connell (1987) provides perhaps the most important critique of this approach (but see also Edwards, 1983; Stacey and Thorne, 1985; Edley and Wetherall, 1995). Firstly, Connell points out that sex role theory is ultimately based on biological difference. ‘The very terms “female role” and “male role”, hitching a biological term to a dramaturgical one, suggests what is going on. The underlying image is an invariant biological base and a malleable superstructure’ (Connell, 1987: 50). The theory cannot escape from its functionalist, accommodative roots. People are socialised to fit their prescribed roles.

Connell (1987) and Ashmore (1990) both argue that sex-role theory is essentialist as it relies on men and women having distinct roles and developing distinct masculine and feminine identities that reside within individuals. Sex role theory assumes that human experience can be explained in terms of stable qualities of individuals. As Ashmore points out, the various psychological scales developed such as that by Bem (1981; 1985) assumes that masculinity, femininity or even androgyny can be captured ‘fully by self-description of stable internal dispositional qualities’ (Ashmore, 1990, 508).

There is little doubt that there is a connection between sex role and sex, and that sex role theory implies the existence of stable internal dispositional qualities. However, whether this is essentialism may be questioned. Essentialism suggests some entity or property shared by one sex rather than another. Sex role theory as a social theory does not suggest this. According to sex role theory, men and women perform roles or scripts, but sharing a similar script is not essentialist. However, sex role theory is substantialist. That is, it does understand the world in terms of entities acting or being moved in social space. In this particular case, men and women have stable internal dispositions, produced by scripts and they act these scripts out.

Both Connell (1987) and Ashmore (1990) point out that sex-role theories fail to adequately consider the relations between the sexes. Sex-role theory, by concentrating
on individual traits and separate clusters of masculinity and femininity ultimately focuses upon sex-differences not what people actually do with those differences. As Connell (1987: 50-51) points out, there is a sex-role theory but no class- or race-role theory. It has no theory of power.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s feminist theory had already began to criticise the lack of a theory of power and political action. It was all important to identify the limited ‘sex-roles’ and disadvantages for women but there was no theory to describe and explain the systematic nature of women’s disadvantage nor was there a political theory to identify what might be strategically important for political activism (Connell, 1987). Sex role theory could not adequately account for the systematic inequalities.

Finally, Connell (1987) argued that socialisation theory could not account for the transmission of sex roles. The theory grossly oversimplifies the complexity of gender. Children simply do not accept everything they are told, nor is what they are told or what they see and hear straightforward. The world is full of contradictions concerning sex-roles but children seem to acquire “appropriate” behaviours. A theory of sex-role socialisation must also account for such complexities and contradictions. Connell suggests, ‘most sex-role theory is not constructed around problems raised by field observation, but as analysis of a normative standard case’ (1987: 51, emphasis added). However, what is normative may not be what is common or what people always do or what all people ‘usually do’. People depart from and contradict norms all the time. As Ashmore (1990) argues, sex-role theory fails to consider the multiple ways in which gender is connected to one’s self-identity. He argues that our culture is not so homogenous and so without contradictory aspects as the sex-role model would suggest. Again, a key theme is the inability of a theory to capture the variability of its subject.

**Categorical theory**

It was the lack of a theory of power rather than is inability to account for socialisation that led to the loss of influence of sex-role theory. Rather than moving away from
essentialism, gender essentialism reached its peak as a theory and as a radical force in a family of theories that Connell (1987) terms ‘categorical theory’. According to Connell (1987), the theories differ according to the theorised cause of the oppression of women but were similar in that the theories explain social order in terms of the power relationship and conflict between two categories of men and women. Men were in one category and women in another.

Crawford (1989) argues that feminist theories can often be distinguished on the basis of whether gender differences are minimised or maximised (see also Hare-Mustin and Maracek, 1988; Ashmore, 1990). While feminist psychology had previously attempted to minimise apparent gender differences, and sex role theory argued that whatever differences existed, such differences are the result of socialisation, the radical move of categorical theories is to maximise the difference between men and women, male and female, and typically to value the specifically female attributes, traits, ways of knowing and being and so on (Crawford, 1989). Within psychology, the work of Gilligan (1982) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) argued that women’s moral reasoning and thinking were different to those of men’s.

The origins of these differences are seen to be psychodynamic, as a result of the parental division of labour e.g. Chodorow, 1978), or biological e.g. Brownmiller, 1975), or as a result of the particular social location of women e.g. Collins, 1990). Through their social location, women as a group are believed to have a different (collective) understanding and sensibility to that of men. Feminist standpoint theorists, for example, argue that some social locations produce distortions while others, and in particular ‘the oppressed, can pierce ideological obfuscations and can attain a correct and comprehensive understanding’ (Hawkesworth, 1989: 536).

Such views are ultimately essentialist – there is something universal shared by women that is not shared with men. As the experience of sex difference research illustrates, this is difficult to sustain empirically. Theoretically, as Chafetz (1997) points out, such approaches hold to a dichotomous view of gender, a form of ‘either/or’ thinking that in
other respects is generally rejected within categorical theories. However, more importantly, it became recognised that women (and presumably men) were not homogenous groups. Sub groups of women are not homogenous, there are black women, third world women and those whose experiences cut across the homogeneity of gender all of whom are more marginalized than middle-class white women who were often seen to be speaking for (and perhaps over) these women (see e.g. hooks, 1981; Spelman, 1988; Collins, 1990).

As Butler (1990) argues, categorical approaches implied essentialism. To be able to treat women as a homogenous category, it is necessary to identify just what it is that all women share with each other. The problem is that the experience of women is far more varied than that permitted by a simple binary of men and women. Within the category of women exist a diverse range of experiences and the problem becomes how to account for these. West and Fenstermaker (1995) argue, tongue in cheek, that the solution for categorical feminists is a mathematical one solved by the addition of extra, orthogonal or independent categories for each difference. Not only does such an approach regress towards solipsism, it cannot account for what occurs at the intersection of the categories their interaction, or how to analytically separate gender from other categories (Butler, 1990).

Gender essentialism or substantialism, in its sex difference, sex-role theory and categorical forms, exhibits similar theoretical problems to the views of the inner, essential self discussed in Chapter Two. The variety of positions a person may hold for either gender is far too broad to be captured by a dichotomy. Gender is not an essence or a set of core attributes shared between men and between women. Gender is important; there are typically real differences in outcomes in status, incomes and advantage and what one can and cannot do. The theoretical challenge has been to develop a new approach to gender. One persuasive solution are the current approaches to practice theory. In the following sections I discuss three contemporary practice theory approaches. First, I shall discuss the work of R.W. Connell (1987; 1995; 2002) and the concept of hegemonic masculinity; and secondly, the gender performativity
approach of Butler (1990). I will then discuss the ethnomethodological approach of West and Zimmerman (1987).

**Gender as social practice**

**Connell and Hegemonic Masculinity**

Connell (1987) introduces the idea of masculinities and hegemony as a step away from the essentialist and totalising approaches of categorical explanations. Connell (1987) argues that gender was a product of social practices and that the practice theory of Giddens (1984) provided the basis for a theory of gender. Giddens (1989), for his part, argues that Connell’s work is a substantive theory based on his general approach. For Connell, masculinity and femininity are social attributes rather than natural essences:

The body as used, the body I am, is a social body that has taken meanings rather than conferred them. My male body does not confer masculinity on me; it receives masculinity (or some fragment thereof) as its social definition. Nor is my sexuality the irruption of the natural: it too is part of a social process (Connell, 1987: 83).

Connell (1987: 95) argues that practice presupposes structure. ‘To describe structure is to specify what it is in the situation that constrains, the play of practice’ (emphasis added). The consequence of practice is a transformed situation that is itself the object of new practice. Practice over time produces structure that constrains practice. In Connell’s theory, structure constrains but the enabling side of structure — how it might be used by the participants to communicate meaning, synchronise action, how it might form part of the matrix of intelligibility — is left undeveloped.

Connell draws his concept of hegemony from Gramsci (1992), who used the concept to describe the means of ideological control by the ruling class (Boggs, 1976). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as ‘the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women’ (Connell, 1995: 77). As a ‘configuration of gender practice’, Connell argues
that there is no one set of practices but a range of gender practices and there are many alternative masculinities that men may engage in and become. The idea of masculinities moves theoretically away from a totalising view of men as a more or less homogenous category to one of multiplicity.

While the potential for alternative masculinities is available, Connell argues that in fact one particular ‘configuration of masculine gender practices’—hegemonic masculinity—dominates and serves to subordinate all women and all men who practise alternative masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is not well defined by Connell. Kenway and Fitzclarence (1997: 21) describe the particular gender practices involved in hegemonic masculinity as follows:

At this stage of Western history, hegemonic masculinity mobilises around physical strength, adventurousness, emotional neutrality, certainty, control, assertiveness, self-reliance, individuality, competitiveness, instrumental skills, public knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity and rationality. It distances itself from physical weakness, expressive skills, private knowledge, creativity, emotion, dependency, subjectivity, irrationality, co-operation and empathetic, compassionate, nurturant and certain affiliative behaviours. In other words it distances itself from the feminine and considers the feminine less worthy.

Hegemonic masculinity is, however, not simply a dominant view that despises or undervalues the feminine. It is also dominating. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), drawing on and following the work of Connell, argue that the point of hegemonic masculinity is not simply that some masculine forms are ‘culturally exalted’ but that hegemonic masculinity is in important ways regulative:

In our view, it is reasonable to speak of a pervasive and powerful form of masculinity which is exalted and practiced across discourses and social contexts, which regulates thought and action, and which is therefore called hegemonic (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998:51).

Hegemonic masculinity is not simply a normative standard it regulates thought and action.
Limitations of the concept of hegemonic masculinity

As a practice theory, Connell’s approach suggests the dynamic interplay of intersecting, converging and contradictory social practices whose end result sums to the reproduction of a particular masculinist domination. However, I find there several difficulties with the theory and its application. These can be summarised as: (i) a lack of specificity as to what constitutes hegemonic masculinity; (ii) the lack of a theory of how hegemonic masculinity regulates; and (iii) the lack of sensitivity to, and an under-theorisation of, female agency. The very vagueness and openness of hegemonic masculinity means that there is a risk of using hegemonic masculinity as the sole interpretive lens such that almost any behaviour can be interpreted as a sign or consequence of hegemonic masculinity.

Lack of specificity

The concept ‘hegemonic masculinity’ often appears to be employed as a loose descriptive term with little analytical purchase for domination or as an alternative to patriarchy. Hegemonic masculinity appears to range without any clear differentiation between what might be considered locally prevalent forms of masculinity to ‘exemplary masculinity’. There is a slippage from predominant to dominant to hegemonic.

An example of this slippage despite the attempt to be precise is evident in the work of Skelton (1997). Skelton (1997; 351) acknowledges the problem of linking masculinist hegemony to her findings and she attempts to identify the specific hegemonic masculinities that young boys drew upon in the construction of their masculine selves. In her discussion of a set of primary school boys in a deprived area, she warns of the danger of “simply reading off” the aggressive and subordinating postures of the boys as part of the patriarchal rules and regulations that they were learning’ (Skelton, 1997: 355). Nevertheless, she argues that the boys ‘drew on the hegemonic masculinity of the local culture’ (Skelton, 1997. 359).
Skelton’s view that the boys were drawing upon a particular configuration of masculine actions extant in the local area seems reasonable. However, what is missing is an analysis of how those predominant local masculinities serve an overarching order of hegemonic masculinity. Her work appears to assume rather than test an overarching even universal masculinist hegemony common across class and culture in the United Kingdom or that all areas have, a priori, their own particular hegemonic masculinity.

This problem of lack of specificity is the result of the problem of the ‘deductive’ or ‘descending’ analysis (Foucault, 1976). Foucault (1976) argued that the researcher should be wary of taking an overall dominating principle such as hegemonic masculinity as ‘anything can be deduced from the general phenomenon [of the bourgeois class]’ (Foucault, 1976: 100). In a similar way, anything can also be deduced from the phenomenon of hegemonic masculinity. While hegemonic masculinity as a concept is an advance from the concept of patriarchy it still suffers from an insufficiently clear account of what it actually is and the tendency towards a unitary discourse.

Hegemonic masculinity and regulation

As well as an unclear definition and specific theoretical direction, Connell’s theory of practice does not elucidate precisely how hegemonic masculinity regulates the actions of people and dominates. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) are correct to suggest that for exemplary masculinity to become hegemonic, it must regulate and dominate. However, there does not appear to be any indication as to how this occurs. There is no indication, for example, of what a constraint is or how it actually constrains. How, why and under what circumstances, such discourses are taken up, resisted, followed and so on needs to be further examined empirically and theoretically. Moreover, as I have argued in the previous chapter, this constraint model is one sided and ultimately deterministic. The regulation of discourse appears to be identical to the idea of normative regulation discussed in the previous chapter. The theory of hegemonic masculinity needs to investigate how men dominate rather than simply assert that they do through the dominant discourse. It needs, for example, to identify how at an early age boys and girls
both pick up the notion that boys are the ‘kings of the castle’ and the girls are the ‘dirty rascals’ and in particular, how the teachers and parents allow this to occur.

Connell (1987), in his critique of socialisation is clearly aware of the problems of regulative approaches. However, in my view, he does not resolve or sufficiently elaborate the regulative links between hegemonic discourse and its production. Without elaborating this link, hegemonic discourse becomes a descriptive rather than an analytical concept and the concept runs the risk of failing to progress past the similar problems that beset the concept of patriarchy.

Lack of sensitivity to female agency

A second limitation of hegemonic masculinity is that by sensitising the researcher to the prospect of male power, it risks desensitising the researcher to female agency. The concept of hegemonic masculinity potentially allows for complex power positions of enablement and constraint. That is to say, girls and boys may at various times be more or less powerful, more or less constrained according to social circumstances. However, the interpretive lens of the approach appears to focus almost exclusively on male power and may blind the researcher to power plays between the genders.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity can provide a useful and orienting concept for empirical research. However, the same concept may become an *a priori* interpretative and an explanatory crutch. Because of its lack of specificity it can explain almost all behaviours. The researcher can undertake empirical work and interpret that work through ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and thereby demonstrate and support theory. Hegemonic masculinity threatens to foreclose rather than develop opportunities for empirical ‘surprise’ or interpretation.
Chapter Three: Gender and Identity

The work of Judith Butler

Judith Butler (1990; 1993) was among the first to take up systematically the notion that the major problem with previous gender research concerned essentialist ideas of gender and self and she sought to replace such theories with a theory of practice, or what she termed performativity. Butler (1990) argues that gender is a cultural construction and that ‘gender also designates the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established’ (1990, 7). She adds that gender is a ‘corporeal style or act’ (1990: 139) that has ‘no ontological status outside its performance’ (1990, 136).

Butler’s key argument is that gender is a set of performances, gestures and enactments that produce the appearance of a gender core:

Such acts gestures, and enactments, generally construed are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that otherwise purport to express are fabrications, manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (Butler, 1990, 136).

Gender is not a ‘stable identity’ but is an ‘identity tenuously constituted in time’ and instituted in a stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler, 1990: 140, emphasis original). Gender does not exist outside its enactment. Being male does not refer to some inner essence of maleness. Only in a secondary or derivative form does masculinity produce various attributes such as a liking for sport, drinking beer, talking tough etc., but masculinity is itself constituted by these attributes and constellation of practices. Butler uses the term ‘performativity’ rather than ‘performance’ as performance may misleadingly imply that there is a self, subject or mind directing these performances or enactments. Butler, like the other practice theories discussed earlier, argues that just as gender is produced through its enactment, so too is the subject.

Butler further argues that, rather than thinking that the subject produces the enactment of gender, it is ‘the subject, the speaking ‘I’ [which] is formed by virtue of having gone
through such a process of assuming a sex’ (Butler, 1993: 3). Butler suggests it is difficult to conceive of an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ who has not:

been subjected to gender where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves. (1993: 7).

For Butler, both the self and gender emerge from the matrix of gender relations. Butler does suggest that there is no singular gender matrix (1993:8) but she seems to take for granted that gender relations take some form of precedence over any other form of social relations and practices. In my view, this primacy of gender sits uneasily in her work as it is totalising (cf Hood-Williams and Harrison, 1998). Butler further argues, drawing upon the work of Freud, that gender reproduces the heterosexual world and that there is a regime of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. Butler’s importance for this thesis is, however, that she conceptualises gender and the self as socially constructed, their emergence as directly linked to each other. The processes of subjectification overlap with and are related to the processes of gender.

What is performed, is of course, not arbitrary or a set of ‘free floating attributes’ (Butler, 1990: 24) and the issue for Butler arises as to how gender is patterned or structured. That is why do some particular behaviours cohere to form this particular gender constellation with those particular desires and life conditions. Why, for instance, is there not a random collection of behaviours, acts or performances that obtain to a particular individual? Butler’s answer to this question is that gender is a ‘regulatory fiction’, a culturally restricted principle of order and hierarchy and that the substantive effect of the performance of gender is ‘compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence’ (1990, 24). She argues that ‘regulatory discourses’ pattern gender and that they obtain their power through repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices (Butler, 1993: 226-227, emphasis original). What authorises the production of the present is past practice.
Butler views these regulatory practices as norms (Butler, 1990, 136). People, according to Butler, act as they do as a result of norms. Norms are forces towards conformity and constraint. She argues, for example that the cultural matrix ‘requires that certain identities cannot exist’ and that such a requirement follows from cultural laws that ‘establish and regulate’ (1990: 17, emphasis added). Gender as performativity is ‘the forced reiteration of norms of a compulsory and constraining heterosexuality (Butler, 1993, 94). In these passages, the subject is the outcome of performativity of various sorts, including the performativity of gender and, secondly, the types of performativity – the reiteration of practices that occur depend upon norms, the authoritative set of practices. Butler further links the regulatory practices to that of intelligibility. She argues that the ‘very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered human beings. Norms of intelligibility create intelligible genders and identities (Butler, 1990, 16-17). Identity, intelligibility and gender are linked through normative or regulative practices.

**Criticisms of Butler**

The most cogent criticisms of Butler centre upon what Burkitt (1998) has described as her ‘lack of sociological vision’ (Burkitt, 1998). Certainly her work can appear as unnecessarily foundationalist: she seems to isolate gender and compulsory heterosexuality out of the vast number of available social practices that may well be equally important. As Hawkesworth (1997: 669) suggests, Butler posits ‘gender as the explanans of culture’. Hood-Williams and Harrison (1998) also argue that the claim for the precedence of gender relations and compulsory heterosexuality suggests a form of foundationalism and totalising conception of gender performativity. Butler certainly needs to, but does not adequately, explain why gender should be so isolated.

Others, such as Lloyd (1999), have also argued that Butler’s work is effectively deterministic. This, I believe, is in part due to the problems involved in her concept of norms and also due to her wish to expose gender as a construction, to demystify the
gender core. As a consequence, she recognises but fails adequately to consider how these fabrications are actually used in social interactions to achieve particular ends. As Burkitt (1998: 493) suggests ‘identity and agency of the subject is not fictive in the sense that Butler originally referred to it in *Gender Trouble*, as “falsehood” or “fabrication” but is a real force within social relations for the agent has the capacity to employ and to change moral precepts’. Identity may be a construct but it is also a force, both repressive and enabling. Butler only sees the negative and repressive aspects of gender, not the positive or enabling aspects of gender.

It is Butler’s conceptualisation of norms that lead her towards a functionalist and foundationalist position. Hood-William and Harrison (1998) have suggested that Butler’s concept of norms are ‘positively Parsonian’ and ‘familiar from functionalist anthropology and sociology’ and that the citation of norms ‘looks suspiciously like a return to early sociological notions of ‘sex role socialization’’ (Hood-William and Harrison, 1998: 89). Butler’s concept of the human subject is in danger of being a robotic reiteration of existing norms, thus producing a totalising and deterministic theory.

Butler provides an important step in developing a theory of socially constructed gender and self, however, her work founders on her problematical idea of norms and normative regulation. Butler’s theory, in spite of her claims to the contrary (Butler, 1993) is one of constraint, control and compulsion. Butler provides the important insight that norms produce gender intelligibility, however, her limitation was to consider that norms were regulative rules or maxims to be followed rather than a series of techniques used by people to render others and themselves intelligible.

As I have argued in Chapter Two, the problems of normative regulation are precisely the area the ethnomethodological approach of Garfinkel (1967) attempted to address. Gender is produced not as a result of passive obedience but through active participation. I shall now consider the ethnomethodological approach to gender of West and
Zimmerman (1987) in order to develop a framework for gender and self that is both enabling and constraining.

**Doing gender: West and Zimmerman**

Gender has been a focus of ethnomethodology since its inception. Garfinkel’s (1967) study of Agnes is a classic study of transsexualism and gender. Kessler and McKenna (1985) also provide an ethnomethodological approach to gender. West and Zimmerman (1987), however, take a remarkably similar approach to gender to that of Butler (1990) and argue that gender is only instantiated in its performance. However, their ethnomethodological approach avoids the problems of regulation, determinism and constraint that arise in Butler (1990; 1993).

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is a social accomplishment, a routine achievement by men, women, girls and boys as they engage in everyday life. In West and Zimmerman’s words, people ‘do’ gender. West and Zimmerman distinguish their approach from the approaches identified earlier, such as those examining psychological traits or essential difference. They argue that there is no thing, no gender essence, behind the production of gender. Gender is constituted in social interaction. To this degree, West and Zimmerman’s approach is very similar to that of Butler.

West and Zimmerman make a distinction between sex, sex category and gender. For West and Zimmerman, sex is a determination based on socially agreed upon biological criteria. By this definition, West and Zimmerman stress that the social process determine the criteria of sex. The sex category of a person is the outcome of the application of sex criteria. However, sex category is only ascribed through the application of agreed biological criteria in exceptional circumstances. Sex categorisation is routinely achieved through identificatory displays – particular clothing, posture and demeanour, ornamentation etc. As West and Zimmerman point out, sex and sex category are independent. A person can claim membership of a particular sex
category without the requisite, socially agreed sex criteria. Finally gender, for West and Zimmerman refers to the ongoing activity of managing one’s conduct according to the normative requirements of one’s sex category. Doing gender ensures that one is ascribed the correct sex category. ‘Gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership of a sex category’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 127).

West and Zimmerman argue that what ensures the continuation of gender (and the practices of sex categorisation) rests upon the fact that people’s activities are subject to comment by others and potential justification or rationalisation by the actor. People are accountable to others (and to themselves) for their activities. People are expected to be able, if called upon, to provide an account for their actions. To be unable to provide an account of one’s actions signals a lack of competence as a human being. The potential of being called to give an account may apply to any action of a person. However, it is argued that a person can be assessed against their sex category, and hence be held accountable, in virtually any given circumstance. Few, if any, other social practices are as ubiquitous and thereby as potentially relevant as gender. Thus, any action by a human can be potentially assessed for appropriateness on the basis on gender. As West and Zimmerman suggest, ‘doing gender’ is unavoidable. Following Goffman (1977), they suggest that virtually any situation can set the scene for a demonstration of gender difference. Goffman concludes that [such] situations do not so much allow for the expression of natural differences as for the production of that difference itself” (1977, 324; cited in West and Zimmerman, 1987: 138).

Finally, West and Zimmerman suggest that by doing gender, the social arrangements of gender are themselves reproduced. Just as the practice of speaking English reproduces English, doing gender, reproduces gender. Such social arrangements include relations of power. As suggested above, in virtually any situation, one’s sex category and one’s performance of gender can potentially be called into account. West and Zimmerman believe that such a system is legitimated by doing gender which renders the social arrangements e.g. which sex category does what, gets paid more etc.) normal and natural and ‘differences between women and men that are created by this process can then be
portrayed as fundamental and enduring dispositions’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 147).

West and Zimmerman’s argument can thus be summarised as there are two sexes in our society and that our categorisation of people into, and the membership of, one of the two sexes is congruent with the agreed upon determinants of sex. One’s actions or performance – one’s gender — can be subject to evaluation and accountability and this is the basic reason for the continuity of gender and the sex categorisation. Gender is the activities that are appropriate for that sex category and the doing of gender reproduces the social arrangements based on gender and sex category.

Most importantly, however, West and Zimmerman (1987) provide a way forward out of problems of constraint that bedevil Butler. For West and Zimmerman, the production of gender is not the result of a regime of regulative norms that compel, but the result of a ‘regime’ of accountability —the very grid of intelligibility. The primary reason for the continuation of gender is not simply regulative and constraining, with sanctions or the threat of sanctions for failing to act appropriately. It is also enabling. Such sanctions may support or repair intelligible social communication, but the production of gender provides a basis for intelligibility. The accomplishment of norms is doubly constitutive. Norms are made as fastening points to ‘fix’ intelligibility, and gender is one crucial element. As part of the grid of intelligibility, gender enables people to use its performance by others as normal and routine. People’s behaviours are thereby more comprehensible, and only the departures from the norm signal, and are used to signal, that something needs to be paid attention to. However, what works for the other also works for the self. A continuous and coherent gender also provides comprehensibility of oneself. Gender is part of the reflexive project of the self. To not know one’s gender is to not know how to act.

The ethnomethodological approach of West and Zimmerman (1987) provides the opportunity to view gender and its relationship to the self as enabling as well as constraining. In my view, it overcomes the limitations of Butler’s regulative approach
and provides an additional interpretive lens to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. The practices of gender may well reproduce hegemonic masculinity, but such reproduction is not simply, or only, through the constraints imposed by gender. Reproduction, I suggest is also the outcome of the routine, use-value of gender and its social interactive enablements. These productive aspects of gender must also be understood in order to understand the intractability of gender (Shapiro, 1991).

**The incitement of self and gender**

Gender is, as Butler identifies, deeply implicated in, and central to, the production of the self. As Giddens (1991) has argued, the self emerges from intersubjectivity and gender provides a partial, normative framework for its accomplishment. Gender forms one ‘element’ of the self and the reflexive project of the self draws upon gender and produces gender in the production of self. To reflect this interweaving, but also to place emphasis on gender, I will use Butler’s term gender-identity in this thesis.

In this section, I shall attempt to describe in theoretical terms how this process may occur. Schatzki (1996) argues that the ability of the agent to engage in social conduct emerges or forms from what Wittgenstein termed the ‘natural reactions’ of the body. Schatzki (1996: 84) attributes the term “incitation” to Foucault to describe this process and argues that:

Incitement occurs when the matrix of doings, sayings, and explicit propositional entities fastens upon, singles out, or calls attention to some already existing feature of human bodily existence and thereby intensifies, consolidates, transforms, or draws that feature out.

The point is that the child, in the process of becoming (Lee, 1998) must be so incited. It is a process of becoming human. The human being imperceptibly moves from infant to toddler, to young child and so on. A baby is not expected to, cannot undertake various tasks, to take certain responsibilities. Part of that incitement is the child’s own constructed reflexivity. Drawing on Giddens’ (1991) notion of ontological security,
gender may well provide an important, early ontological prop for the emerging child. West and Zimmerman argue that gender is virtually omnipresent and people can at any time be held accountable. Its virtual ubiquity may provide an important early framework for the child.

Incitement also avoids the idea of development whereby the person moves from incomplete child to complete adult. For as Lee (1998) points out, the adult, just as much as the child, is in a continual ‘becoming’, through the continuous social accomplishment of self, gender and social order. Moreover, the reflexive moment of attention is itself an incitement.

The critique of the concept of the essentialist self means that the self cannot be conceptualised as developing slowly and learning the meanings of words and making the connection between sounds and objects. Such a view presumes the self is in some way prior. However, the self and gender-identity do not exist prior to participation in world.

The theoretical and empirical study of how the subject seizes, appropriates and utilises these devices of meaning production is the subject of inquiry. As I have suggested, the work of Rose and Butler, but also others who attempt to define the limits and contours of discursive regimes, pay insufficient theoretical attention to this reflexive appropriation. The self is a temporal construct produced, reflexively wrought, in social interaction. Its ‘use-value’, so to speak, is that it enables interlocutors to reach certain ends, act, communicate specific things and so on. Within these social interactions, the protagonists draw upon social conventions, regulatory regimes and techniques, bringing a form of order and the possibility of recognition and communication.

Regulatory regimes are devices used in interaction whose own immediate use value is that, by being regular, they are understood. This may account for at least part of the apparent continuity and order in the social world.
As Lee (1998) argues, what it is to be human is a process of becoming. The development of a child from infancy through to adolescence and adulthood is neither the unfolding of genes nor a process of finding one’s true nature within oneself. Rather, it is the production of a human being more or less acculturated and competent in the ways of his or her world. Part of that enculturation is the production of a ‘mind’, an identity, a gender. The incipient potentialities of the infant and child are regulated, incited, disciplined and instructed to produce the human being. Such regulation and instruction may be intentional e.g. schooling), however, much may be unintentional and appear to be spontaneous and hence ‘natural’.

**Children doing gender-identity**

Cahill’s (1986) research illustrates one aspect of how children draw upon gender-identity to further their own ends. Through his research, Cahill argued that young children learn to distinguish themselves from babies by becoming, by referring to themselves as girls and boys. Cahill found that children referred to younger children or less socially competent children as babies but older and competent children as boys and girls. As Cahill (1986: 304) states:

> Through interactions…children apparently learn that in order to gain recognition as full-fledged persons they must avoid appearing and behaving in ways that contradict, in the eyes of others, their socially bestowed sex identity. Because children desire to be recognized as such persons, most children become increasingly concerned at doing so.

Doing gender or gender performativity demonstrates competence, demonstrates that they are not babies but persons. To be taken seriously as a person, the person must demonstrate competence. Doing gender is a ‘basic skill’. As West and Zimmerman point out, it is virtually omnipresent so the child has many opportunities to view its operation. One’s mother and father are gendered and so is everybody else. While for an adult, gender may be an unnoticed background to whatever we do, for the child it may
well be in the foreground. It is also relatively a straightforward differentiation into one of two groups, at least initially.

The development of a more or less consistent self-narrative that is ‘not wholly fictive’ is also a skill that demonstrates competence and ability to participate in social interaction.

From the findings of Cahill and the idea that gender is closely related to the development of identity and ontological security, it follows that children doing gender are doing more than simply aping or imitating adults. Moreover, adults are doing more than simply rewarding appropriate gender displays. Both adults and children are working at bringing gender and identity to bear on the emerging human being.

**Theoretical framework of the thesis**

The theoretical framework of this thesis takes as its point of departure the practice theory approach which posits both gender and self as social accomplishments, instantiated in action rather than existing prior to action. Such accomplishments are, following the work of Garfinkel, contingently produced for the routine ‘here and now’ purposes of social interaction. Normative standards, including the accomplishment of self and gender, provide part of the framework or matrix of intelligibility from which to act. Departures from the normative standards serve as indicators of motives and future action (see also Mills, 1971).

An important element of practice theory is the twin themes of enablement and constraint. Social practices simultaneously enable and constrain. As we have seen, particularly in the work of Foucault and Rose (1996), the identification and critique of constraint and its transgression has been a major theoretical focus within practice theory. Gender and identity clearly constrain and limit possibility and theoretical attention has been almost exclusively focussed on these qualities. However, my argument is that neither gender nor self can be fully understood as simply constraining. As I suggest
above, one of the possible reasons for the intractability of normative gender is precisely its role in producing the self and constituting an aspect of the framework of intelligibility. Secondly, as I have attempted to show, a failure to consider enablement leads also towards a deterministic and totalising theory.

Rose in his work *Inventing the Self*, is able to demonstrate at least some of the ‘devices of meaning production’—grids of visualization, vocabularies, norms, and systems of judgement’ that produce our experience. His work also emphasises how ‘these intellectual techniques … have to be invented, refined, stabilized, to be disseminated and implanted in different ways in different practices — schools, families, streets, workplaces, courtrooms’ (Rose, 1996: 25). However, as discussed above, Rose’s perspective is one of limitation of possible selves – how they are ‘implanted’. As I have attempted to demonstrate, this is one side of the story of constraint and enablement and in the next chapter, I demonstrate that it is a familiar story, even an orthodox story, in the educational literature.

From an ethnomethodological perspective, this limitation or reduction of possibility is precisely what conventions are attempting to achieve. There is a need to ‘fix’, from the plethora of possibility and possible interpretations, a contingently agreed social reality in order to proceed. However, given the vagaries of the human situation, such forces are themselves appropriated, resisted and utilised according to circumstance and interests, according to the everyday logic of the compelling reason (Coulter, 1989).

For many, the argument that gender is implicated and deeply rooted in the devices of meaning making is deeply pessimistic from the point of view of social and feminist change (cf Hawkesworth, 1997). Nor does it provide ready-made villains to mobilise political action. However, such an approach does explain both change – reinvention does not imply an exact copy; and stability —reinvention has definite links to past practice. This dilemma of ‘change and continuity’ is what Nielsen and Rudberg (1994) attempt to address.
Agreement to a social reality and the normative standards are not given but are accomplished. Such a social accomplishment implies negotiation, consensus, agreement, conflict, domination and contestation between people as they draw upon normative standards and work to fix reality. It is this process that I wish to examine with respect to the self and gender-identity. The construction of gender, the construction of self, should not simply be regarded or theorised as a passive acceptance or a robotic determination but as an appropriation, struggle, a conflict, a contest, a negotiation and a consensus. It is part of the ‘complex strategical situation’ described by Foucault (1978: 93) in his discussion of power. It is this conflictual and contested aspect of the social interaction that Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) refers to as the field. As Mahar, Harker and Wilkes (1990) argue, fields identify and delineate the areas of struggle.

This field of struggle, this complex strategical situation demands empirical investigation. We need to understand how gender and identity are seized and appropriated and how people participate in their own subjectification, their own selfhood as opposed to how people are simply passive recipients. The challenge for research is to understand their enablements, their affordances—what they permit and foster—and how people draw on and appropriate these in order to conduct their lives. This thesis is directed to this issue.

Exploring how children do gender-identity is one way of exploring the construction of self. In particular, we should be able to determine whether children appear to be active and eager participants in their own gender socialisation. Such a view would help to explain the apparent ‘naturalness’ of gender, how doing gender seems to emanate from the children, often against the wills, desires and hopes of their (generally middle class) parents and teachers.

It is also likely that as a skill, children are likely to get the doing of gender ‘wrong,’ by for example, the wearing of ‘inappropriate’ clothing, the wrong interests and so on. As I shall show, however, the children generally quickly learn the correct behaviour. It is not only that children may get things wrong and be corrected by each other, but their
behaviour may, to an adult’s eyes, be exaggerated or limited. For example, there may be activities, gender displays and so on which even the most conservative adult may concede are not particularly gendered that are clearly marked by children. It is this potential gender clumsiness that may provide a window into the doing of gender-identity.

Observing close up the working of gender-identity may also assist in explaining how gender empowers girls and boys differently in different setting and context. This may be due to the cultivation of different interests and tastes according to the successful incitement and enactment of gender, but gender-identity may also provide different affordances, different constraints and different enablements. That is to say, girls may spontaneously and therefore apparently naturally be better and predisposed to some things and worse at others than boys.

As a consequence of their relative inexperience in gender, I believe that children are particularly suitable subjects for the exploration of the accomplishment of the self. The school and classroom provide a useful site because the school is an area in which gender incitement and cultivation can be expected to occur within a discrete space. It is also an area where the different enablements and constraints of gender and their outcomes may be observed. I now will turn to the literature on gender-identity in the school.

In the following chapter, I discuss methods to explore gender-identity production in the classroom. In particular, I attempt to develop the method of ‘flashpoints’ to glimpse the production of gender-identity.
But if the commonsense understanding of schooling is bracketed and belief suspended, another reality emerges, the life of the playground. There, we believe, are constructed fragments of society the reality of which is unquestioned by the children who are its constructors and who know how to maintain it. It is a world of compacts and bargains, of the control of present and future by ritual, a world dominated by the absolute power of words once spoken to bring order into the world of actions and social relations, an order which needs other words to dispel. Here, if anywhere, lies true sociality, and rules need no sanction for their consent. Here there can be no crime in a world built by all for all (Marsh, Rosser and Harré, 1978: 3).

**Introduction**

In the previous chapter I argued that gender-identity provides important benchmarks or points of reference in the understanding and comprehension of the social world. Both gender and identity are routinely accomplished or ‘performed’ in day-to-day situations. Children face a set of challenges similar in the formation of gender and self to those they face with respect to language and speech. They must identify from a wide array of examples, counterexamples, contradictions, encouragements and discouragements the normative standards for gender and identity and perform them in the right contexts.

At one level, gender-identity formation could be mistaken with elements of developmental psychology approaches to gender-identity development in that the child’s gender-identity develops with experience. However, my frame of reference is social rather than psychological or maturational. I do not suggest an unfolding genetic blueprint and I am not interested in marking off various stages of normative development as the self ‘matures’. Instead, I am interested in how the self assembles from the social and how the emerging self participates in this assemblage. This assembling is inherently social as the ‘necessity’ for gender acquisition as well as the
specifics of gender-appropriate behaviour are social in character and are dependent on the current social practices in a given society.

In this chapter I discuss the major approaches to the study of gender and identity in one of the institutions where children spend a large amount of their time – school. As I will show, the theoretical approaches commonly drawn upon in the exploration of schooling systems also draw upon the same themes of constraint as the theories of self and gender outlined in the two previous chapters. Gender, in particular, and the school itself, are viewed as forces of constraint and social reproduction and there is a tendency to view children as passive victims and ‘dopes’ (Garfinkel, 1967) of these forces (Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, 1996).

The literature on gender-identity construction in the classroom among young children and on gender-identity and children is within the broad field of the sociology of education. I will focus on studies of children in pre- and primary school that shed light on the doing of gender and identity by children as it seems more likely that the performance of gender by such young children will be less ‘seamless’ and less accomplished as a result of their lack of experience and they will be less ‘expert’.

Much of the literature reviewed below has developed within the ‘new sociology of education’ (Young, 1971) and the critical and constructivist approaches that have followed. In my view, these approaches have in common a reproductionist perspective. While these approaches have generated some excellent empirical studies, they tend to emphasise the constraining and reproductionist qualities of schooling at the expense of the productive and enabling aspects of schooling. Their primary concern is to uncover and demonstrate the means by which schooling turns young children into the classed and gendered adults of their family and neighbourhood but reproduction is only one aspect of schooling. I will argue they understate the active participation of children in this process.

The reproductionist perspective suggests that there is a true development of the child and that constraints and limitations such gender, class and race are somehow independent rather than constitutive elements of the child. Such approaches do not
adequately consider the alternative side of constraint which is enablement, and how children seize upon gender and class to make identity. Most importantly, these approaches by focusing on reproduction do not adequately consider the school, the situation, the events and behaviours that are enacted as a site of production.

Reproduction and production are, like constraint and enablement, a duality. Through a productive process, people attempt to ensure the continuity, order and intelligibility of the world and thereby reproduce it. I use ‘reproductive theory’ to refer to those theories that provide some sort of regulatory mechanism that forces people to behave and act in particular ways. A ‘productionist’, however, views each situation as potentially inventive and participatory. People engaged in a particular situation must work to produce continuity, order and intelligibility using the social ‘tools’ and techniques at hand.

Taking a ‘productionist’ perspective is, I believe, to see each situation as a complex strategical and tactical situation from where each agent has a part to play. Thus, the children, the teachers, parents, bureaucrats draw upon and perhaps even work against the sedimented outcome and backdrop of these situations. The school itself and the schooling system, with its history and intended and unintended consequences, have parts to play. Here the story is not one simply of reproduction. This argument is developed in this chapter in dialogue with the literature which draws upon and emerged from the initial insights of the new sociology of education.

The themes of enablement and constraint in the school

Over the past century there have been a number of significant changes in the theoretical perspective of the school. The theoretical perspective has moved from one of a simple location for social mobility to one of social reproduction of inequality. The perspective has moved from one of the school as enabling to one that constrains. Foster, Gomm and Hammersley (1996) provide a useful historical introduction to the changing theoretical attitude towards schooling in their critique of broadly social constructionist empirical work in schools in the United Kingdom. Foster et al. (1996) identify four movements aimed at reducing social inequality
through schooling. The earliest approach argued that there was often a mismatch between social class and genetically determined intelligence, and programs were implemented to identify and provide individual, bright working class children better access to education. The objective was to remove customary and financial barriers against working class children access to schooling.

By the 1950s, intelligence was increasingly believed to be determined by the social environment rather than inherited. The lower educational achievements of working class children were seen to be a result of culturally deficient home backgrounds and there were calls for closer links between school and homes and compensatory educational programs. Sociologists also began arguing against streaming programs on the basis that they increased negative attitudes towards schooling among the working class and exacerbated educational attitudes between middle and working class children.

Foster et al. (1996) note that the work of sociologists up to this point was mostly concerned with increasing access of working class children to education. However, the rise of the new sociology of education in the 1970s began to question, not access to education, but the schooling system itself: ‘attention started to be given to the nature of the education that was on offer, to the sort of academic ability on which school achievement depends, and to the kind of learning schools fostered’ (Foster et al., 1996: 10). Sociological work began to be increasingly concerned with the school, not as a means for progression but as one of systematic domination.

The new sociology of education was also influential in the United States through the work of writers such as Michael Apple and Henry Giroux (Ladwig, 1996). The following quote from Bowles and Gintis (1976) sums up the new sociology of education from a Marxist perspective:

[T]he educational system does not add to or subtract from the overall degree of inequality and repressive personal development. Rather, it is best understood as an institution which serves to perpetuate the social relationships of economic life through which these patterns are set, by facilitating a smooth integration of youth into the labor force. This role takes a variety of forms. Schools foster legitimate inequality through the ostensibly meritocratic manner by which they reward and
promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy. They create and reinforce patterns of social class, racial and sexual identification among students which allow them to relate ‘properly’ to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production process. Schools foster types of personal development compatible with the relationships of dominance and subordinacy in the economic sphere… (Bowles and Gintis, 1976: 11).

The focus of the new sociology of education has become one of how existing class and social relations were reproduced and legitimated in the schooling systems. Rather than being vehicles for social mobility, the schools actually perpetuate and reinforce existing social and class relations. The classic work of Paul Willis (1979) *Learning to Labour* had a major influence in defining this approach.

The educational inequality focus of the new sociology of education has since moved from class to gender and to a lesser extent race and ethnic minorities. However, the underpinning perspective that schools reproduce and legitimate social inequality has remained. The key research question has been to demonstrate how girls and ethnic minorities were ‘denied their fair share of educational success; and the very nature of school knowledge and learning, currently constituted, discriminate against them’ (Foster *et al.*, 1996: 19). The theoretical perspective of the school has moved from a liberating perspective to one of repression. Foster *et al.* (1996) conclude their overview:

> With the new sociology of education…[s]chooling was no longer portrayed as a modernizing and enlightening force in the world but came to be regarded as itself part of the problem. It was seen as involving the imposition of the dominant culture, and function to reproduce the social-class structure (Foster *et al.*: 19).

The new sociology of education and since focusses almost exclusively on the problems of constraint. The school is seen as a site for detouring and constraining human capacities rather than mobilising those capacities. As Hunter (1996: 144) states, the classroom becomes the site that ‘allegedly reproduces social relations, by detouring human capacities into the forms required by middle-class hegemony, capitalism, racism, patriarchy and other enemies of complete human development’.
Hunter (1996) is implicitly referring to the normative thrust derived from the Enlightenment — the schools in the right hands, those of the critical theorists, could do better. As I have suggested previously, there is a relationship between reproduction, constraint and critical approaches. The key point is that the school should not only be construed as a site that simply reproduces and constrains, but that it must also be construed as a site of production and enablement.

The problematisation of boys in education

Over the past decade, masculinity has become a focus in the sociology of education (Mac an Ghaill, 1994) and a key political and theoretical development has been the problematisation of boys in education. There is currently considerable consternation and debate in the media, governmental reports and in the academic literature in Australia and the United Kingdom concerning the scholastic and behavioural outcomes of boys (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998; Epstein, 1998; Lingard, 1998; Skelton, 1998; Reed, 1999; Collins, Kenway and McLeod, 2000; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002; Lingard, 2003). Educational and behavioural problems of boys appear to be replacing the earlier view of boys’ educational advantage (Tyler, 1997).

The current debate is part of a political and strategic struggle to render the problematised conduct intelligible and understandable in particular, specified ways (Rose, 1996). Currently, what appears to be at stake is the legitimacy of the claims of disadvantage, the motives of those who are arguing the disadvantage and the most appropriate conceptual framework to explain or redress disadvantage (Lingard, 2003). The concept of hegemonic masculinity itself forms part of that problematisation; it is one interpretation vying for explanatory and political power.

The move from girls to boys as problematic has been relatively sudden. Walkerdine (1985) showed that in 1985 those behaviours attributed to girls such as ‘passive, nurturant femininity’ (Walkerdine, 1985: 220) were not those behaviours that were attributed to the successful child, which were activity and progression to autonomy.
She concluded that the chances of being both a ‘successful’ child and a girl was ‘remote’ and that the learning styles of girls were deemed to be ‘inadequate’ (Walkerdine, 1985; see also Clark, 1990; and below, p. 110; Tyler, 1997). Walkerdine now shows that many middle class girls now excel, and are expected to excel at school (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001). Increased attention is now being placed on boys’ education and mental health. Tyler (1997) reports the Australian Temperament Project (ATP), a ten-year study of infants and their children suggested that ‘maturity’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘pro-social behaviours’, characteristics said to be achieved by girls rather than boys, are what counts as competence in children. Moreover, Tyler argues ‘those same attributes that Walkerdine identifies as excluding girls from the ranks of competent children are precisely those cited by the ATP as the hallmarks of the competent child’ (Tyler, 1997: 76).

The challenge for the broadly reproductionist approach has been to explain this apparent failure of boys and the success of girls. That reproductionist theories can explain boys’ success is not surprising. However, it is more surprising that it can also explain boys’ poor achievement and how the domination of the boys can lead them to underachieve. This apparent paradox can be resolved by pointing out that only some boys – heterosexual, white and middle class in the main and who are the chief beneficiaries of hegemonic masculinity — actually achieve scholastically and enjoy school, while other groups, and most notably the working class boys, significantly underachieve as they are sidetracked into ‘laddish’ behaviour e.g. Willis, 1979; Walker, 1988; Parry, 1996).

On this point, Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, and its focus on men and boys has proved most useful and it has become very influential in the sociology of education over the past decade.

**Hegemonic masculinity and the school**

The move to focus on hegemonic masculinity in education is arguably the convergence of three themes. First, the influence of feminist theory and the new sociology of education suggest that there is some form of hidden agenda within
schools that advantages some, most or all boys and disadvantages girls. Secondly, there are the theoretical developments of Connell and the move away from categoricalism and essentialism e.g. Butler, 1990; Collins, 1990) and finally, as I have discussed above, there has been the emerging problematisation and focus on boys in schooling.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is currently one of the most important approaches that focus on the ways in which the schooling system reproduces and fosters a masculinity that ultimately dominates not only girls and women but also other masculinities as well. Throughout this period, researchers have attempted to identify ‘the hidden curriculum’ or ‘hidden agenda’ e.g. Evans, 1988; Clark; 1990; Martin, 1998) within the schools that serves to reproduce existing social structures. Hegemonic masculinity has been used as the key explanation for almost all behaviours in schools. As an explanation, it is often employed to explain what underpins the curriculum, what the teachers do, the schooling system and what the boys and girls do. It also appears to have become the key interpretive tool or template of boys’ and girls’ actions.

In Australia, Evans (1988) provides an excellent, early study utilising the masculinist hegemony approach. Evans undertook an ethnographic study of two schools in the La Trobe Valley, Victoria. One school was located in a town and the other within a farming district. Evans observed daily classroom life and parent councils and he interviewed teachers, parents and children at the two schools.

Evans’ theoretical perspective was critical of the reproduction theory of Althusser and Bourdieu (Evans, 1988: 6) and attempted to develop a theory whereby practices such as the categorisation into feminine and masculine are constructed as the human actor engages in everyday activities, drawing upon previous practices and their material and intellectual resources. To this end, his key analytical concept was that of agenda. He defines it as follows:

An agenda is formed of ideas, issues and problems flowing from previous practice which shapes engagement with the immediate practice. Gender is one element of the continuous formation and reformation of the agenda (italics in original Evans, 1988: 7)
Evans argued that the entire agenda is generally set by adults, but he points out that students are not necessarily passive recipients; they may resist, struggle and adjust to the agenda. In a similar way to the hidden curriculum theorised and described by Clark (1990) and Martin (1998: see below, on page 78), the agenda serves to identify what is going on in the schools beneath the curriculum, debate, discussions and decision-making contexts of the schools.

Evans argued that individuals have differing degrees of power to form and set agendas. Such power is derived from their position and experience but are modified, constrained and enabled by gender, class and ethnicity. For Evans, ‘knowledge is structured in the pursuit of individual power’ (Evans, 1988: 13) and agendas are used by individuals to structure their discourse and ‘represent the boundaries of knowledge and values which are allowed into the discourse’ (Evans, 1988: 53).

For the purposes of this study, Evans is of most interest when he considers pupil knowledge and school agendas and discerns that there is a powerful gender agenda which, he argues, is a central part of school life. Based on his observations, Evans argued that students are exposed to an adult agenda about gender division of labour. Through day-to-day activities, children come to see that men play an important role in breadwinning and women are caring mothers. He suggests that in pre-school, it is mainly female teachers and mothers who are involved and this provides ‘another legitimation to the children’s developing view of a gender segregated world. The occasional father who performs a duty session is insufficient to alter this view’ (Evans, 1988: 92).

In contrast to the position of women in schools, Evans argued that men are in a dominant position and control the school as most of the senior positions at that time were held by male teachers, despite the children themselves often having a female teacher. ‘The primary school is analogous to the family with the male staff as “fathers” - having less contact, more power, authority and importance - and the female staff as “mothers” — more contact, subordinate and of limited importance’ (Evans, 1988: 93).
Evans study was important insofar as it highlighted the centrality of the gender division of labour for the development of gendered identities within schools. His interest is, however, not the direct effect on school performance per se but on the development of gender-identity itself and its possible implications for children in their adult life.

Not surprisingly, given the academic and popular problematisation of boys, much attention has also turned to the role of sport in the development of masculinities and schooling (Connell, 1995; Skelton, 1996; 1997, 2000; Renold, 2001; Hickey, Fitzclarence and Matthews, 1998; Wright, Weekes, McGlaughlin and Webb, 1998). Renold (2001) shows how many boys must negotiate and balance the ‘female’ pursuit of academic success and studiousness against the ‘masculine’ pursuit of sporting prowess. Connell (2000) uses the term ‘exemplary masculinity’ to identify particularly popular and exalted models of masculinity (Connell, 2000) such as sporting heroes and media representations of men. Skelton (2000) argues that masculinist hegemony within the schooling system leads most boys to be preoccupied with sport and physical prowess rather than academic achievement, and Mills and Lingard (1997) suggest that boys’ choices in subjects in later years reflect more an overweening masculinist pride than ability. Thus boys choose subjects such as mathematics not because they are particularly skilled but because it is perceived as a hard, masculine subject. Those boys consequently gain poor marks in the subject (Mills and Lingard, 1997).

According to this approach, teachers and schools are witting or unwitting media of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is one aspect of a broader ‘hidden curriculum’ where ‘hidden curriculums are covert lessons that schools teach, and they are often a means of social control’ (Martin, 1998: 495). I am suggesting that such a view of the hidden curriculum derives from the basic ideas of the new sociology of education that schools function as a socialising, disciplining and regulatory process to reproduce and legitimate existing social inequalities. At school, boys learn and practise their superiority, and the superiority of the hegemonic forms of masculinity. Girls on the other hand learn their inferiority.
Hegemonic masculinity and the assumption of boys’ superiority

I have discussed in the previous chapter some of the theoretical problems with Connell’s theory of practice (see Chapter Two, page 50). One of the key problems with the application of the theory in the educational literature appears to be an assumption that boys are in some way superior or favoured in the educational system and that the interpretive lens is turned to service this assumption rather than to test or explore it. I also discussed in the previous chapter that there is often a lack of research sensitivity to female power.

A key challenge for the researcher of hegemonic masculinity is to identify those aspects of school life that may explain how boys rather than girls learn the ‘right’ lessons in the school that lead them to dominance and success whereas girls learn their place under hegemonic masculinity. For hegemonic masculinity to be reproduced then, in relative terms, most girls must ultimately ‘fail’ in some way and at least a sizable proportion of boys must succeed. The rising success of girls in school provides considerable tension for the researcher to identify what it is that leads to these ultimate differential outcomes.

The underlying assumption of such research appears to be that ‘whatever the boys are doing, they are doing something right’ while the girls success is likely to be short term. The ‘lessons’ the boys learn is that, notwithstanding any evidence to the contrary, they are superior. The ‘lessons’ the girls learn is that they are inferior despite any evidence to contrary and they are not included in the development of any masculinist skills required for future success.

In the following, I provide four examples from what I consider to be overall sound rather than poor studies, but which nevertheless appear to assume that whatever the boys are doing will lead them to greater long term success and ultimately appeal to an a priori hegemonic masculinity as an explanation. In each case, the interpretation of the researchers may be correct, however, at first glance at least, each requires far more elaboration to demonstrate their point satisfactorily.
The first example is drawn from Millard’s (1997) work. Millard, like many others, notes the poorer average literacy rates and attitudes to reading of boys. However, she also notes that boys are more likely to use a computer and are consequently ‘differently literate’. She concludes:

Moreover, girls’ current superiority in reading may constitute no more than a short-term gain. At home, boys, particularly white middle class boys, are acquiring newer, technological forms of literacy more rapidly...[and] it is boys who have greater facility with all forms of electronic media (Millard, 1997: 46-47).

Girls’ superior traditional (and conventionally recognised) literacy skills are dismissed out of hand and Millard does not report any evidence as to why and how, extensive practice and knowledge of how to play ‘shoot ‘em up’ computer games advantages the boys.

A further example of this kind of reasoning is offered by Reay (2001) in her case study of children in a London primary classroom in which girls are assumed to be inferior and masculinist hegemony is used as an explanatory backdrop. Reay (2001) shows that girls take up a variety of gender positions at school, ranging from working class ‘spice-girls’, ‘tomboys’, and the ‘limited and limiting discourses’ of ‘girlie girls’ and the middle class ‘nice girls’.

Reay appears to take for granted that the gender positions of the ‘girlie girls’ and the ‘nice girls’ are limited and limiting. She focuses on her finding that the girls at various times or circumstances believed that it was better to be a boy (while no boy admitted that, at times, it was better to be a girl) despite girls achieving better results than boys and perceiving themselves to be harder workers and more mature. From this Reay argued that girls perceived themselves to be inferior to boys. The cause of this was given as the prevalent discourses of the ‘prevailing masculinist hegemony’ (Reay, 2001: 158).

Reay provides important insight into British girls’ culture in early primary school and I do not wish to argue that her interpretations and conclusions are necessarily wrong. However, she has not demonstrated those interpretations adequately and her
work appears to be predicated on an *a priori* assumption that what the girls are doing is in some way ultimately inferior to what the boys are doing; the evidence is marshalled accordingly. For example, it does not necessarily follow that because girls at times believe it is better to be a boy that they see themselves as inferior. Such statements and their contexts need to be examined since no girl in the study stated that boys were better and the girls who thought that it was better to be a boy were mostly tomboys. The assumption that inferiority and the ‘limiting discourses’ is based on linking their current behaviour with predicted future adult outcomes and inequalities. Such linkages may not be all that direct and clear.

Thorne (1993) provides a further example and appeals to notions of hegemonic masculinity to explain that for boys, girls and the objects associated with girls, were the ‘*ultimate source of contamination*’ (1993, 74). The boys in her study would label low status boys or boys with physical disabilities as ‘girls’. However, she found that for girls, boys were not the ultimate source of (all) pollution and they did not label low status or girls out of favour as ‘boys’. Thorne identified an interesting asymmetry between girls and boys. Boys, in Thorne’s study more strongly believe in the contaminating effects of girls than vice versa and also take up more playground space. Such an asymmetry, in all likelihood, signals something significant and certainly something worth exploring and is strikingly similar to that found by Reay (2001). It would seem that no boy admits or believes that girls are better than boys, while girls, under some circumstances believe that boys are better than girls.

Thorne’s explanation for this asymmetry was that ‘these pollution rituals suggest that in contemporary U.S. culture even young girls are treated as symbolically contaminating in a way that boys, as a group, are not’ (Thorne, 1993: 74). This again appears to be overly simplistic. We should not directly and more or less immediately link this asymmetry to what occurs in the adult world, but consider how this asymmetry is relevant to the logic and practices of the children themselves. We should not immediately link such views of the children so directly and unproblematically to a certain reproductive form. There is a need to show the ‘genealogy’ of the linkage between adult and child, rather than simply assuming one.
A final example of assuming girls’ inferiority is provided by a recent study of gendered conflicts in secondary school by Lahelma (2002). Lahelma describes a situation where a ‘loner’ boy begins to be teased by two girls but one stops the activity with a cry ‘don’t tease him’. This embarrassed the boy and Lahelma interprets the embarrassment in the following passage:

> Being teased by girls seems to be an exceptionally humiliating situation for a boy and questions his masculinity. ‘Doing masculinity’ appears to involve the ability to deal with and engage in joking relations….To be a target for joking of ‘mere’ girls is most degrading. (Lahelma, 2002: 301 emphasis added).

An important survival skill for boys in Australia is to be able to ‘take a joke’ and that to be teased by girls may be particularly mortifying. However, how is it that the girls were ‘mere’ girls? What is the link between boys’ beliefs, hopes and fears and masculinist hegemony? These matters need to be examined more fully, not taken as given.

The reproduction of masculinity hegemony and the assumption of girls’ inferior position becomes almost a priori the explanation of the behaviours of the children. While there is fine research from within this approach, often researchers seem intent on explanation of the findings, of interpreting them within a given perspective rather than subjecting their observations to more critical examination and looking at alternative interpretations. Often it seems that the research was provided to demonstrate what the writer knew all along and there are few surprises, contradictions or struggles. Hegemonic masculinity theory as practiced is often a simple and, at times, a priori explanation.

Masculinist hegemony, even though it opens up the possibilities of alternative masculinities, is in practice, insufficiently open to the contradictions and conflicts of social practice. While the concept is sensitive to potential relations of power exercised by boys and broader social institutions that may support such powers, it is far less sensitive in practice to those powers exercised by girls, women and such authorities that seek to intervene in current gender practices. One way forward is to show how gender, through its enablements for both girls and boys, and the
participation of the children, ultimately produces hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity should not be conceptualised simply as a regulative regime.

**The school as a site of production**

Schooling practices cannot be so easily tied or reduced to a mysterious, hidden force of social reproduction as the hegemonic and reproductionist approaches suggest. The school may be totalising but it is not a total closed system. There is a real danger in such work of overemphasising the power of the school, in much the same way as Foucault has been accused of overemphasising the power of total institutions (Giddens, 1984).

School practices and their effects seem too contingent, shifting and contradictory to be captured by such frameworks (Hunter, 1994). School children themselves bring to school their own ‘agendas’; they negotiate, conflict and converge with each other, their teachers and the schooling systems, in what Foucault describes as a ‘complex strategical situation’ (Foucault, 1978). The school is a site of productivity as well as one of reproduction.

Walkerdine (1984) argued that reproductionist approaches are often overly simplistic, determinate and linear. She argues that disciplinary power, the forces of regulation, do not operate on the individual as an external power but through the individual:

> It is important to point out that the processes of normalization are not the product of some repressive superpower hell-bent on keeping people in their place. That is disciplinary power does not function through overt repression but *through the covert reproduction of ourselves*. Thus, liberals, radicals, feminists alike will advocate the child-centred pedagogy and will teach and learn within its orbit. Education is therefore more contradictory than suggested by those theories of ‘reproduction’ which assume a determinate or linear relation between schooling, which underplay it as a *site of productivity in its own right*. (Walkerdine, 1984: 196, emphasis added).
Walkerdine draws attention to the complex social interactions in the school and the classroom, between the range of forces operating at this site – teachers, school practices, parents, students and so on as they negotiate, interpret, interact and conflict. She also points to the centrality of the desire, need and demand of the production or assemblage of self in the process of normalisation. Following Rose, I suggest that normalisation, amongst other things, is about the assemblage of a ‘normal’, intelligible self, a subject of a certain kind. Through the production of the self, through the fixing of the routine and everyday, reproduction occurs.

**Making gender-identity in the early years of school**

Following Walkerdine (1984), I conceptualise the school as a site of productivity and consider how gender-identity is produced and how the children participate in or incite its production. In distinction to the hegemonic masculinity approaches discussed above, the aim is not to focus on constraint and reproduction but to foreground participation and production.

The early years of schooling provide an important source for the making of gender-identity. Young children are less socialised and arguably less accomplished than adults and older children. The children must make their way in the schoolroom and schoolyard. To the degree that this holds, it should be a key site of gender-identity production. Young children have been selected for discussion because it is likely that if gender-identity production is a significant part of the ‘developmental task’ placed on the child, then we should expect to see children engaging in a wide variety of activities that develop and incite their experiences and knowledges of gender-identity. Like any skill, it may be expected that the children are also potentially more likely to get gender ‘wrong’ or to exaggerate. This means that it may be possible to better view the production of gender-identity, to see its workings.

In the following sections, I discuss a range of research that may shed some light on young children making gender in the classroom. My perspective on these studies is to identify how young children drawing upon their available flawed resources to
produce gender-identity and how they make use of gender’s simple dichotomous and relational nature to differentiate, assemble and reinvent gender and themselves.

A survey of the research yields an extensive literature on hegemonic masculinity and reproductionist theories. In the following, I attempt to identify some of the key themes within that literature that may shed light on gender-identity production. In presenting these themes, some of the literature has been reinterpreted from the perspective of gender-identity production. These themes are: children making gender at pre-school children; gender segregation and border work among primary school children; visibility and attention in the classroom; resistance and cooperation; and gender differences in scholastic and behavioural outcomes.

**Children making gender at pre-school**

Two Paley’s (1984) *Boys & Girls: Superheroes in the Dolls Corner* and Davies (1989) *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Pre-school children and gender*, provide important, detailed insight into gender-identity production at pre-school and I focussed on these two pre-school works.

**Paley: Superheroes in the doll’s corner**

Paley, a celebrated US kindergarten teacher, provides a case history of her experience teaching a 1977 class of kindergarten children. Her work does not attempt to test a theoretical insight but simply observes and describe the children’s and her own activities and experiences over the year. Her observations are, however, ones of gender-identity production by the children. Her view is that the children work to produce differences between girls and boys, often — even typically — against the intention of the teacher and that the motivation for such differences lies in the production of certainty.

Paley (1984: ix) opens her case history with the following observation and summary:
Kindergarten is the triumph of sexual self-stereotyping. No amount of adult subterfuge or propaganda deflects the five-year-olds passion for segregation by sex. They think they have invented the differences between boys and girls and, as with any new invention, must prove that it works. The doll corner is often the best place to collect evidence. It is not simply a place to play; it is the stronghold against ambiguity.

When the children separate by sex, I, the teacher, am more often on the girls’ side. We move at the same pace and reach for the same activities, while the boys barricade themselves in the blocks, periodically making forays into female territory.

She continues:

The boys have been trying to leave the doll corner since they came to kindergarten. They are superheroes now – or feel they should be (1984: x).

On the basis of her observations, Paley argues that the children are constantly scanning their environment for cues in order to define and develop their identities as boys or girls. This active engagement leads to a wide variety of gender-segregated behaviours. This gender-identity work pervades not only free play, but also whether the child hop (boys) or skip (girls) from the tables, clap in rhythms (boys) or sing louder (girls), spontaneously ‘work’ at the tables (girls) or do so as a result of protracted negotiation (boys).

Her work is an open dialogue with the reader concerning these observations and her struggle disciplining, motivating and engaging the boys of her class to do kindergarten work – cutting and pasting, drawing and colouring, sitting still and so on. The girls as a group appear to do all these things with comparative ease. Drawing the boys into kindergarten work is a greater challenge.

The opening quotation is significant. Paley observes that the children are doing the stereotyping against her designs, that the girls are like her and that the territory is female and finally that the boys are trying to leave the home corner. Whatever is going on for the boys and the girls, a significant component has been brought to the pre-school classroom by the children. The schoolroom is a new site and provides new materials for gender work. Paley can certainly be seen as aiding and abetting
gender-identity of boys and girls at times, but in a variety of ways she deliberately attempts to subvert that process and her work can be read as a reflection on her attempts to do just that, particularly with the boys.

Secondly, her reflection that the girls move as she does, thinks as she does, suggests that her own gender has an important effect on the activity of the classroom. The girls identify with her, and she with them. The territory, according to Paley, is female. The boys do not identify with her (nor she with them). Their world is not a world of cutting and pasting, colouring at tables and home corner but a world of blocks, superheroes and rough and tumble. Paley believes that the boys were trying to leave the home corner. Since they identify as boys and perceive the home corner and the cutting and pasting, and the lessons as female, this is perhaps not surprising. The boys’ business is elsewhere and the boys who initially cut and paste quickly learn that their business as boys is not at the tables.

In Paley’s work, the teacher, the parents and the children are active participants. That a child is wearing a dress rather than trousers, that boys hop to the tables while girls skip to the tables, that boys are less often told to speak more quietly than girls despite being far noisier and boisterous are possibly important findings and activities. However, we should not posit that these activities are simply a product of the teacher or parent design or ignorance. As Paley has argued, the kindergarten year revolved around trying to get the boys to the cutting tables – to do kindergarten work, to be quiet and so forth.

Paley sees the home corner not simply as the best place to play but as a 'stronghold against ambiguity'. Paley does not develop this point, however, the implication is that the home corner provides some form of certainty where the children know how to act, know how to be. This further suggests that the home corner provides structure and ontological security to the children. Gender-identity, grounded in the mundane, provides ontological security and a position from which to make sense of the world and act in the world. In her account it appears that the children are participating in the making of gender-identity and are engaging in some form of ontological work. This gender-identity work has not been imposed directly by the teacher who appears to work, at times, against the actions of the children.
Davies (1989): *Frogs and Snails*

Davies (1989) provides a ground-breaking study of Australian pre-school children and gender. Davies theoretical concerns are similar to those presented in this thesis. Her view is that:

> Children learn to take up their maleness or femaleness as if it were an incorrigible element of their personal and social selves, and they do so through learning the discursive practices in which all people are positioned as either male or female. By basing our interactions with children on the presumption that they are in some unitary and bipolar sense male or female, we teach them the discursive practices through which they can constitute themselves in that way (Davies, 1989: x).

Davies (1989) undertook a series of observations and interviews with pre-school children. In the first stage of her study, she read and discussed feminist stories with eight four-and-five-year-old children over an intensive period. In the second stage of her study, she observed pre-school children in four pre-school centres. The focus of her study was the ‘incorrigibility of gender’. She had observed that despite the many efforts by teachers and parents to encourage children otherwise, little girls and little boys seemed to act like little girls and boys respectively. As she mused ‘What is so important, I wondered, about getting one’s own and other people’s gender right? Why does it matter so much’ (Davies, 1989: ix).

Her work on the distortions that children produce to make feminist fairy stories fit established gender stereotypes is particularly instructive. In one example, Davies (1989) presents them the story of the *Paper Bag Princess*. The story is about a princess heroine who saves the prince from the dragon. After the prince rejects her because she has become un-princelesslike, (becoming dirty and wearing only a paper bag in the process of saving the prince), she renounces him and runs happily off into the sunset.

Both boys and girls found this ending unsatisfying. The three girls’ understandings of the story show that they identify with the princess. One girl sees the prince as rude and agrees that she should not marry the prince, *at least for the time being.*
Another prefers the princess at the beginning of the story. The third believes that the prince was right to reject the princess but she would have preferred them to marry.

The boys, on the other hand, have a more difficult problem. The character they are obliged to identify with, Prince Ronald, is not a hero and is rude. Three of the four boys interviewed would like to be like Prince Ronald, the fourth boy wishes to be like the dragon the ‘smartest and fiercest dragon in the whole world’ (Davies, 1989: 62). None of them identify with the princess. Three of the four boys note the sporting attire of Prince Ronald and two of them stated that it demonstrates a form of prowess: the prince skillfully clings to his tennis racket and has a gold medal for playing tennis.

In these accounts we see the children reworking the feminist tale. The feminist tale violates established gender roles and story lines of fairy tales and the children attempt to render the story into the known established gender order and the world of the fairy tale. The story is ‘wrong’ and the children work to put it right, according to their understandings. We see at that, even at this early age, children have a clear and gender conservative idea of what constitutes appropriate gender roles for girls and boys and they act to repair the anomalous story.

Davies observations and interviews with pre-school children demonstrate the ‘incorrigibility’ of gender and the active participation of the children in the creation of gender-identity. She ultimately answers her question as to why it is so important for children by arguing that ‘within the discursive practices made available to the children, the only comprehensible identity available to them is as ‘boy’ or ‘girl’, ‘male’ or ‘female’ (Davies 1989: 141). Davies argued that the children learn that having a particular set of genitals was insufficient. To be male or female, they needed to demonstrate their gender alignment through action. Davies argues that children need to be given access to a discourse that ‘frees them from this burden’ (Davies, 1989: 141).

Davies’ work is important and she clearly recognises the participation of the children in the making of gender-identity. However, in her conclusion there is an almost exclusive emphasis on the constraining and burdensome aspects of gender-identity.
She does not adequately consider the implications for the children of having a comprehensible identity for themselves. Gender-identity may constrain but it may well be a greater burden to not have a gender-identity.

**Other studies of pre-school children**

A series of other studies have also identified the role of the children in the making of gender-identity in pre-school. Durkin and Nugent (1998) examined kindergarten children’s predictions of the sex of a person carrying out a variety of activities, the children’s view as to whether men or women were better able to carry out the task and finally, whether when they were an adult they could carry out the task. Durkin and Nugent found that the children’s predictions and expectations were strongly stereotyped at this age. Durkin and Nugent believed that the children played an active role in the production of the stereotypes, *seeking out confirmation of their own views of gender*. They concluded that, ‘rather than distorted input “shaping” children’s perception of the world around them, children’s sex stereotyped expectations find confirmation in the distorted gender distributions of television’ (Durkin and Nugent; 1998; 398).

Neppl and Murray (1997), in an American study, studied the play activities of pre-school boys and girls. Their review of the literature found that there were a variety of differences in the play activities of boys and girls. These differences included:

- Boys and girls segregated in play;
- Greater social interaction in same sex dyads;
- Girls were more likely to make indirect demands, use persuasion and co-operative behaviour whereas boys were more likely to make direct demands and threats; and
- The children had preferences for sex-typed toys and play themes and role enactments.
Reproductionist approaches

Parents, teachers and the school system may also serve to reinforce, support and encourage particular gender-identity formations. For example, Wellhousen and Yin (1997) argues that the kindergarten teachers play an important role in reproducing gender-identity. Wellhousen and Yin (1997) studied the role of a kindergarten teacher in reinforcing gender-identity in one predominately Hispanic class in USA. Using a sophisticated observational technique they videotaped children in read-aloud sessions of a series of books selected by the researchers as illustrating men and women in non-traditional roles. They found that during these sessions boys received more attention from teachers than girls. Unfortunately Wellhousen and Yin did not provide any detail on the type of attention received by the boys so it was unclear whether the increased attention was favourable to the boys or in response to the boys’ behaviour.

Martin (1998) provides a ‘hidden curricula’ perspective on pre-school children in a study on how gender was embodied at pre-school. Martin argued that gender was not only discursive or symbolic in nature, but that to ‘do’ gender effectively, the body must act, be comported and adorned in gender appropriate ways.

Martin found age and gender differences in the dressing-up by children. Three-year-olds participated in more experimental modes of dressing up that crossed gender than five years olds and girls dressed-up more than boys. Martin also found major differences in the activities of the children. Boys were noisier, engaged in far more relaxed as opposed to formal behaviours than girls, and were more likely to engage in activities such as building blocks, climbing and crawling.

Martin also found differences in the ways teachers treated the children. Martin found that teachers sometimes encouraged the girls to the tables and were more likely to reprimand girls for relaxed behaviours than boys. Although Martin did not provide the extent and nature of the reprimands in her study, she did find that girls were told to speak more quietly than boys almost three times as often while boys were given ‘bodily instructions’ almost three times as often (Martin, 1998: 505-506).
found that 94% of physical contacts by teachers to control the physicality of the child were with boys.

The findings of Martin (1998) closely mirror those of Paley (1984). The girls are quieter and engage in dress-ups more while the boys are more physical and noisier. The higher level of experimentation in dress by younger children may reflect a project of differentiation as much as it may reflect a hidden socialisation process. The key issue is the cause or reason for these differences. Martin from her ‘hidden curricula’ perspective sees the actions of the children as a product of the school (Martin, 1998: 496). Girls are put into dresses by their parents and girls are told to keep quiet by the teachers. The point I wish to emphasise here is not that teachers and parents have no role in gender production and reproduction. They clearly do. It is rather, to suggest that their role may be overemphasised and that the participation of the children in the process is under-theorised or under-examined empirically.

The contribution of studies of pre-school children

The pre-school literature presented suggests four main findings:

*The children have previously begun to differentiate themselves on the basis of gender.*

As we have seen from Paley (1984) in particular but also supported by Davies (1989) and Martin (1998), the children are developing different interests based on gender. These interests are, as Paley suggests ‘triumphs of stereotyping’. Such differentiation appears to be not simply, or only, the direct result of teachers’ or parents’ efforts.

*The children appear to be active participants in the making of gender.*

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6 Martin (1998; 498) does admit that the children may insist on wearing some clothes and object to others. However, its import is glossed over and the focus remains on the parent.
School practices may, and are expected to foster, and discipline and incite children’s gender-identity. However, even at pre-school age, the children are active participants in the invention or accomplishment of gender. It would appear that, at pre-school, they seek out to confirm their own views on gender e.g. Durkin and Nugent, 1997). Children are not passive recipients of teachers and parents.

The children resist the interventions of the teachers

Children are not only are active participants but they also appear to have at least a fledgling idea of how to perform gender. Davies (1989) shows for example that the children know how a fairy tale ‘should’ turn out. They also resist alternative readings. A key focus of Paley’s effort was to get the boys away from the building blocks and to the cutting tables.

While their particular intervention efforts may be criticised as being ineffective and more effective methods may be devised e.g. see MacNaughten, 2000), it nevertheless shows that much of what the children do is not necessarily either a direct result of teacher or intentional, authoritarian school practices

Making gender as a stronghold against ambiguity

Paley suggests that the children participate so determinedly and in such stereotyped and rigid ways as a stronghold against ambiguity. Paley does not develop this view; however, this is very consistent with the idea that gender forms part of the ontological framework. Children may depend upon gender as a means of understanding and participating in the world. This certainly suggests that the doing of gender is very intractable at this age and the children may resist alternatives, as much of the work of Davies (1989: 1993) shows.
Awareness of gender, segregation and differences appear to be well established among pre-school children who seek out confirmation of their gender in the environment. These studies show, at the very least, that children at a very young age already demonstrate and seek out gender-identity differences. They choose sex-typed toys and roles and are willing to change their behaviour with new found knowledge of gender appropriate behaviour. It would appear that the children come to school with an idea of gender-identity and continue to work on this identity in pre-school.

On the other hand, the participation of children in gender-identity development appears to be under-theorised. Even Davies (1989), who shows that children do participate in gender-identity, sees gender-identity as a burden. There is little attempt in the pre-school literature to consider the enabling aspect of gender-identity as well as its constraints. What is required is to consider the making of gender not only as a constraining force upon the passive actor but also a means partly by which the actor may understand and make sense of the world and him or herself.

**Gender segregation and ‘borderwork’ at primary school**

It is well known that children do segregate by gender and even the most casual observation of school children reveals that girls and boys spend most of their time in single sex groups in primary and secondary schools (Prendergast and Forrest, 1997). Schools have historically segregated the children. King (1978) in a classic study found that teachers routinely segregated children by gender. Roles and lists of students, children’s line ups, and hooks for clothing and paraphernalia were all differentiated according to gender. King found that teachers would at times use competition between boys and girls as part of an activity or motivation. However, such segregation also comes from the children themselves. Croll and Moses (1991) in their overview of gender segregation or differentiation found that, like the pre-schools of Martin (1999) and Paley (1984), primary schools ‘are made up of little boys and little girls rather than little children and reference to this and the use of it

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7 This I believes leads her to underestimate the importance of gender-identity and the resistance to change the children exhibit in her subsequent work, *Shards of Glass* (Davies, 1993).
for organization, control and class management, is a routine feature of teaching in primary school’ (Croll and Moses, 1991: 274). Lloyd and Duveen (1992: 10) further suggest ‘that the most sexist persons in reception class are the children themselves’. The gender segregation that is apparent in kindergarten continues in primary school.

Prendergast and Forrest described their daily research experience of gender segregation in the early years of secondary school in the UK as follows:

> Our days in school were exhausting yet strangely exhilarating. They were exhausting because, by the time of secondary school, the sexes do not just ignore each other as they do in primary school: what we found in class and elsewhere was an active, radical, articulate atmosphere of confrontation — ‘girls versus boys’. Exhilarating because at the same time they were charged with a contagious energy: certainly something seemed to be going on. In the early years of adolescence, in these schools at least, the polarities of the sexes were such girls and boys might just as well have come from different planets (Prendergast and Forrest, 1997: 180).

Prendergast and Forrest may not be that surprised to find that the children on the primary school do not simply ignore one another but they also produce an atmosphere of confrontation.

Barrie Thorne’s (1993) work *Gender Play* provided an important insight into the processes of segregation by girls and boys. Her study of American fourth and fifth graders in the school playground showed that the boys and girls were not simply ignoring each other in schoolyard and her work tackled the question of how segregation is constructed and maintained in the primary school.

Thorne’s major contribution was to find that the children in the schools she studied actively undertook ‘borderwork’ (Thorne, 1993). Borderwork refers to those occasions when the girls and boys were not playing separately but were interacting in a way that strengthened gender boundaries.

> When gender boundaries are activated, the loose aggregation ‘boys and girls’ consolidates into ‘the boys’ and ‘the girls’ as separate and reified groups. In the process, categories of identity that on other occasions have minimal relevance for interaction become the basis of separate collectivities. Other social definitions get
squeezed out by heightened awareness of gender as a dichotomy and of ‘the girls’
and ‘the boys’ as opposite and even antagonistic sides (Thorne, 1993: 65).

‘Borderwork’ describes how boys and girls maintain and interact across gender
boundaries. Thorne found that when gender is activated, the loose aggregation of
boys and girls became ‘the boys’ and ‘the girls’, often culminating in contests of
boys-against-the-girls. Thorne argued that border-work reinforced the notion of
gender as oppositional and the exaggeration of difference. Encouraged by some
schooling practices such as segregated line ups and gender contests in the classroom,
the children were inciting and constructing gender difference. Border work is the
construction and policing of gender differences and segregation. They were making
difference based on past practices but also through utilising the oppositional,
dichotomous and relational structure of gender.

In Thorne’s (1993) work we again see the participation of both boys and girls in the
making of gender. Moreover, girls play an active part. Within the reproductive and
hegemonic masculinist approaches, girls’ enthusiastic participation in gender
accomplishment is often overlooked, or they are seen as (passive) victims of the
active, boys and social reproduction forces. From Thorne’s work, there is a budding
sense that the girls are also keen and active participants in gender accomplishment.
They, as well as boys, work the gender border between boys and girls and make
forays into the boys’ gender ‘territory’. What is needed is further examination of
how girls and boys participate in borderwork.

Thorne’s work supports the view and shows how the making of gender is
oppositional and relational. That gender is relational has been well established e.g.
Connell, 2002). Francis (1997a), following Davies (1989), has suggested that ‘boys
and girls construct gender identities based on the hegemonic discourses which
presents the sexes as relational to one another’ (Francis, 1997a: 181). Thorne (1993:
158) suggests ‘that the dichotomous nature of individual gender categories and
identity — one is either a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’, never both — may help to account for the
deep hold of dualisms on our ways of thinking about gender’.
Past practices and current claims, I suggest, mark out activities as a girl’s or a boy’s activity. From my theoretical perspective, gender’s dichotomous and relational nature may provide a simple grid for intelligibility and action. Children can locate themselves on this grid. There is no inherent gender meaning in the activities and accomplishments. To that extent what girls or boys do is ‘arbitrary’ and defined in opposition and in contestation.

Given that the children are armed with the idea of the importance and ubiquity of gender and that gender ‘works’ relationally and oppositionally, the children can almost ‘endogenously’, ‘spontaneously’, and ‘naturally’ generate those differences. The dynamics of differentiation are immanent in the gender relation. This provides a further dimension to its constitution. Such an approach places far less emphasis on ‘exogenous’ regulation from the school authority. The children can simply draw on past practices and their own emerging predispositions. The children participate in the creation of gender afresh.

I am emphasising here the relational and oppositional aspects of gender at the expense of both historical differences and the push-and-pull effects of the teachers, school and family. Putting these differences to one side to focus on the productive elements, I suggest that a key factor in the making of gender is its oppositional and relational nature (see also Connell, 2002; Kehily, 2002). Activities at the outset are not necessarily gendered but made so by the children through the process of opposition. What we need to pay attention to is the relational or oppositional aspects of gender-identity. We must consider what girls and boys take up, enact and what they refuse to do in relational and gender conflictual terms in addition to the more familiar historical and institutional reasons. Such a viewpoint is not at odds with a regulatory, reproductionist or hegemonic masculinity approach. It does, however, show and highlight the participatory and contested nature of gender.

**Attention and visibility in the classroom**

Thorne’s (1993) *Gender Play* was undertaken in the playground. However, the insights she brings to the playground need to be more fully explored in classroom
settings such that the classroom is considered in a similar way as that of the playground as a place whereby children’s actions constitute an ongoing definition, differentiation and contestation of gender-identity. Could it be the case that ‘girls behaving nicely’ and ‘boys behaving badly’ in the classroom has as much to do with the relational nature of gender-identity development as it does with regulatory regimes of hegemonic masculinity? Do their behaviours have something to do with the application of localised and specific gender powers as boys and girls tussle with and contest their identities? What is required is to take this gender relational and conflictual approach into the classroom? It is not only regulative but also a struggle between gender.

I now move the focus to the classroom itself and reconsider the literature on the interactions of teachers and students in the light of internecine gender conflict. A important impetus and subsequent focus on the matter of gender power and difference arose from Spender’s (1982) claim that boys received ‘so much more attention from teachers than do girls’ (Spender, 1982: 54). In Spender’s view, teachers wittingly or unwittingly give greater time and attention to boys than to girls and this difference in attention is to the detriment of the girls.

Spender’s claim is now two decades old. Croll and Moses (1991) undertook an extensive review of the 1980s research literature on the attention teachers give to boys and girls in the US and Britain. They found that boys received slightly (rather than dramatically) more attention than girls. This was partly due to but not entirely attributable to the behaviour of the boys:

Averaged across all the (predominately US) studies girls received 44% of interactions. Of the five recent large-scale British studies, three showed lower levels of interaction with girls of an extent broadly comparable to Kelly’s results while two showed no differences. No study has shown girls receiving more individual attention than boys. The studies which show that this is in part due to boys receiving substantially more behavioural criticism, but the studies also show that this does not account for the overall differences in levels of interaction (Croll and Moses, 1991: 278).

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8 Kelly (1988) undertook an meta-analysis of 81research studies that quantified the amount of student-teacher interaction.
They believed that while the differences do not appear large and are certainly smaller than the more extreme claims sometimes made, the differences do add up over a school career. Croll and Moses’ (1991) review does suggest that what the children are doing has an effect on teacher behaviour. The findings of Clark (1990) support this view. Clark found that female teachers believed that the boys challenge and resist their authority at school. Clark observes the fact that many female teachers attempted to take more notice of boys:

 wasn’t just because boys were potentially the naughty ones, it was because teachers recognised that that boys have the potential to make life extremely difficult for female teachers.

Some teachers related incidents where even young boys successfully undermined and humiliated them. The sort of incidents mentioned included refusing to obey a request, swearing, making rude signs, sexual innuendo and bullying teachers on playing fields (Clark, 1990: 20).

That is, the boys get substantially more criticism in response to their behaviour and even their expected behaviour. However, we need to see the behaviours of the children and the teacher in the light of the relational nature of gender and power and the context of the classroom. It may not necessarily be the case that girls seek attention but fail to receive it. There are a host of possible alternative interpretations that require further study. Girls, for example could be more successful at avoiding the attention of the teacher. It is not altogether certain that the gaze of the teacher is received unequivocally positively. On the other hand, boys may not be seeking attention and what attention they receive is not altogether advantageous. The point is that attention and visibility and its reasons and consequences may be far more complex than normally understood.

A study that provides an opportunity to consider these complexities of the classroom is that of Kamler, Maclean, Reid and Simpson (1994) Shaping up Nicely. Kamler et al. (1994) carried out a major study of the first month of schooling of prep school children in a state primary school in a large Victorian regional centre. The study was
well resourced and involved extensive videotaping and field observation over the first month.

Kamler et al. argued that within the first month of schooling, girls learn that to be a good girl, girls must be polite, quiet, obedient and, above all, invisible. A major part of the study focussed on the level and type of interaction between the teacher and the students. Kamler et al. explored whether the teacher attended to the same things equally for boys and girls. They suggested, on the basis of their qualitative work, that the teacher's gaze or attention was selective. Boys were generally noticed for their transgressions and girls for behaving nicely and quietly. This supports the findings of Clark (1990) and Croll and Moses (1991).

Kamler et al. argued that girls learn to be invisible and they attempt to explore ‘the practices, rituals and interactions that sustain and promote the invisibility of girls in their initial experiences of school, and how pupils and teachers work together to position girls as invisible’ (Kamler et al. 1994: 170).

A central means by which they explore this issue is through the analysis of the ‘naming practices’ of the teacher. Naming practices refers to the number and type of calls a child receives from the teacher or is spoken about between teachers on the two days. In all five types of naming are categorised and counted:

- disciplinary namings;
- praise namings;
- call namings, where the calls are used for greetings or selection;
- teacher comments about a student to another teacher; and
- total namings.

From the data collected, Kamler et al. argue that the data provided support for the following conclusions:

- Girls ‘take up a wider range of subject positions than the boys’ (p. 177);
Boys were more likely to be named for discipline;
Namings for praise were fairly equal across gender groups; and
Other calls were fairly equal across gender groups.

At face value, it may be argued that such data provides very weak evidence for Kamler et al.’s (1994) overall argument that the girls were invisible but had a wider range of subject positions and the claim for the wider range of subject positions for girls was made on the basis of the increase of namings of girls between the two days of observation.

Nevertheless, on the basis of this data and an extended discussion of two visible girls, Ayse and Jodie, Kamler et al. (1994) concluded that:

Mrs T...constructs gender difference within the classroom discourse. Mrs T does not intentionally gender subjectivities [sic] through such practices, but the problems of classroom management override what she would like to do...her practice is weakened by problems of controlling conflicting discourses of power, that is, the ‘bad boys’. While these conflicts remain the teacher will reward visible behaviour with attention, and invisible behaviour with approval, but less attention (Kamler et al., 1994: 198).

The authors recognised that such a conclusion ‘lays the responsibility for the ongoing construction of gender difference solely on the teacher which is not the whole story’ (1994: 198). They agreed that the children do play an important part and wonder why girls adopt a strategy of invisibility but significantly this is left unanalysed despite the wealth of material available in their study. Their argument for doing so is that the ‘classroom is a reflection of society’ (Kamler et al., 1994: 199). They speculate that the girls trade visibility for the prestige of goodness but lose the ‘prestige of power’ (p. 199) and ‘internalise the teacher’s gaze’ (p. 199). These are interesting speculations that their data should be able to throw some light on. It is unclear, however, how the boys who are subject to the gaze and discipline

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9I performed a Mann-Whitney U test on the disciplinary namings data which found no significant difference in frequency of disciplinary namings between boys and girls. No significant differences were found for all other namings. The Mann-Whitney U test was performed owing to the data being highly skewed.
of the teacher gain or do not lose power, whereas the girls who identify with the teacher and are enjoined to share that gaze, lose their power.

In my view, Kamler et al. (1994) are characteristic of writers in the new sociology of education and the reproductionist perspective discussed earlier. As I have argued above, such work assumes that girls are ultimately victims and the boys are in power. The girls are passive and boys are active. Bad, active boys get attention and disrupt gender equity and appropriate power. The good girls are docile and subsequently get no attention and have little or no power. There is a need to examine closely these assumptions and excise them from our theoretical understandings and interpretations. A far tighter link between the idea of the classroom as a reflection of society and its enactment in the classroom needs to be demonstrated.

Spender (1982) was one of the first to open the issue of visibility and attention. As it appears at the moment, there is only weak evidence to support the notion of a quantitative gender difference provided by the teacher. It may also be the case that attention and visibility in the classroom are likely to be far more subject to change as a consequence of policy and awareness. What is more interesting is the differences in the types of attention and interaction that boys and girls may have with teacher and the school.

Resistance and cooperation in the school

The resistance of working class lads to the school has been well documented e.g. Willis, 1977; Walker, 1988). In this section, I am less interested in class resistance but the resistance to, the cooperation and cooption of the gender and gendered interventions of the teachers.

The cooperation and cooption of girls

Kamler et al. (1994) provide a representative finding of how girls may be coopted into a position of obedience and quietness. They provided a detailed example and analysis of how girls were rewarded for their behaviour and were encouraged to
identify with the teacher. In their example a girl, Ellen, is rewarded for sitting perfectly whereas a boy is initially chastised for his sitting. The reward for Ellen is to help the teacher, and Ellen’s specific reward is to judge the boy:

Ellen the perfect sitter is asked to take on teacher subjectivity and maintain the gaze. Perfect sitting becomes invested with moral regulation and Ellen is invited to take on the teacher judgement and decide whether Rohan is clever, ‘I wonder if he’s clever. Ellen do you think so?’ (Kamler et al., 1994: 123)

This is a significant reward for good behaviour. The reward for Ellen’s feminine behaviour is considerable power within the classroom, a closer relationship with and identification of the teacher and the female teacher’s power of judgement. Ellen could not be more visible at that moment. Whether or not such identification of femininity with power has poor long-term prospects is another matter. It is clear that in this example, power lies in femininity. Poor Rohan’s reward for ‘sitting up pretty nice’ (p. 123) is to be subject to an evaluative, feminine gaze. Indeed, it may not be possible for Rohan, as a boy\(^\text{10}\), to sit perfectly, only ‘pretty nicely’.

Kamler et al. argue that it is through these processes that girls learn to be good. They view such behaviours negatively, seeing them as reproducing undesirable feminine gender positions. But in the focus on the negative consequences for the girls, they authors do not consider what these processes might mean for young boys such as Rohan or the attraction and utility of these processes for the girls.

The evidence provided by Kamler et al.’s (1994) research supports the domesticity of the prep classroom. Kamler et al. argue that the teacher uses the daily ‘show and tell’ session as a display for the type of relationship she wishes to have with the children and shows how the teacher blurs the boundary between home and school. The teacher is seen as knowledgeable and interested in the child outside of school and ‘in many cases Mrs T is responding as a familiar adult – a relative or friend of the family – to the children, rather than responding in a way that is clearly teacherly’ (Kamler et al. 1994: 152).

\(^{10}\) By this I mean not only that boys may not sit in the appropriate manner but that ‘perfectly’ may be reserved for girls.
Kamler et al. note that girls bring far more objects to present at school than do the boys. Girls also more commonly brought highly gender marked objects such as dolls than did boys. Kamler et al. detail the exchanges between the girls and the teacher over these objects and argue that these interactions serve to reproduce gender differentiation and feminine interests of the girls (Kamler et al., 1994: 129-168).

Such identification may well be a source of power for the girls. Walkerdine (1990) points out for example that often the brightest girls in a class become ‘sub-teachers’. As previously discussed in the work of Kamler et al. (1994), one girl’s reward for perfect sitting was to be given the gaze of the teacher. The girls wish to and are encouraged to emulate their teacher. They do well as a result of this motivation but also as a result of, through training and practice, thinking along similar lines to the teacher.

Furthermore, the qualities of obedience, conformity and even invisibility identified by Kamler et al. (1994) are a response to this identification with the teacher and her power. ‘Obedience’ and ‘conformity’ can also be viewed as co-operative. To be invisible, for example, is to not be subject to the teacher’s evaluative and powerful gaze. This is something of an advantage when compared with the plight of Rohan who cannot sit perfectly. Greater attention is, after all, greater surveillance. Ellen who can sit perfectly, gets to evaluate.

**Boys’ resistance to gender interventions**

Boy’s treatment of, and resistance to, women teachers is often interpreted as an attack by the boys in response to their loss of power (Clark, 1990; Davies, 1993; McFarlane, 1998). Walkerdine (1990) suggests that is not simply a masculine hegemonic assertion of power or a response to its challenge that may lead boys to resisting female authority. They are resisting ‘female power’. Clark (1990 21) suggests that where the boys feel threatened or relatively powerless, they resort to the forms of power available to them. This process is illustrated in Clark (1990; 16) in two following examples of boys resisting the teacher:
Chapter Four: — Gender, Identity and the School

Incident 1
Two year 4 boys: (to teacher) Miss, come and see what we have built. It’s an army camp - a whole army camp.
Teacher: Why did you decide to do an army camp?
Boys (sounding exasperated): Well it’s not exactly an army camp. We’re not going to fire the artillery or anything.
Teacher: Well I’d appreciate it if you didn’t. You know what my feeling is on war things.
Boys (tiredly): Yeah.
Teacher: OK. I’ll be there in a minute.
Teacher (to interviewer): To me it’s such a big problem and the more I say ‘Yuk’ the keener they seem to get.

Incident 2
Two year 1 boys: (to teacher) Miss, we’ve finished our story.
Teacher: Great, let’s have a look. (Teacher reads story full of blood, killing and violence.)
Teacher: Well it’s an exciting story, but I don’t like all the violence in it.
Boys (gigging): We do.
Teacher: Well I don’t like the violence. (The two boys just roll their eyes at each other and walk away.)

Clark (1990) suggests that the above are examples of a teacher legitimising violence. However, an alternative interpretation is that rather than being a legitimisation of violence, the responses by the teachers to the boys were lukewarm. While the teachers did not rebuke the boys, they did not condone or (directly) encourage the boys. The vignettes depict the anticipation of the boys, even a mild provocation, of the response of the teacher. There is an almost ritual quality to the encounters. In the first incident, the teacher recognises that the boys are in some way reacting to and provoking a reaction in, her: ‘For me it’s such a big problem and the more I say “Yuk” the keener they seem to get’. In the second, the boys appear to expect the teacher’s reaction. To her reaction of ‘I don’t like all the violence in it’, they giggle and walk away, as if the gender-identity of themselves and the teacher have been confirmed. This may be further interpreted as defining and confirming the ‘reality’ of gender and its grid of intelligibility. The incidents suggest that the boys rather than identifying with the teacher set themselves in opposition to the teacher and differentiate themselves from the feminine.

Clark (1990) is correct to focus on the violence of the boys’ imagination but it such violence is worth further examination but it needs to be considered as a ‘complex strategical situation’ (Foucault, 1978: 93) with a variety of over-determining layers
e.g., reaction to maternalism/femininity and oppositional differentiating from girls and drawing upon masculine themes and...). Such a situation cannot be explained or dismissed simply as ‘violent’. McIntyre and Tong (1998), for example, suggest that boys are required to conform to the ‘behavioural code of European-American middle class women’ by sitting still and being non-confrontational and so on. These little boys may well have been differentiating themselves from such a behavioural code.

Consistent with gender as an accomplishment, the boys are trying to become male, they are drawing on resources that enable them to resist and set themselves in opposition to the teacher. Just as the girls may readily identify with the teacher, the boys may readily resist and find the means to do so. In doing so, the boys are drawing on past practices and thereby reproducing a familiar theme such as a fascination with violence.

The resistance to alternative gender regimes

In her later work, Shards of Glass, Davies (1993) attempts to intervene explicitly in this taking up of gender by the children. This work ‘explores the radical possibility of giving children the capacity to disrupt the dominant storylines through which gender is held in place’ (Davies, 1993: 1). The study involved reinterviewing children from the 1989 study as well as focus groups with three ‘study groups’ of Grade 5 and 6 children. The children of the study groups were invited to:

- talk about their ideas and beliefs about gender and by making visible the centrality of gender to their subjectivity. They talked about the ways in which their ideas and beliefs were encoded in their own bodies and in the textural images they found in popular magazines and in photographs...In order to enable them to grasp the concept of discourse and, in particular, its constitutive force, they examined the cultural and historical locatedness of categories which are generally understood as ‘natural’ and inevitable (Davies, 1993: 3-4).

Some of the results are ironic and even comical. They are ironic in that, as McFarlane (1998: 202) points out, the research is ‘intrusive, dominating, and completely certain of its emancipatory agenda’ and comical in that the young children resist the ‘discourse of resistance’ proffered by Davies’ co-researcher
(Davies, 1993: 55-56, see also McFarlane, 1998: 202). They are comical where the students deftly resist the proffered interpretation of their behaviour.

The following section has been quoted at length as it demonstrates the active resistance of a girl to the ‘liberating discourse’ of the researcher. It shows the girl in question, Jennifer, deftly dealing with Chas, the co-researcher, who insists that she resist a certain discourse.

CHAS: Now if you would just into the microphone [sic] tell me what it is about, it ‘doesn’t show your legs’ nonsense. You said that you chose them because none of them showed your legs
JENNIFER: ‘Cause my legs are fat.
CHAS: But we’ve done all that work on discourse of resistance, how come you’re still gonna accept that and not develop some sort of discourse of resistance to the way a girl’s body should look Jenny?
JENNIFER: Because, because everyone else looks good and I look bad.
CHAS: Well that’s only looking bad if you’re accepting the dominant discourse about what a girl should look like.
JENNIFER: Mmm, that’s right.
CHAS: So you’re gonna accept that are you?
JENNIFER: Yep. I’ve been taught not to fight. I ‘sit down and shut up’ says mum (Chas laughs) That’s how I’ve got to stay.
CHAS: Nonsense, Jennifer.
JENNIFER: Well you go and tell my mum that
CHAS: I’m sure your mum doesn’t want you to take on board a discourse that’s going to make you feel bad.
JENNIFER: Doubt that she even knows what discourse means Chas (Davies, 1993: 55-56).

It is, of course, dangerous to interpret this event simply from the passage. There does appear to be a complete acceptance by the girl that her legs are ‘fat’. However, it is also remarkable how the girl works stubbornly to escape the interpretation of Chas. She seems far from obedient and conforming. Davies does not discuss the implication that if the children are active participants in their own gender making, then they too will have their own strategies and tactics, demands and desires. They will appropriate discourse to their ends.
Davies analysis fails to recognise and hence analyse the different agendas of the interventionist researcher, the boys and the girls. In *Shards of Glass*, the girls appear far more active than they are given credit for. In the example above, Jennifer appears to use passivity as a tactic (i.e. by accepting the dominant discourse) to get Chas off her back and provoke at the same time. Throughout *Shards of Glass*, the girls tell on the boys, they side with Chas against the boys. The girls should not be read as powerless. It is not discussed what the boys made of this.

McFarlane (1998) describes the boys’ reported behaviour in *Shards of Glass* as ‘sexual tyranny’. They appear to be deliberately sexist and relentlessly obnoxious. They make offensive sexist remarks, bully and go out of their way to undermine the girls. The following example, identified by McFarlane (1998), illustrates the behaviour of the boys:

CHAS: So you think [Princess Smartypants] is a snob, Brian?
BRIAN: Yep and a slut.
CHAS: Why do you think that? A snob and a what/
BRIAN: No I won’t.
CHAS: Did you say a slut?
KEN: Yep.
CHAS: Why do you think she’s a slut?
BRIAN: Oh well she/
ROSIE: She’s not. She hasn’t even been out with a boy
BRIAN: So/
MAL: Yeah Brian.
ANNA: She’s not a gutter snipe.
BRIAN: You are though (Davies, 1993: 134).

In this example, it would seem that the boy is reacting to the story, and to Chas. It parallels the example of Jennifer. Both resist what Chas has to say. The interesting aspect is that they go about it differently. The girl becomes passive, the boy abusive. These differences in response need to be further examined. However, the reasons given by Davies for the shocking behaviour by the boys’ response are surprisingly unreflective. For Davies, the boys have reacted as a result of being cast out of their ‘heroic role’, a masculinity that they achieve at the expense of the girls. It appears to me that, not only were the boys cast out of the role of the hero, they were almost
certainly were cast into the role of villain. Moreover, it would be surprising that the boys (and also the girls) had worked out the views and prejudices of the Chas on this matter.

Older boys reflect the behaviour of the boys at primary school. Kehily and Nayak (1997), in their study of ‘lads and laughter’ among secondary school boys in the UK, also found that the boys were keen to shock and that the boys often used crude, even abusive, ‘humour’ to subvert authority. Following Walkerdine (1990), Kehily and Nayak (1997) suggest that their resistance to intervention can be ‘reactionary’ as well as ‘revolutionary’.

Davies’ 1989 work began a very promising line of inquiry, namely why does gender matter so much to the children? However, her writing gradually moves form this agenda and ultimately ends, in her 1993 work, attempting to ‘liberate’ some very unwilling subjects. It may be the case that for the boys and the girls, the ‘revolutionary message’ is simply another authority figure. What needs to be examined is the differing ways in which boys and girls go about their business and what that business is. From that point, it might then be possible to draw links between action and structure. Davies, although acknowledging the participation of the children, does not see past the constraining nature of gender. In doing so, she cannot deal adequately with their resistance to her discourse and does not consider what the children have invested in doing gender correctly.

Walkerdine suggests the identification of the girls with the teacher may lead to better academic and social outcomes. Firstly, simply through attending to the teacher and being motivated will in all likelihood lead to better results than where children attend less frequently, are more disruptive and so on. If we also view power as a positive process, the identification with female power may enable young girls to learn. As Paley observes: ‘I, the teacher, am more often on the girls’ side. We move at the same pace and reach for the same activities’ (Paley, 1984: x).

The alternative is to consider each gender in relation to one another in a complex strategical situation (Foucault, 1978; 93) and one in which the female teacher may be unwittingly complicit.
Gender differences in scholastic and schoolroom outcomes.

As we have seen from the work reviewed above, there are small but potentially significant gender differences in the attention that teachers give children. In this section, I briefly raise the issue of the perceived and actual gender differences in scholastic outcomes and behavioural or disciplinary issues concerning primary school children.

The purpose here is not to join a hotly contested political and ideological debate (see e.g. Lingard, 2003) but to consider the differences emerging between boys and girls as a result of the children ‘doing difference’ (West and Fenstermaker, 1995) and border work (Thorne, 1993) as much as it is the result of social reproduction of capitalism and masculinist hegemony.

The performance and behaviour of boys in primary and later years of schooling has increasingly become a political issue. The overwhelming consensus amongst teachers and commentators is that, in primary school, girls currently perform educationally and socially better than boys (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998). This concern also appears in the United Kingdom and in the United States (Epstein, 1998; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear, 2002). As early as 1990, Walkerdine (1990) reported that girls in the United Kingdom generally outperformed boys at primary school.

Clark (1990) in a study that attempted to identify how the schooling system disadvantaged girls identified a range of bad behaviours by boys. Her teachers reported a wide variety of disciplinary problems, learning style problems and learning ability problems. By contrast, teachers reported that girls come to school able, organised and integrated (Clark, 1990: 19). White (1990) observes that boys and girls exhibit ‘different degrees of proficiency’ and that boys can ‘trade off their poorer performance in literacy by means of their sheer volume of talk’ (White, 1990: 143).
UK studies consistently show that girls outperform boys scholastically (Epstein, 1998; Marshall, 1998). Boys are over-represented in remedial classes and with problem behaviours. Such over-representation does not appear to be a result of teacher bias towards selecting boys as requiring specialist classes and services (Cline and Ertubey, 1997). Bullying and violence have also been identified as being a particular, although not exclusive, problem with boys (Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997).

The major scholastic area where boys perform more poorly than girls is in the area of literacy (Bartlett Report, 2002; DEET, 199811; Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993). A major survey of literacy was undertaken in Australian primary schools in 1996 (National School English Literacy Survey Management Committee [NSELSMC], 1997). The aim was to assess the literacy achievement of a sample of Year 3 and Year 5 students that was nationally representative of children across Australia. The study found that ‘The findings that girls have higher reading levels than boys is consistent with the findings of many other studies of primary school reading’ NSELSMC, 1997: 121).

A comparison of the medians for males and females shows that the gender difference is larger for the expressive modes (writing and speaking) than for the receptive modes (reading, viewing, listening). The greatest gender difference occurs for writing; the least for viewing. The size of the gender difference does not change significantly from Year 3 to Year 5 (NSELSMC, 1997: 189).

Collins, Kenway and McLeod (2000) in a major review of gender and Australian educational performance found a generally lower performance in literacy and English. One possible explanation for these poorer overall results and observations concerning primary school is an interaction between class and gender. It has been argued that boys in secondary schools from working class or low socio-economic class backgrounds perform so poorly that they bring the overall literacy averages down while middle class boys perform as well as middle class girls (Mills and Lingard, 1997; Lingard and Douglas, 1999). Collins et al. (2000) support this view with their analysis of the relative contribution of class and gender. On the basis of the available research, Collins et al. (2000) found that socio-economic status in

comparison to gender was of ‘overarching significance’ for secondary school participation and performance. The debate concerning girls has shifted from parity with boys in educational performance and retention to those of subject choice and post-schooling and vocational outcomes (Collins et al. 2000) and the debate concerning the relative contribution of gender, class and their interaction will undoubtedly continue.

**Gender and literacy**

A key concern about boys is the poorer literacy levels of boys overall and in comparison to girls on orthodox testing of the conventional understanding of literacy (cf Millard, 1997 and above, p. 113). In Australia the LAP\(^\text{12}\) tests show that girls outperform boys across Australia on the standard test at year 3 and year 5. The issue, as Rowan, Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear (2002) aptly describe it, is both complex and political. Part of this complexity is the interaction between gender and class (Mills and Lingard, 1997) and ethnicity.

As a public issue, academics, politicians, feminists, activists, populists and parent and teacher groups have all clamoured to identify and interpret this failure and make some sort of capital from it. The stake or outcome is how boys are viewed and the ministrations applied. Literacy cannot be reduced to the decoding of stimulus and its encodement in another form. Literacy is not simply, or cannot be reduced to, the ability to read and write, to decode and encode but is ‘the ability to read, communicate, compute, develop independent judgements and take actions responsible to them’ (Graham, 1980: 127, cited in Cook-Gumperz, 1986: 6). As Cook-Gumperz argues, literacy involves the exercise of ‘socially approved and approvable talents’ (1986, 5). Literacy is thus a social accomplishment. It cannot be separated from the contexts and purposes in which it is produced. It involves judgement of what is appropriate, what is sanctioned and what literacy (or its absence) achieves for the child or adult. These are social achievements, produced in accordance to context.

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\(^{12}\) Learning Assessment Project. The LAP was introduced by the Australian Government in 1995 and is undertaken by Years 3 and 5 students in all Government and Catholic schools and some independent schools across Australia. The LAP tests a range of academic skills including literacy and numeracy.
Literacy as a social construction does not throw away the notion of cognition. Rather, cognition is itself as a social production. Solutions to cognitive tasks are produced in situ, according to the production of the social context (see also Walkerdine, 1997). Thus, literacy, in this view, suggests that some groups of children may find it easier to learn to read and write than others.

Currently, it would seem, boys are poorer readers in the classroom. Millard (1997) in her study of reading found that boys may be ‘differently literate’: that their obsession with computer games and reading about such games developed a new form of literacy. Such a form might well be more appropriate for the future than fiction and text based literacies preferred to by girls (and their teachers). This is still an open question. However, the apparent differences between girls and boys in the area of literacy suggest that it may be an excellent site to study the making of the difference by girls and boys. As I discuss in next chapter, it is on literacy and English classes that I focus the research work.

**Gender power in the classroom**

Underpinning most of the studies of gender segregation, visibility and performance, resistance and cooperation is the operation of power of some sort in the classroom. Most of these studies identify masculinist hegemony as the major power and shaper of classroom practices. However, as I have argued above, the links between masculinist hegemony and the classroom need to be demonstrated rather than assumed and a more critical attitude towards the shifting nature of power in the classroom needs to be adopted.

The work of Walkerdine provides a key resource for understanding what might be happening to, and by, girls and boys in the classroom. Walkerdine focuses on the operation of gender power in the classroom. Walkerdine (1990), as we have seen above, noted that it was girls who were the best performers at school and that their better performance may well be the result of the operation of female power.
Relative to boys, the academic performance of girls in the whole of the primary school is superior...the nursery school provides a context in which good mothering and good pedagogy are seen to be part of the same process – of aiding child development. I would argue that the very power of women in this transitory situation, between the domestic and the academic, is precisely what permits the early success of girls (Walkerdine, 1990: 12-13).

Walkerdine provides the opportunity to view the classroom as a site of contested, negotiated and contingent conflict between girls, boys and the teacher rather than the often one-sided approach of hegemonic masculinity research. Moreover, her remarks suggest that, if anything, the power balance in these early years may be in favour of girls (Walkerdine, 1990). Walkerdine also points out that the similarity of child-centred teaching to mothering and the predominance of female teachers may allow girls to identify with their teachers. Walkerdine’s argument gains support from Paley’s (1984) observations in the kindergarten, that both teacher and girls identify with each other and produce a similarity of thought and movement. What is required is to look far more closely at what the girls are doing in terms of power and to look at the power relations between the teacher, the boys and the girls.

Thorne’s (1993) examination of borderwork shows how both girls and boys engage in gender power contestations. It should be expected that girls, as well as boys, accomplish gender by marking off their performances and physical space. Walkerdine (1990; x) notes that, in coeducational play, girls attempt to manoeuvre the play towards the domestic sphere where they will have authority, while boys will attempt to define the situation as being non-domestic where they have greater power.

Whether or not this explanation is correct, it does draw attention again to the careful consideration of what the girls and boys are actually doing and achieving. We must see them as using the situations according to their interests. Girls should not be seen \textit{a priori} as passive victims incapable of action and subterfuge just as much as boys should not be seen as the \textit{a priori} villains. It may be more fruitful to consider that doing gender-identity has important elements of contestation and gender colonisation. Boys and girls are not simply attempting to discern and create appropriate gender action in the world independently of the other gender; they define themselves in part in opposition to and in confrontation with the other.
Such a view sheds a different light on previous studies. I have already suggested that Davies (1993) needs to be reread in this light. Strategically speaking, the girls are in a powerful position. Faced with an apparently partial co-researcher, they can tell tales on the boys, they can exaggerate and distort in the knowledge that they will appear credible and the boys will react accordingly. Some aspects of Kamler et al. (1994) may also be reconsidered in terms of power contestation. Kamler et al. provide an example of a power struggle between a boy and a girl that is illustrative of the tendency to misinterpret.

The struggle is a sequence of physical actions between a girl and boy. The girl initially pushes the boy and he pushes her back, the girl sticks her tongue out at him and he pushes, pokes and stands on her foot a series of times, eventually pulling at her shorts. He also pushes another girl once. Finally, she points to where he should stand where the other boys are standing and he moves across.

Kamler et al. summarise their interpretation by arguing that the boy:

\[\text{can take up the position of men through his actions on girls’ bodies. His power is gained by refusing to be constituted as the powerless subject in the teacher discourse (they were playing ‘Simon says’ at the time) and re-casting the girls as the powerless subject of his (p. 127, comment in parenthesis mine).}\]

On the other hand, the following interpretation can be made, at least on the evidence provided by Kamler et al. Firstly, elsewhere in their work, the girl is identified as a tomboy who belonged to a group of boys that received the highest number of disciplinary and other namings. It is possible that her involvement, rather than that of another girl, was not random. Secondly, and most importantly, the girl actually initiated (pushed the boy) and closed (pointed to where he should stand) the interaction. The girl in question seems to have been anything but powerless in the interaction.

This gender power does not mean that the school system does not pose particular problems for girls. Certainly, Walkerdine (1985), for example, provide careful
documentation of how, in the early 1980s girls’ cleverness was viewed in patronising and feminine terms and their achievements were negated. Walkerdine (1998; 2001) has followed this particular theme and in the mid-1990’s shows that the performance of clever middle-class girls, who excel at school continues to be negated, particularly by their mothers.

Identification with the teacher by girls may also cause problems later. Such problems may not be ‘inadequate forms of learning’ in a strictly academic sense. However, it is possible that such strong identification and learning so closely from a teacher is also likely to teach other attributes of the teacher, both good and bad. Clark (1990) observed that the teachers often found the boys more interesting. One reflected that it was because, she, the teacher was uninteresting. Girls may take this as part of the lesson.

We must reconsider power within the classroom accordingly. Walkerdine points out that power is contingent and contextual. Girls, teachers and boys are not unitary subjects and their power shifts according to context. They will each have power under different circumstances. It may be the case that through their identification with the teacher and their alignment of interests and sensibilities, girls enjoy an overall power advantage vis-à-vis the boys at this time in their lives, at this moment in history, rather than the reverse.

Enablement, constraint and power in the classroom

Enablement and constraint are twin aspects of positive and negative power respectively. Enablement marks out the possible, while constraint the limits. The state of the ebb and flow of enablement and constraint on the subject is what Foucault (1978) refers to as the complex strategical situation. The primary purpose of this thesis, is not to keep a tally sheet on the travails and tribulations of girls and boys in the classroom, but to recognise the classroom as such a complex situation of contestation, differentiation, enablement and constraint. The ongoing accomplishment of gender-identity by the children in the classroom is a central part of this situation. It may be useful to at times to employ a political terminology such
as that of ‘border work’ implies. Boys and girls may be contesting and ‘colonising’ areas. Boys and girls, through the history of their own gender and their own efforts of discovery and (re) invention may have different skills, different predispositions that they use to their strategic advantage. The classroom enables and constrains according to gender and the scholastic and behavioural outcomes are the result of this interplay in the classroom.

**The key research questions**

Gender is an important dimension of schooling as the extensive research in this area has shown. I have reviewed some of this literature in this chapter. Currently, the new sociology of education and the critical approaches that followed it, depict the school as a ‘factory’ for gender and class reproduction (Foster *et al.*, 1996). The concept of hegemonic masculinity developed by Connell (1987; 1995; 2002) has also been applied to the school room. In this view, a dominant, hierarchical form of masculinity informs gender-identity production and reproduces masculinist hegemony. I have criticised this approach principally because it provides too direct a link between school practices and gender reproduction and there is a tendency to view all behaviour within school as reproducing hegemonic masculinity. I have argued that the school is more accurately viewed as a site of production with the children actively involved and participating in that production as well as being subject to the regimes of the school.

The pre-school and primary school literature surveyed above generally reflects the new sociology of education approach. My alternative reading of some parts of this literature identified how children may engage with the school, the teachers and other children and participate in the making of their gender-identity. The children appear keenly involved, even preoccupied, with gender matters and segregate and differentiate themselves at an early age. They appear to come to school with the concept of gender and while at school they continue to work on it and themselves. The young children also seek out opportunities to accomplish or do gender in and out of the classroom. They would appear to be active and willing participants in the
accomplishment of gender. There are glimpses in these research accounts that, for children, the school is indeed a site of gender-identity production.

The work of Thorne (1993) provides the framework of contestation and conflict with her concept of border work in the playground. There is, as the schooling literature points out, a hegemony of gender dichotomy. The two genders are in some way oppositional and sit in relation to one another. Such a dichotomy is, from the point of view of meaning production, elegant. By observing either gender, one ‘knows’ how to act or not act. The concept of borderwork suggests that the children ‘patrol’ their gender borders making forays into each other’s territory.

Borderwork may be an important dynamic in gender-identity production and it may also contribute to the scholastic and behavioural outcomes of the children. Firstly, it supports the idea of gender as relational. Secondly, it suggests that what each gender is permitted to perform is to some extent open for (re)invention. The children can and do experiment with, and annex, various ‘areas’ or actions for their gender. Within the structure and confines of the dichotomy what they can do is reinvent gender. Children do not produce gender-identity alone nor do they invent it. Past practices, child-centred pedagogy, and the current relations between men and women all influence the production of current practices. However, rather than simply being imposed, the practices of gender are taken by the children and used for their purposes of identity creation. The participation of children in gender is part of the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991). Such reaching out or participation in the making of gender is not to imply a voluntarism. The children have little choice but to participate. Many actions and practices are contested, tested and patrolled by both genders. The outcomes of these contestations may have real consequences regarding the attitudes and abilities of the children towards schooling and the classroom.

There is a need to change focus from reproduction and imposition to production and invention and to consider the situation or context of the children as they appropriate, contest and conflict. Identity does not arise from within for nor is it given by others but is constituted in social interaction. Gender and, arguably, class and other characteristics or ‘vectors’ (Rose, 1996) are also not like items of clothing that dress the naked self but actually serve within interaction to constitute and assemble the
self. The challenge is to develop research questions and an approach to empirically explore and shed light on the production as opposed to the imposition of gender-identity.

If the schools are ‘factories of reproduction’ then the direction and force of gender imposition by the school system should be reasonably apparent. The school system, through its processes should be segregating children by gender and treating them markedly differently. One problem, for instance, of the ‘hidden curriculum’ approach is that if the imposition of gender is very subtle then the children must work hard to discover it, but to do so the children must be motivated. But where does that motivation come from? They must have been trained to be so motivated. The problem is one of infinite regress. If I were to find that teachers and the schools were clearly imposing their views of gender on the children and treating the children quite differently by gender, this would not preclude the notions of participation by the children but it would certainly make such participation far more difficult to find and justify. To this end, my first two research questions are:

(i) To what extent do children construct their gender-identity and what kinds of encouragement do they receive for this?

(ii) To what extent did the children seem to be appropriating gender practices and inciting the making of gender-identity in the classroom?

Drawing on the work of Thorne (1993), border work in the playground may be construed as gender segregation and contestation. Borderwork is a form of gender-identity work. However, the playground is far less monitored or ‘policed’ by teachers than the classroom. Moreover, such gender play may not be construed as being central to the overall message of gender imposition and reproduction. If the classroom were a site of such gender segregation contestation this would provide evidence that children are busy making gender-identity right in the heart of the school system – the classroom. My third research question is:

(iii) To what extent can the classroom be viewed as a site of gender contestation and borderwork?
What the answers to these questions may show is the importance of the self and the appropriation of gender by children for the purposes of meaning and sense making, and that the social world is not simply imposed but is something of a co-constituted ‘joint production’. As Walkerdine (1984) has suggested (see p. 83 above), the subject plays in role in the reproduction of society. It is to suggest that social interaction is a complex strategical situation full of possibility and limitation.

In the following chapter I shall consider how such a complex strategical situation as the production of gender-identity may be explored. In particular, I consider methods to catch the process of gender-identity production rather than its outcomes and develop the concept of flashpoints to capture this process of production in mid-flight.
CHAPTER FIVE

Methodology

Introduction

The classroom is a rich and productive site in which to observe gender and identity processes in their day-to-day setting and as they ‘naturally’ or ‘spontaneously’ occur. The purpose of this chapter is to identify an appropriate method to investigate the production of gender-identity in the classroom and more specifically, to address empirically my research questions. I aim to develop and justify a set of research methods to identify the degree to which teachers and the school impose, regulate and discipline gender-identity in and on the children and the degree to which children are active participants in the process of gender-identity formation. As part of that active participation, I explore the degree to which that participation was relational and the degree to which gender-identity work by the children involved appropriating resources and contesting the other gender for those resources.

Underpinning these concerns is a focus on participation and production in the construction of identity, or to paraphrase Foucault (2002) how we turn ourselves into a subject. In other words, the focus of this thesis is on the process of construction rather than the outcome of the construction. Can gender segregation, visibility, behavioural and scholastic outcomes — typically construed as the imposition or product of social reproduction, or of masculinist hegemony — be interpreted as accomplishments by the participants? My concern is not whether there are any differences between boys and girls that might be identified, but how girls and boys may participate in the making of those differences. Can gender-identity processes be observed or inferred through fieldwork? Could gender-identity production be caught in ‘mid flight’? Can the ‘seams’ of its production be glimpsed?
An empirical study of gender-identity production faces a number of obstacles: general methodological issues concerning observation and also the practical methods for observing a process that is a routine and usually an almost seamless performance. In this chapter I address these issues and develop a research method that can explore my research questions. In particular, I attempt to develop a method that can capture or glimpse the production of gender-identity by Year 3 children (around eight years of age) and their interaction and contestation with their peers and the teacher.

**Overview of the approach of the study**

The research method employed was a ‘naturalistic’ approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This involved three aspects: (i) observing Year 3 children in the classroom during English and literacy and communication classes; (ii) interviewing the teachers and employing the teachers as informants; and (iii) undertaking group interviews with the children. Interviews and observations were not confined to the classroom and observations were also undertaken in the school staffroom and, to a lesser extent, the schoolyard.

I chose a field observational approach because the key focus of the study was the production of gender-identity, the processes the children used, and the teachers employed, in the generation and instantiation of gender-identity of the children. Teachers were both informants and subjects of the study. As informants, they could provide insight for observations made by myself of the children and their interaction with the children. As ‘subjects’, I observed and questioned them about their attitudes and behaviours towards promoting or mitigating conventional gender-identities. The purpose of the group interviews with the children was to provide a structured interaction with them and to elicit their attitudes towards school and reading.

Before discussing these approaches, and the field setting in detail, it is first necessary to discuss the factors shaping my methodological decisions.
Methodological issues for research

The practice theory perspective I have adopted has important methodological implications for any empirical study. From a practice or constructionist perspective, there is ‘no royal road to truth’ (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). All research methods, quantitative and qualitative, interpretivist or positivist, are all in some way flawed or limited. As Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 3) observe, both qualitative and quantitative approaches to empirical work suffer from:

(i) The problem of ‘the transparent self’. This refers to an assumption that the research participants are knowledgeable about themselves and their actions. As Giddens (1984) points out, people’s accounts of their actions and themselves are rationalisations. There is no necessary or unproblematic correspondence between their statements and ‘what really is going on’.

(ii) The ‘transparent accounting’ problem — that they are willing and able to tell it to a researcher should they actually know what is going on.

These twin problems are exemplified in the work of Stoller (Stoller and Olkes, 1987). Stoller reported of his fieldwork in Niger that he learned that ‘everyone had lied to me and…the data I had so painstakingly collected were worthless. I learned a lesson; informants routinely lie to their anthropologists’ (Stoller and Olkes, 1987: 9, cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 16). The controversy concerning the work of Margaret Mead in Samoa (Freeman, 1983) can be reconsidered in this light. Hollway and Jefferson observe that in everyday life, another’s account is not taken at face value and we routinely consider the veracity of a person’s account. People in everyday life may be unable or unwilling to ‘tell it like it is’ or are even misguided, mischievous or deliberately misleading. The field researcher is also not immune from these problems.

These twin problems are what Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to as the ‘crisis of representation’. This crisis arises as a result of an inability of either the researcher or
subject to report accurately what is happening as result of a ‘distorted lens’ or mediated percepts, or the result of simple bias and self-serving accounts. It is also due to the indexical and constitutive qualities of language and reporting. Language is not primarily representative, our words do not correspond to objects in social space but are used to indicate and draw attention to aspects of the world and thereby constitute a particular situation.\(^\text{13}\)

The researcher is like any other participant in social practices and has no privileged place and has no special access to truth. The researcher cannot impartially observe and report what is ‘really’ going on but can only give a particular and partial description of events. Moreover, what is observed, talked about and participated in is a matter of negotiation rather than discovery. The interlocutors, the participants including the researcher, work towards a particular construction of social reality. Bourdieu (1996: 609) observes interviewees can only ‘give a response worthy of the name if they can appropriate the inquiry for themselves and become its subject’. Both the researcher and subject are involved in the production of the account. The researcher no longer discovers ‘nuggets of truth’ but returns to his or her community with a story or account (Kvale, 1996). This story is a ‘partial truth’ and co-constructed by the participants—the ‘traveller’ and his or her interlocutors or ‘subjects’ (see also Shotter, 1995).

A further problem arises as a result of the crisis of representationalism (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). How does one evaluate empirical research if it is ‘only a story’, a particular, context-based construction and reconstruction of events, actions and statements? Why should such a story be believed or acted on? Why should the researcher’s observations and interpretations be given any weight?

The positivist response to this problem has been to attempt to develop an objective, rigorous method. Such methods attempted to avoid or reduce the distorting lens of values and presupposition and thereby provide confidence in, if not guarantee, the veracity of the findings. However, such an approach has been roundly criticised as

\(^{13}\) One way of considering this indexical property is to think of a person coughing as the boss unexpectedly arrived. The cough serves to indicate that ‘stop what you are doing, attend to your work, the boss has arrived. The cough does not represent a concept (See also Harré, 1995).
the values and interests of the researchers cannot be overcome in such a manner (e.g. Habermas, 1971; Giddens, 1974). This problem is exacerbated when social reality is not considered as ‘objective’ but is a co-construction and subject to negotiation. There are then no clear criteria for credibility or veracity (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

Lincoln and Guba (2000) provide an overview of approaches for the establishment of non-representationalist criteria. They include authenticity and ‘transgressive’ criteria.

Those authenticity criteria —so called because we believed them to be hallmarks of authentic, trustworthy, rigorous, or ‘valid’ constructivist or phenomenological inquiry—were fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity (Lincoln and Guba, 2000: 180).

Here ‘fairness’ refers to the attempt to ensure that all voices had a chance to be represented in social inquiry and were treated fairly and with balance. Ontological and educative authenticity refer to a ‘raised level of awareness of the research participants’ (Lincoln and Guba, 2000: 180), a view similar to Kvale’s (1996) that a good research interview is also partly ‘therapeutic’. Finally, catalytic and tactical authenticities refer to the ability of the research to prompt social and political action from the research participants.

Lincoln and Guba (2000: 181) also introduce the notion of ‘transgressive validity’ which extend the ideas of catalytic authenticity. Transgressive validity attempts to disrupt not only social and political action but the actions of science and the research as well. What this entails is unclear, however, my reading of transgressive validity is that research must attempt to critique, transgress and extend the limits of possibility (cf Foucault, 1978). Examples provided by Lincoln and Guba (2000) include the crystalline metaphors of Richardson (2000) and the transgressive validities of Lather (1994).

Approaches to validity appear to be moving towards ethics and morality. While I appreciate the attempts to conjoin ethics and validity, the demands of intervention as a standard of validity appears to signal an unwarranted certainty of purpose and
understanding. They foreclose uncertainty and ambiguity. A more modest and open approach is one that does not legislate transgression but views research as valid, whereby the research participants are, at the very least, ‘no worse off’ and arguably better off than prior to any research intervention. What ‘no worse off’ implies or means is itself a beginning of a conversation or negotiation.

The answer to these crises lies in the practices, debates and conversations within the ‘scientific communities’ and ‘communities of intelligibility’ (Gergen, 1994). That is to say, the researcher should adopt a set of methodical procedures and established practices accepted among his or her peers. Intelligibility is a social process and what is credible is considered by peers in the light of accepted community practices. What constitutes intelligibility is, like other social phenomenon, a matter of negotiation and power.

Pursuing Kvale’s (1996) metaphor of the researcher as a traveller suggests that the researcher/traveller undergoes a practical experience of travel to a ‘foreign land’ and returns with a tale. The tale is discussed according to its poignancy and pertinence to the current matters at hand and the accepted criteria of that community. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) note, such criteria are moving towards that of authenticity. To this list I suggest a further criterion for validity—providing opportunities for ‘discovery’ or ‘surprise’. The methods employed should admit alternatives.

What this means is that the method must be able to demonstrate that alternative findings can be potentially found and that the method and researcher is capable of discovering and entertaining alternative viewpoints. To re-employ the traveller metaphor of Kvale, if the traveller seeks their own prejudices and takes the package tour then they will find little that is novel or surprising. Indeed, one of the key questions I have of theories of reproduction and masculinist hegemony is that there seems little room for discovery or surprise. The same tourist sites seemed to be revisited and the same stories retold.

The way forward may be through the practice of research rather than its theory. Bourdieu (1999: 607) stresses the focus of research on its practices and procedures:
Many decades of empirical research in all its forms, from ethnography to sociology and from the so-called closed questionnaire to the most open ended interview, have convinced me that the adequate scientific expression of this practice is to be found neither in the prescriptions of a methodology more often scientistic than scientific, nor in the antiscientific caveats of the advocates a mystic union. For this reason it seems to me imperative to make explicit the intention and the procedural principles that we put into practice in the research project whose findings we present here. The reader will thus be able to reproduce in the reading of the texts the work of both construction and understanding that produced them.

The following discussion is informed by Bourdieu’s principles and shall take Bourdieu’s advice, and proceed with the practice and practical issues of the research.

**The practical issues of research**

**Catching gender-identity production in flight**

The key practical problem of this study is how, within the above general methodological limits, one can make visible or identify the routine, everyday doing of gender and identity. How does one make ‘commonplace scenes visible’ (Garfinkel, 1967: 36)? Gender-identity production is a routine and continuous process and all action may be gendered to some degree (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Because my focus was on the construction or production of gender-identity, not the outcome of that construction, my methodological problem was what particular actions, activities or events should be researched, and how to do that in a way that is transparent and open to discovery.

One possibility was to examine the commonplace by studying disturbances to the commonplace or, alternatively, through the study of the pathological, where the commonplace has fallen down. This approach was advocated by Rose (1996) who, following Foucault, uses the notion of problematisation, considering where things
have been rendered a problem. Rose argues that in the genealogical method\textsuperscript{14}, the pathological has primacy over the normal and that:

This is a methodological as much an epistemological point; in the genealogy of subjectification, pride of place is not occupied by the philosophers reflecting in their studies on the nature of the person, the will, the conscience, morality, and the like, but rather in the everyday practices where conduct has become problematic to others or oneself, and in the mundane texts and programs — on asylum management, medical treatment of women, advisable regimes of child rearing, new ideas in workplace management, improving one’s self-esteem — seeking to render these problems intelligible and at the same time, manageable (Rose, 1996: 26).

Rose’s approaches leads to the suggestion that we can investigate the making of the self by reading the (self) help manuals. However, my interest, and the focus of this study, is on the performance, the use of the manuals, the enactment of the advice, prescriptions and treatments.

A better known example of this approach was Garfinkel (1967), famous for his use of pathology and exaggeration in his small-scale experiments.

Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble. The operations that one would have to perform in order to multiply the senseless features of perceived environments; to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation, and confusion; to produce the socially structured affects of anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation; and to produce disorganized interaction should tell use something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained (Garfinkel, 1967: 37-38).

For example, in his famous breach of trust experiments, his confederates persistently refuse to understand the situation (Garfinkel, 1990). Davies (1989) uses a similar approach with her feminist fairy tales that unsettle and provoke the children to repair the story along some sort of conventional line. Again, while both approaches are important avenues for making the commonplace visible, such approaches are interventionist and obtrusive and the link between the ‘disrupted’ and the ‘day-to-

\textsuperscript{14} The genealogical method was developed by Foucault (1984b). Foucault argued that it was a method of analysis that traces the emergence of phenomena from disparate, haphazard and overlapping events.
day’ or ‘natural’ is unclear. Such an approach can also have practical and ethical problems in terms of deceiving the research subject. The aim of my research, however, was on capturing gender-identity in a less contrived, more mundane, field setting.

**The idea of ‘flashpoints’ or ‘critical incidents’**

This study utilised the idea of a ‘flashpoint’ (Skelton, 1997) as a framework to observe and understand gender-identity production. The idea of flashpoints was developed to capture the predisposing factors surrounding public disorder (Waddington, Jones and Critcher 1989; Troyna and Hatcher, 1992). Waddington *et al.* (1989, 21) recognised the difficulty of defining a flashpoint. They ‘assumed that a flashpoint was a dramatic break in a pattern of interaction which might help to explain why and where disorder broke out’ (emphasis in original). In this study, I am not interested in predisposing factors so much as the actual incident, a moment of some significance that changes the course of a social interaction and one that makes gender-identity salient.

The idea and use of flashpoints is a newly emerging research approach. In my usage, flashpoints are turning points in a social interaction and do not have the autobiographical poignancy of ‘fateful’ or ‘critical’ moments in the sense used by Giddens (Giddens, 1991; Thomson *et al.* 2002). They are moments of psychological and sociological significance where some aspect of interaction is made clear or salient but they are not necessarily turning points in one’s life.

Flashpoints are moments when our declarations and performances ‘work internally to reconstruct the momentary space of possibilities available...to shrivel up, or open out, say, one’s own or another’s reality’ (Shotter, 1995: 167). Harré and Gillett (1994) refer to this process as ‘signification’ where the meanings invoked changes the character of the situation. They point out, for example that the statement “I love you” immediately changes the situation. In this research, my method is based on the conviction that gender-identity production can be caught in mid-flight during such a flashpoint, where gender-identity appears to suddenly ‘intrude’ in the progress of a
social situation and changes, opens or closes the interaction in some way. These glimpses will be fleeting and subtle but nevertheless revealing.

Flashpoints or moments and situations approaching flashpoint status are by definition unlikely to be common events. Nor are they necessarily readily or unambiguously recognisable. My methodological challenge was to develop an observational strategy that was able to identify flashpoints either retrospectively or within a field setting.

Empirical observation generally, and in particular that undertaken in an everyday setting, has two interrelated methodological problems. The first problem is that of what to observe and attend to in the field setting. How can we recognise flashpoints and observe their key elements? The second problem is to minimise the effects caused by the presence of the researcher and the distortions caused by the researcher’s presuppositions which produce a symbolic violence upon the setting and its participants (Bourdieu, 1999).

**The ‘what to observe’**

The most problematic aspect of my observation approach was to decide what to observe from the profusion of events occurring within a classroom. A theory can provide a raft of ‘sensitising questions’ or observation points and the concept of flashpoint provides a key focus of the observations. However, a problem of interviews and in particular observations is that it is very difficult to know what is actually happening until after it has occurred, until subsequent events and reflection has worked something out. This is well put by Garfinkel (1967):

> The investigator frequently must elect among alternative courses of interpretation and inquiry to the end of deciding matters of fact, hypothesis, conjecture, fancy, and the rest, despite the fact that in the calculable sense of the term ‘know,’ he does not and cannot even ‘know’ what he is doing prior to or while he is doing it. Field workers, most particularly those doing ethnographic and linguistic studies in settings where they cannot presuppose a knowledge of social structures, are perhaps best acquainted with such situations (Garfinkel, 1967-78).
Garfinkel (1967) points out issues such as what to observe and how to interpret phenomena bedevils not only ethnographic approaches but all sociological endeavours. Lincoln and Guba (1985: 146) suggest that the resolution of this problem is achieved in part by using an emergent design and allowing the focus of the research to emerge as the study progresses.

Garfinkel’s solution, based on Weber and Mannheim, is to propose the ‘documentary method of interpretation’. Following Mannheim, the documentary method involves attempting to identify ‘…an identical homologous pattern underlying a vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning’ (Mannheim, cited in Garfinkel, 1967: 78). Each individual appearance is seen as a ‘document of’ or pointing towards an underlying pattern. In a hermeneutical fashion, what is known of the underlying pattern is itself used to interpret each individual appearance.

Garfinkel refers to this process as ‘fact production’ and goes further, arguing that the use of the documentary method is the routine method that people employ to understand and engage with everyday life. In this study, analytic attention is addressed to the underlying patterning of gendering children produce. Garfinkel’s experiments were often attempts at catching ‘fact production’ in mid-flight. In this study, my approach was to use the idea of flashpoints to glimpse the ‘clanking of the machinery’, a disjointed moment in the otherwise apparently seamless and evolving process of gender-identity production.

**Observations and presuppositions**

It is well recognised that researchers change the behaviours and actions of the participants simply by their presence, the development of the relationship or the questions asked, (e.g. Bourdieu, 1999; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Hollway and Jefferson; 2000). People will act differently simply because of the presence of another and the gender, age, class and interests of that person will, in complex ways, change behaviour.
The response to these difficulties has often been to standardise: the researcher attempts to ensure that all participants submit to similar, if not identical, questions, formats and procedures. Another approach is to attempt to become a ‘fly on the wall’, to minimise one’s intrusion and disappear as far as possible onto the wall. The first approach is to standardise the intrusion, the second is to minimise it.

There are clear problems with standardisation, particularly in a field setting and the positivism that generally underpins such standardisation. Standardisation generally assumes an underpinning objective reality from which the researcher can, at least in principle, obtain some direct, objective discoveries of that reality (Kvale, 1996; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). As we have seen above, such a reality and attempts at its measurement have been under sustained attack (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). However, if we consider that social reality is a construction, a result of a negotiated interaction between the researcher and researched, it becomes clear that a far more flexible method that can accommodate this interaction needs to be adopted. At best, one might be able to say that a research participant, when confronted by a standardised questionnaire, acts in such and such fashion, leaving open, or at best assuming, that people understood what was expected of them, cooperated with that expectation and would act in such a way if left to their own devices (Roiser, 1974).

However, the main problem I wish to focus on here is that this ‘standardisation’ approach fails to recognise that research forms part of a social relationship (Kvale, 1996; Bourdieu, 1999). It treats the accounts provided by the participant and the interventions of the researcher as unproblematic. The participant is rarely seen as reacting to, or engaging in, their own agenda in completing the survey or formal intervention. The opposite approach of minimising intervention can also suffer from this same problem. As Bourdieu (1999) has recognised, the minimisation of intervention may yield poor sociological results. Little or no intervention may mean that potentially revealing avenues remain closed. Good interviews intervene and take up issues, allow the participants – researcher and interviewer or ‘subject’ — to exchange views and to appropriate the research process (Bourdieu, 1999). As Kvale (1996) stresses, good interviews are ‘Inter Views’.
At this stage we have simply recognised the reflexive nature of the subject — that people change as a consequence of a researcher’s intervention. However, it is well recognised in the literature that the observations of the researcher, the questions asked and the notes taken, the interpretations made are themselves mediated by the researcher’s presuppositions, the researcher’s theory and values. We have the distorting hand of the intervention and the distorting eye of the theory.

Bourdieu (1999) proposes that the post-positivist response to the former is to try, as far as possible, to take this into account:

The positivist dream of an epistemological state of perfect innocence papers over the fact that the crucial difference is not between a science that effects a construction and one that does not, but between a science that does this without knowing it and one that, being aware of work of construction, strives to discover and master as completely as possible the nature of its inevitable acts of construction and the equally inevitable effects those acts produce. Bourdieu (1999: 608).

Specifically, Bourdieu calls for a ‘reflex reflexivity’, a sociological ‘feel’ or ‘eye’ that monitors these effects as they take place. The interviewer or observer should be as close in terms of social distance as possible, however, where this is not possible, to provide an environment where the interviewees may ‘legitimately be themselves’ without pretending that the social distance has vanished. This requires mentally ‘putting oneself in their place’ but is not limited to empathy. Putting oneself in their place does not by itself produce good questions.

Similarly, one may argue that the response to the distorting eye of theory is also to recognise this as an inevitable part of research. We must not only reduce and recognise social distance, but we must also see how our theories and presuppositions, our questions influence and produce the interactions, observations and recordings. Our theoretical lens is also creative, as it is from our theory that our questions and approaches derive.

This reflex reflexivity response, rather than removing the researcher, supports Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) naturalistic approach which utilises the human as instrument. By this Lincoln and Guba (1985: 39) argued that the researcher uses
him- or herself, and others, as the ‘primary data gathering instruments’. They argued that any other instruments e.g. paper and pencil testing, could not \textit{a priori} be sufficiently adaptable. They continue:

Because of the understanding that all instruments interact with respondents and objects but that only the human instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of that differential interaction; because the intrusion of instruments intervene in the mutual shaping of other elements and that shaping can be appreciated and evaluated only by a human; and because all instruments are value-based and interact with local values but only the human is in a position to identify and take into account (to some extent) those resulting biases (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 39-40).

The importance of their approach is to recognise that social research involves a social relationship and that this relationship needs to be recognised and addressed in the research method.

\textbf{The perspectives of the teachers}

Field observations of the classrooms also provide the opportunity to understand the teachers’ perspectives. Through the interviews I could explore the teachers’ accounts of how they dealt with gender issues, their attitudes towards gender and how they might treat children differently according to gender. While this was an important aspect of the research, teachers are generally experienced in working with children and could provide insight into their activities. To this end, teachers were seen as informants in the project as well as subjects of observation.

This necessitated developing two overlapping goals and two interview settings. One goal of the interviews was to elicit information that shed light on the teacher’s attitude and treatment of children according to gender, such as whether they saw boys and girls differently, spoke about them in a different manner, or stated that they treated them differently. The second goal of the interviews was to engage them as co-researchers or informants of the research enterprise. The intention was to explore with them various observations I had made of the children and invite comment and
discussion. I could, however, only undertake that once I was satisfied that the
tapat with the teacher(s) was such that they would not simply acquiesce but
disagree where they believed that my observation or interpretation was misguided.

There were two interview settings. There were a series of ‘formal’ interviews
separate from other teachers at a time arranged between myself and the teacher. In
addition, several informal interviews occurred in the staff room in the presence of
others or were a matter of open discussion and also in the classroom with the
teachers prior to or following a school period.

*Interviewing the children*

Field observations also provided the opportunity to interview the children. The
research literature described in the previous chapter suggests different attitudes of the
children towards school teachers and towards reading (e.g. Millard, 1997).
Interviewing the children could explore these differences. However, the key focus of
the study was not on such gender outcomes but on their construction. In addition, the
problem of the transparent self and transparent accounting is more likely to be
exacerbated with young children. It was unlikely that young children would have
well-developed communicative skills or insight into gender-identity production.
Group interviews provided a place to talk to, and observe, the children as they
attempted to answer the questions. Group interviews and, in particular, mixed
gender interviews provided an opportunity for gender dynamics and contestation to
come into play. Group interviews also avoid potential issues of an overly intrusive
research with young children.

*Research Method*

The research method I adopted was broadly informed by ethnographic or
‘naturalistic’ method described in Lincoln and Guba (1985). This approach fitted
well to both purposes of the observation of gender-identity production and
flashpoints in a natural setting and the underlying methodological and
epistemological requirements of the practice theory approach.
Lincoln and Guba (1985) outline fourteen characteristics of this approach. A summary of these characteristics is provided in Table 5.1. I chose not to use a standard or typical naturalistic or ethnographic method. As the research method developed, I wanted to contribute to the research through a disciplined observational framework. I feared that without such a framework, I would be subject to the same criticisms that I had made of the deductive interpretations in the educational research literature. Another constraint on this approach was that schools wished to limit access to the classrooms as far as possible. Telephone conversations with principals as well as informal contact with teachers gave me a firm understanding that most schools were unwilling to allow extended research times within schools. Some principals reported ‘research fatigue’, others had special programs or difficulties that they did not wish to be disturbed or would upset the research. I believed that the time taken to develop an idea of what was going on would lead to either outliving my welcome or lead to no schools participating in the study.

The classroom activities that the study focussed on were literacy and communication. This limited the intervention or disturbance in the schools and the classroom. While the extent and nature of gender differences in these areas remains controversial within the literature, this curriculum area is understood widely as intensively and intensely gendered. On this basis, it seemed more likely that this area, as opposed to other aspects of classroom work, would provide the opportunity to view the children, and for the children to produce gender-identity difference.

I planned to videotape the literacy and communication classes observed. The catching and identification of flashpoints required a method that can record events so that what constitutes a ‘flashpoint’ could be discerned on reflection, with changes in subsequent events, and later accounts of participants of the events or changes. This was to be combined with field notes and discussions with participants to produce a rich picture of how in and through routine events gender-identity is made salient. I simply needed to tape a number of lessons, develop an understanding based on my view and then analyse them accordingly. For the reasons detailed below, the video camera as a data collection method largely failed for both practical and theoretical reasons.
Table 5.1

Characteristics of Naturalistic Inquiry
(after Lincoln and Guba, 1985)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural setting</td>
<td>Reality cannot be understood separate from its context. Interaction and social relationships do not happen in an abstract social space but constitute that space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In this study, a natural setting was selected in recognition of the context dependent nature of social reality but also as a result of the need to observe process rather than focus on culturally sedimented (Gergen, 1994) outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human instrument</td>
<td>See discussion above (p. 134)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilisation of tacit knowledge</td>
<td>Intuitive knowledge is as important as propositional or discursive knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In this study, the identification of flashpoints was as much the result of tacit knowledge as ex post facto propositional knowledge. That is to say, flashpoints were felt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative methods</td>
<td>Qualitative methods are selected because they are more adaptable and they ‘expose more directly the nature of the transaction between the investigator and the respondent’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 40).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A key element of the study is the recognition of the social interaction between the research participants and myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposive sampling</td>
<td>Purposive sampling increases the scope or range of the data. This was the reason for selecting two schools from different socio-economic areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inductive data analysis</td>
<td>Inductive data approaches reflect and accommodate the interactions between investigator-respondent and the context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>Substantive theory emerges from the data and to approach the respondents as ‘neutrally as possible’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 41).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent design</td>
<td>The research design emerges rather than being designed a priori.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiated outcomes</td>
<td>Meanings and interpretations are negotiated between investigator and respondent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case study reporting mode</td>
<td>There is a preference in the naturalistic approach towards case study reporting, as it is more adaptable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiographic interpretation</td>
<td>Findings are interpreted concerning the particulars of the case and circumstances at hand rather than generalising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tentative application</td>
<td>There is a tentative, hesitant approach to a more broad application of the findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus-determined boundaries</td>
<td>The focus of the study – the research problems emerge from the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special criteria for trustworthiness</td>
<td>Traditional forms of credibility are inappropriate. New forms of trustworthiness are necessary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The design of the research therefore involved the use of the videocamera as the key method of observation, supplemented with notes made at the time and immediately following the observations. The use of the videocamera was to be supplemented by student interviews and teacher interviews. The study was undertaken in two primary schools in Melbourne, Victoria and comprised three parts: field observations; student interviews; and teacher interviews.

**Research Sample**

I selected two schools from the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne in which to conduct my study. To provide a somewhat broader cross section of the community one school was selected from an acknowledged affluent area of Melbourne—the inner East and one school was selected from a less affluent area in the outer East. In selecting each areas I tried to avoid selecting schools with a high proportion of the students coming from non-English speaking backgrounds. This was because ethnicity may also have a strong influence on literacy and add an extra layer of practical and theoretical complexity and such areas were avoided in the targeting of schools.

Two schools were selected rather than one to widen the range of children’s backgrounds and to reduce the possibility of selecting one unusual school. Although the schools were drawn from two different socio-economic catchment areas, socioeconomic status or class were not the focus of this study. One school “Eastern Hill” was drawn from a solid middle class suburb and the other was drawn from what can be characterised as a lower middle class area that included an industrial estate and housing commission estate “WestVale”. The second, lower socio-economic area was more heterogeneous in nature with pockets of affluence and upward mobility. Appendix I provides a summary of the socio-demographic characteristics of the catchment areas of the two schools.

Appendix I show that residents of WestVale and Eastern Hill are more likely to own their house, be a undertaking tertiary study, be employed as a manager or a professional, have a high household income and to have children less that ten years
of age than the average for the Melbourne Statistical Region. Both WestVale and Eastern Hill were less likely to be unemployed and to have low English skills than the Melbourne average and in the case of Eastern Hill to be less likely to have one-parent families. At face value, it can be argued that the broad catchment areas for both schools were slightly more affluent than Melbourne overall but the sample provided a reasonably wide range of children from different socio-economic positions. Discussions with teachers from WestVale stated that the area had a high number of children from separated families and a moderately high number of students from Non English Speaking Backgrounds.

**Approach to schools**

The Department of Education gave ethical approval to undertake the study and to approach schools. Overall six schools were approached, 5 from higher SES target areas and one from a lower SES area. Two high SES did not wish to participate, one already had two research projects being undertaken in the school, one gave initial agreement but the School Council decided not to proceed and one did not respond to the letter or follow-up telephone calls.

In all six schools, the principal of the school was sent a letter outlining the nature and anticipated degree of involvement by the children, teachers and school in the project. This was then followed up by telephone. Where the principal agreed that the study was feasible in the school, an interview with the principal was arranged and the project was discussed at length. The principals then discussed the matter with the Year 3 teachers and the Head of the junior school.

At WestVale school the principal reported that the Year 3 teachers were willing to proceed and the principal arranged a brief visit to the teachers in the staff room to introduce me. I was also required to present an overview of the research at a school meeting. The principal of WestVale also introduced me to one of her teachers as her ‘star teacher’ and asked that this teacher’s multigrade years 123 class be included in the study. The principal also arranged with the literacy program co-ordinator to coordinate interviews with teachers. Through these meetings and discussions it became
clear that teachers were unwilling to be interviewed out of school hours. Many teachers had children who they need to care for and other activities including school meetings outside of school hours. At WestVale the literacy program co-ordinator was able to take classes during class times while I interviewed teachers.

At Eastern Hill, the principal arranged a meeting between me and the Year 3 teachers and the research was discussed in detail. A further meeting was held at the instigation of the teachers to discuss some reservations they had with the project and the videotaping of the teachers and the children. The Principal at Eastern Hill was unable to provide class relief for teachers to participate in the interviews. She undertook to advise teachers of the project and to encourage teachers to participate in interviews.

Letters and consent forms to parents of children were then prepared and sent home with the children. A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix II. Similar consent forms were used to obtaining consent from teachers participating in the study. At WestVale, the literacy co-ordinator organised the mail out, follow up of parents and returns with the teachers. At Eastern Hill, the teachers prepared the mail out. Obtaining return of the consent forms proved to be a contracted process and one follow-up letter was sent out to all parents. The time between the initial mail out and the finalisation of the children permitted to participate in the study was approximately four weeks in both schools.

Table 5.2 provides the breakdown figures for consent by classroom and gender. Children whose parents did not give consent were not videotaped or interviewed as part of a group and their work was not taken. It is difficult to determine the reasons for not giving consent. One teacher at Eastern Hill observed that the boys who could not be videotaped were her poorest readers. My observations suggested that in at least some cases, the parent had not so much objected to the videotaping but had simply not got around to considering the issue. Teachers at both schools stated that parents get large number of requests from school and that it was sometimes difficult obtaining information from them.
Table 5.2
Consent for research participation by classroom and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In class</td>
<td>No. consent</td>
<td>In class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WestVale</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class One</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Two</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Three</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eastern Hill</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class One</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Two</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The higher consent rate at WestVale, I believe, was at least partly due to the coordinating efforts of the early literacy co-ordinator who was well known to the parents and who organised a weekly mail out and followed up the parents. The early literacy co-ordinator at WestVale had also reported that some of the parents of children with identified learning difficulties were also reluctant to participate and she had referred three of them to me to discuss the research with the parents. In these cases the parents mainly wanted assurance that their child would not be placed in a situation where the child might feel inadequate.

**Arranging field observations**

At both schools the timing of the field observations was dependent on negotiation with the teachers and their teaching curriculum. Teachers provided their teaching curriculum timetable and identified the times that they would be teaching reading writing and communication skills. A timetable of observations was then constructed and agreed. Table 5.3 provides the number of hours spent undertaking the field observations.
### Table 5.3
Field Observations/Videotaping (hrs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Observation of classroom interaction</th>
<th>Discussion with teacher/ time in classroom, with students absent</th>
<th>Playground/staff room observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WestVale</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class One</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Two</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Three</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eastern Hill</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class One</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Two</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Field work**

**Observations in the classroom**

Field observations in the classroom provided the opportunity to observe gender-identity production and how the children may seize upon opportunities to do so. In addition, field observation can also provide the opportunity to explore the relational and oppositional qualities of gender-identity construction within the classroom.

At the commencement of the study at WestVale, one of the teachers requested that she not be videotaped. The second teacher had a higher proportion of children where consent to be videotaped had not been given and she believed that adequate arrangements could not be made for these children. I was of the view that the teacher did not really want the videotaping in her class and that it was inappropriate to press her further. Finally, for the third class, the two university video cameras were inoperable and had been taken in for lengthy repairs at the time I needed them. As a result no videotaping occurred at WestVale.
This *ad hoc* change to the study meant that the field observations would not as systematic as had been planned and an observational schedule was quickly devised for each setting.

Classroom observations were divided into three key settings in order to structure my attention and give a clearer focus to my data collection and observation. These settings followed the structure of the classroom activities. They were:

- On the mat;
- At the tables /doing the rounds;
- Out the front; and
- Transitions between these events.

**On the mat**

In three of the four classes, almost all lessons and story telling occurred with the children on the floor at the front of the class and with the teacher sitting on a chair. During these observations I located myself in a variety of the positions — beside the teacher, to the side, and behind the children. I would then draw a diagram of the children’s seating arrangements.

The following points are the list that I developed and which emerged for the observational schedule:

- Seating and seating changes: who gets to the mat first, last by gender, recording seating change and context, movement on the mat, who leaves the mat last;
- Student-teacher interaction: asking and telling of questions. What the children do, what the teacher says;
- Discipline, rebukes, and consequences for the children; and
- Behaviour of children: when do they get excited, over what?, demeanour, talking excitedly, leaning back on hands.
At the tables

Students spent a fair proportion of their time during the observations ‘silent reading’ or undertaking the tasks set by the teacher. Silent reading was a period where the children were required to quietly read a book they had brought in from home or the library or other books provided by the teacher in the reading corner. All classes had silent reading. These sessions were normally held at the start of the school day or as the first session after recess or lunch. Silent reading was usually at this time as it allowed the teacher to prepare any last minute changes to the tasks set for the period. Also some teachers believed that it helped to settle the children prior to the lessons of the day.

The observations of children at the tables attempted to record the following

- Silent reading: demeanour, who gets up to change books, who looks like they are reading, who doesn’t;
- Writing and project work and rate of progress (this was an *ad hoc* measure as I noticed the boys speed off and nearly get their work done), attitude;
- Play and other behaviours that appeared unrelated to the task; and
- Ad hoc discipline (unable to systematically record)

Events at the tables were the most difficult to observe of all the settings. The children were far more conscious of being observed and were distracted by the observations. The children were aware when the videocamera was on them and the field of vision of the videocamera was too poor to catch their behaviour that was uninfluenced by the camera. By the time the videocamera had turned to capture ‘noteworthy events’, the children had stopped the behaviour of interest.

Out the front

Children in all classes were called on to perform various tasks such the presentation of project work, poems, scripts, plays and stories to the rest of the class. During this
period, the demeanour, expression, confidence and the interaction with the speaker and the audience would be observed.

**Transition**

Transition is the brief period between the conclusion of one task and the commencement of another. It included entering and leaving the class for recess and lunch, assembly and the arrival and departure from the school. The transition period also included those behaviours that occurred between the teacher sending the students to their new task and the commencement of that task. Transition typically involved physical movement of the children such as from the floor to the tables or in and out of the classroom.

Transition emerged as an important setting as it was in this period that the children were generally under less surveillance and their talking or physical behaviours were more likely to be covered by the general noise of movement and the teacher was often distracted by setting up the next task or dealing with student questions.

**Field observation and Interview focus**

The four settings provided a framework for the field observations. In addition to this framework, I observed the interactions between students and teachers and other students

**Student - teacher interactions**

If children are searching for opportunities to produce gender-identity then student - teacher interactions should provide examples of gender production, resistance and identification. The challenge was to record these interactions as carefully, focussing on demeanour and what was said immediately before during and after such that the context was clear.
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Students interact with a teacher in a number of ways:

- Routine school work: responding to questions and requests of the teacher. Such responses may be voluntary such as the child choosing to put their hand up to answer a question, or being singled out to answer, told to do a task (e.g. to come to the floor at the front);
- Student initiated: asking the teacher a question, seeking help or correction of work, volunteering to do a task;
- Non routine: discipline, requests by the teacher for assistance, talking to or interacting with the teacher between work;
- Teacher rounds: Teachers periodically move around the tables, either in direct response to a student demand, to inspect or assist work under way or to go to a table to provide a presence to ensure that the students get on with their work. Also the teachers may stay at their own desk and request that as students finish their work or have some query that they come to the desk; and
- Child out the front: Children are often asked to present work or perform to the class.

Student-student interactions

Students interact with each other in the classroom as well as in the playground by talking, playing, fighting, joking, making and breaking friendships and so on. The field observations focussed on these observations while the children were on the floor being taught a lesson, moving to and from the floor and in and out of the classroom and finally while at their tables or engaged in a task in the corridor.

Student-teacher-researcher interactions

Student-researcher and teacher-researcher interactions formed an important part of the study. Field notes were made of teacher-researcher interactions in the classroom and the staffroom and formal interviews were recorded. The key purpose of these was the use of the teacher as an informant.
Interviews and discussions with children

I undertook semi-formal group interviews as well as informal discussions or chats with students. The ostensive and primary purpose of the semi-formal group interviews was to get the children to talk about their likes and dislikes about and experience of schooling. The interview (see Appendix III) was centred on the children’s attitudes towards reading and the types of books they liked. The schedule was based on the interview schedule of Millard (1997). By focussing the conversation on reading and writing, it was hoped that the children could at least discuss gendered outcomes, if not produce such outcomes.

These interviews also provided a structured forum for the students to interact with the researcher. Within that space, the ways in which the students tackled the questions and interacted with each other could be observed. These interviews were to be supplemented by casual chats or informal interviews when not videotaping.

The initial plan was to interview children in small groups of 4 to 5 concerning their reading interests and attitudes. Children were to be interviewed in small groups in an open area to forestall any concerns of propriety. My plan was that I would take four or five children out of the class to a seating area in the corridor immediately outside the classroom and ask them semi-structured questions from the interview schedule about reading. Unfortunately there was no suitable and easily accessible space within the school to interview the children. The children were highly distracted in the corridor by passing school traffic and the noise. I found that this noise and their talking over the top of each other meant that the tape recording of the interviews were inaudible and unusable. I therefore reverted to note taking. As the observations progressed, I was able to interview small groups of children at the tables in the classroom.

Permission was sought and granted by parents to collect or photocopy material produced by the children in class. This material included drawings, short stories, journal entries and poems.
Teacher Interviews

Informal interviews and arranged, formal interviews were undertaken for the study. In both instances, and it was made clear as part of approach to the schools that the teachers were to be taken as informants to the study rather than as subjects of the study. My discussions with teachers prior to undertaking the study strongly suggested that many teachers had become cautious, if not hostile, to studies that, in their opinion, misrepresented and criticised their views. This view was subsequently supported by informal discussions in the school staff rooms.

In any event, the key focus of the study was on the children and their gender-identity not the teachers. I believed that the teachers, many of whom had considerable experience dealing with the children, could be used informally and formally as sounding boards and to provide insights and caveats to the events observed.

The teacher interviews included informal debriefing with the teachers of the observed classes about the course of events, explanations for what had happened or unusual moments. These events might also be discussed over lunch or coffee in the staffroom with the teacher or her colleagues. Other informal discussions occurred in the staffroom over the course of the day.

The formal interviews followed a semi-structured interview. The schedule of the interview is attached as Appendix IV. The purpose of the interview design was to gain rapport with the teacher and to get the teachers to speak about the literacy skills of the children. The interview was then to progress on the basis of their experience to discuss gender differences. I expected that teachers would be reluctant to discuss gender differences directly or immediately. Unqualified or hasty statements about gender can easily be interpreted as sexist or ignorant. I generally found that teachers were reluctant to discuss gender differences initially and it was not until the interviewee believed that they would not be misunderstood that an opinion was ventured.

The literacy co-ordinator arranged 14 interviews at WestVale. No teacher approached by the co-ordinator refused an interview. In addition to a general
invitation to participate, each interviewee was invited to participate personally by the literacy coordinator who took the class while the interview was undertaken. The interviewees were selected in consultation with the researcher on the criterion that each year level was represented.

At Eastern Hill, the principal invited all staff to participate. In the staff room, I talked to staff individually or in groups about the project and staff were invited to participate. In contrast to WestVale, the response of staff to the project was lukewarm. While the principal has stated that she would get the support of staff, she was on long service leave during the study.

Staff at Eastern Hill listened politely to the researcher but rarely asked questions or showed great interest about the project. No staff member at Eastern Hill offered to participate in an interview and, when asked directly, staff tended to shift uncomfortably in their seats and gave vague indications that they would think about participating. Only the two teachers in whose classrooms the observations took place were interviewed.

Teachers at both schools expressed some wariness of the interviews and the study. This was expressed more at WestVale as I gained greater rapport with the teachers. The main cause of their cautiousness was that I had a ‘hidden agenda’ of my own and the research would end up criticising the teachers; that they had in some way failed to do the right thing in the classroom. All teachers interviewed were women except one. At WestVale there were only two male teachers. At Eastern Hill, only the vice-principal was male.

**Discussions with Year Three teachers**

Informal discussions with teachers occurred during classroom activities. The teacher would explain why they had said or done something, or provide other background information and often initiated these discussions. At the end of a classroom session or in the staff room, I would talk to the teacher about what had occurred in the immediate teaching session. These discussions were recorded in a notebook as they occurred or immediately following. More comprehensive notes were then made on a
wordprocessing file based on the notebooks on the same or following day to the discussions.

**Data analysis methods**

Kvale (1996) describes five main approaches to interview analysis that are also germane to field survey and naturalistic approaches. Table 5.4 provides an overview of these approaches.

Kvale (1996) notes that the most commonly used method is the *ad hoc* approach and given its flexibility is the most appropriate for a constructionist approach. An *ad hoc* approach does not mean, however, the convenient or atheoretical application of technique. It is, to continue the traveller metaphor, more in the craft and art of going to the right places (identifying the issues) and providing an apt description of the experience encountered than it is the application of a set of techniques. Such techniques are used as necessary and judged according to the trustworthiness of the author and the apparent skill of their application within the intellectual community.

The rigid application of a particular approach, leads further away from the data rather than to a better description of that data. The techniques itemised in Table 5.4 and discussed by Kvale (1996), and also the processing of naturalistic data discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), are techniques which the skilled and experienced ethnographer or researcher draws upon in a selective and ‘scholarly’ fashion.

**The ad hoc method**

The notion of ‘data analysis’ implies a separation of data collection from its analysis. As Kvale (1996) recognises in his response to the question of how to analyse 1,000 pages of transcript, the scope, focus, analysis and interpretation is iterative and simultaneous process throughout the research: it is not simply a process that occurs at the end of the data collection phase.
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Table 5.4
Approaches to the Analysis of Meaning
Adapted from Kvale (1996)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Approach to analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaning condensation</td>
<td>Abridgement of meanings expressed by participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning categorisation</td>
<td>Categorisation of meanings expressed by participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>Finding narratives or stories expressed by participant or creating narratives using the meanings expressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>Hermeneutical interpretation of expression to uncover structures of meaning and relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad hoc</td>
<td>Free play use of all techniques during analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The naturalistic approach described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and outlined in Table 5.1 supports this approach. For as the boundary and focus is produced in interaction with the research participants, so is the analysis. Indeed, the boundary and focus of the study could not be adequately formed without such an analysis.

In his textbook, Neuman (1994) provides an excellent overview of this process. He proposes that field research undergoes a number of phases according to the time spent in the field. Initially, the questions and observations are oriented towards description. That is, they attempt to describe the events or behaviours. The questions and observations then move towards structural questions, where the research begins to categorise events and ask questions or make observations that shed light on these questions. Finally, the research moves into the contrast or disconfirmatory mode, whereby alternative interpretations of the researcher are considered.

In this study, the descriptive or exploratory mode focussed on the behaviours of the children in the settings. Thus observations were made that many girls arrived promptly to the mat when called. In the structural phase, I placed far closer attention on the interactions between the girls themselves and the teacher and the issue was discussed with the teachers. Finally, in the disconfirmatory mode, alternatives were
considered: were the children all girls, the same girls and were other explanations available?

**Issues of entering the field and gaining rapport**

**Videotaping**

No videotaping occurred at WestVale. Videotaping of all sessions occurred at Eastern Hill. The teachers decided that in their view there was no need for children who did not have permission to be videotaped to leave the room so long as they were positioned off camera and they were asked to not say anything during the taping sessions. The teachers also believed that it was difficult to make alternative arrangements for these children. After some discussion, this procedure was agreed and the children sat behind the camera.

The differing responses to participating in the project reflect the different ways in which the researcher was able to enter the field. At WestVale, the principal organised a talk by the researcher on the project to staff and the principal gave a strong endorsement of the project. The principal also arranged for the literacy program coordinator to assist in the arrangement of the interviews. On the other hand, at Eastern Hill, the principal informed the staff by notice that the research was being undertaken. Some discussion at a staff meeting may have taken place but in the absence of the researcher. Staff at Eastern Hill were aware that the project was being undertaken but saw the project more as one that involved Year Three teachers rather than the school in general. In addition, no teaching relief could be organised to allow teachers to participate.

The difficulty of organising teacher interviews was unforeseen in the initial stages of the project. Classroom teachers spend a great deal of time with their classes and times where the class was absent was viewed as an important time for the teacher to prepare lessons and undertake administrative duties. Teachers were also unwilling or unable to spend time after school being interviewed. While there was some flexibility, the teachers needed to be motivated to make the necessary arrangements.
At WestVale, the literacy coordinator was able to organise interviews and take some classes during the interviews and found times for interviews when specialist teachers were taking the class or during lunchtime.

In addition to this difficulty, the videocamera equipment may also have been an entry barrier between the researcher and staff at Eastern Hill. On more than one occasion, I was referred to as the ‘man with the videocamera’. While it was difficult to determine, the videotaping appeared to place a barrier between the researcher and the staff. The videotaping was an exotic intrusion into the school, a device of surveillance that set the researcher further apart from the staff. This distancing may have led to a failure to develop strong rapport with staff. At WestVale staff would talk in the staff room or invite me to join them at their lunch table. This provided me with an opportunity to talk about the project and encourage them to participate in the study. This occurred less frequently at Eastern Hill.

At Eastern Hill, the principal was on leave during the fieldwork. Unlike at WestVale, the arranging of interviews was left to me. The staff room was far quieter and more reserved. While polite and friendly, teachers were less likely to engage in a discussion about the project and there was little room to establish a rapport that would encourage people to be interviewed or to open discussion in the staff room. This meant that with the exception of the two, Year Three teachers, I was unable to arrange interviews with the teachers at Eastern Hill.

**Establishing rapport and trust**

In the early stages of observations, the key issue was to obtain the trust of the teachers and the students. While I had spent considerable time with the teachers explaining the study and my approach, particularly stressing that the study was non-judgemental, all teachers were nervous about teaching while I was in the room. Four of the five teachers expressed the concern that my presence would disrupt the class a little, implying that their classes were generally more well behaved than they would likely be during my presence and secondly that the teachers may well be required to work harder during my presence to maintain order. Such concerns were
understandable given that I was an unknown quantity who, through my actions and presence, could disrupt the class, that my assurances and account of the study could be deceptive or duplicitous. Finally, while teachers understood the goals of the project, they did not necessarily believe that through my observations that I would be able to identify gender differences or anything ‘remarkable’.

In summary, I had to demonstrate:

- My trustworthiness concerning the project;
- My competence in the classroom dealing with the children; and
- My competence in observation and understanding of the classroom situation.

With respect to trustworthiness and competence of observation, my major strategy was to share my observations and ask for comments and clarification of incidents I did not quite see or understand. This usually occurred after the lesson had been completed and the children were dismissed, in the staffroom or immediately before the next session and prior to the children arriving in the room. These discussions served the dual purpose of gaining additional information and views of the teacher as well as obtaining rapport. Special care was taken in discussions with the teachers to elicit their views of a particular event and my observations or comments were provided in a tentative form. During these discussions it was clear that the teachers wanted to know what I had observed. I believe that this was partly the teacher attempting to be helpful but also their way of finding out whether my observations were judgemental either about themselves or the children.

**Establishing communication with the children**

For each class, I was introduced in a similar manner. The children would be told who I was and reminded of the project and requested to provide their usual greeting “Good Morning, Mr Coul…” invariably mispronouncing or not understanding my surname. They would then smile at their mistake and I would smile back. I would then briefly tell them that I was doing a project on the different ways boys and girls learn to read and that I would be talking to them in groups and sitting in the classes over the next few weeks. While table work was going on, I would go around and
introduce myself to each table and ask their names and ask them some general adult-
to-child questions as to whether they liked school, what they liked best and what they
liked least at school and whether they liked reading.

The children’s attitudes to my presence appeared to range from cautiousness, to
indifference to interest and even apparent excitement. In the first sessions, the
children were particularly aware of my presence and they were unsure of my
disciplinary role. For example, a boy would push a girl, a girl would whisper to
another and both would give sly glances towards me, seeing whether I would tell the
teacher or discipline the child directly. As they became familiar with my presence
and they learned that at worst, I would write something in my notebook. During
these interactions, I would try to appear neither as encouraging nor discouraging the
behaviour.

Gender differences in the way children approached me and their initial attitudes
towards the project and me will be discussed later. During these initial interactions I
felt that the children were testing me. A child would say something to gauge my
reaction. For example a child might say ‘the best thing about school is lunchtime’ to
the laughter of others at the table. More obviously, in the early stages of the project,
a child would do something such a poke another child and look at me to see whether
I would do anything about it. Children would sometimes then commit some minor
infraction while I was talking to them or close by and again see what I would do. My
response to this testing was to attempt to neither approve nor disapprove of their
actions. Where a child was apparently joking I would share the joke, for example
mock belief and surprise at their statement, and where the child committed an
infraction, depending on the circumstances, I might look towards the teacher,
implying that it was the teacher that they should be concerned with or look away as if
I was not interested in what they were doing.

Within a short time I felt that I was an accepted curiosity in the classroom and
children would spontaneously talk to me as I walked around the room or on the way
to the classroom. During transitions and classwork on the floor, with exceptions
noted in the findings, the children had forgotten my presence as they undertook their
daily activities.
Chapter Five: — Methodology

Classes with videocamera

In the first classes where the videotaping would occur I took the videocamera along to show the children but did not tape the sessions. In the classes, I stated what I was doing and that any child who did not want to be videotaped even where they had returned a signed consent form would not be forced to be videotaped and they just needed to tell me or their teacher before my return next week or at any time during the taping sessions. No child approached the teacher or me.

In the first videotaping of the class, the children did appear self-conscious during the class lesson and there was some waving in front of the camera. During the taping of table work the children did not appear particularly self-conscious. However, it was very difficult to record children who were not working but playing or interacting at the tables. Children were very aware of when the camera was recording their activity and, with rare exceptions, behaved themselves while they were being recorded. While the camera was focussed on a particular group I would watch other groups. There I would observe some activity and move the camera to that activity. Invariably the children stopped the activity in question.

Issues of note taking and field observation recording

Chaos of the classroom

Each class had up to 30 students in the classroom, one teacher and in some classes, one or two teacher aides. The classrooms were far noisier than I expected. They were to some extent ‘chaotic’ and the number of interactions occurring at any point was quite daunting, particularly in the early stages of the observations. At this point in the research, the key problem of the ‘what to observe’ discussed above in this confusing mass of children, teachers and curricula was foremost in my mind.

The activities of the classroom were difficult to capture through any recording technique. Not surprisingly, it was impossible in notetaking to record all interactions
observed in the classroom. The children are quite skilled at doing things unnoticed by the teacher and a researcher. Many things across the classroom would be happening at once. I might be focussing upon, say, a group of girls who appeared to have manoeuvred themselves outside the gaze of the teacher and to be quietly talking and the boys at the back of the class would become boisterous over some matter that I did not observe.

Table work was the most difficult area to observe as not all children could be within the field of vision at one time. My approach was to observe table work from near the teacher’s table. During these observations I would scan each table and record what the students were doing (talking, playing, quietly working etc.) and record ‘incidents’ as described above. I would then focus in turn on one table for five minutes or so and record the tasks and interactions made.

Flashpoints were events or incidents that cut across the systematic observation and recording of student involvement. To this extent the observation and recording of an incident was subjective, that the activity was worthy of recording. What made something a flashpoint was that ‘something happened’. Such an event would generally be quite obvious to the participants, however I also have included some events that affected me as the research instrument, because they seemed to jut out from the routine running of the classroom.

Flashpoints were frustrating to record. From somewhat quiet and routine notetaking I would shift suddenly to frenzied period of notetaking and it was difficult to continue close observation and take notes at the same time. I would follow up by making further notes immediately following the observation period and discussion with the teacher involved or at times other teachers in the classroom.
Limitations of videotaping

There were four significant limitations of the videotaping sessions:

(1) One of the most significant areas of various forms of gender display occurred during periods of transition – coming in and leaving the classroom, moving around the class and to and from the mat. During these periods the videorecorder had to be turned off to ensure that children who were not permitted to be taped were not taped.

(2) The tapings lacked sound or had poor sound quality. The videorecorder was largely immobile and was fixed to two basic positions in one classroom and one position in the second classroom at Eastern Hill. This meant that while the demeanour of students was recorded, their voices and the teacher’s could not be heard in most cases.

(3) There were serious limitations of field of view. No matter how hard I tried, the interactions of the students seemed to be occurring off camera. The camera could swing to focus on the activity but generally speaking the time taken to identify and turn the camera to the activity meant that the activity had stopped, sometimes stopping as a consequence of the camera movement.

(4) The taping afforded less opportunity for interaction with the students since I was generally required to monitor the camera. This meant opportunities to talk to the students were limited and the children saw the study as an exercise in videotaping rather than discussion. The rapport gained with the children was considerably less at Eastern Hill than at WestVale where I did not use the videocamera..

As the research progressed, I discovered that the videotaping created a social distance between me and the teachers and the students. The working of the camera meant that I was generally stuck behind the camera rather than with the students. I was not able to ask questions while using the camera. My ‘sociological eye’
(Bourdieu, 1999) had been effectively blinded by the technology and because of the resulting social distance, I was less able to follow up the children’s actions and tease out, test and disconfirm ideas as I had done during the more traditional notetaking approach at WestVale. As a result, my findings and analysis were richer from the observations at WestVale where I relied on notes than at Eastern Hill where I taped the classes.

While I would counsel any prospective single researcher study of classroom activities against using a videocamera, I believe that a dual approach with two or more researchers might be successful. One researcher could undertake more traditional fieldwork and lead the research, interview the protagonists and so on while the second researcher could play a secondary recording role.

**Conclusion**

The observations in the classrooms and the interviews provided a rich array of data for analysis. This was despite the technical and practical difficulties with the video and audio recording the classroom and the group interviews respectively. While this meant that my observations, recording, and notetaking were less structured than initially planned, the data collection techniques remained disciplined but open to the insights and alternative viewpoints that arose in the field. Even the group interviews, which were not particularly successful in their original purpose of eliciting information about reading, provided important insights into the social interactions and borderwork of the children. Those children in the interviews, but I believe most of the participants and teacher interviews, were provided the opportunity and were able to appropriate the inquiry and to be ‘legitimately themselves’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 608).

The validity of the method and subsequent analysis rests, at least in part, on authenticity criteria, discussed above. That is to say, the grounds of validity rest upon fairness and trustworthiness. Above all they rest, in my view, in reducing ‘as much as possible the symbolic violence exerted through the relationship … and to set up a relationship of active and methodical listening” (Bourdieu, 1999: 608, italics in
original). As Bourdieu remarks, and I have found, such a position is difficult to sustain. Moreover, it is also Bourdieu who expresses the goals of my method and upon which it success or failure needs to be evaluated:

I would say that the interview can be considered a sort of *spiritual exercise* that, through *forgetfulness of self*, aims at a *true conversion of the way we look at other people* in the ordinary circumstances of life. The welcoming disposition, which leads one to make the respondent’s problems one’s own, the capacity to take that person and understand them just as they are in their distinctive necessity, is a sort of *intellectual love*: a gaze that consents to necessity in the manner of the ‘intellectual love of God,’ that is, of the natural order, which Spinoza held to be the supreme form of knowledge (Bourdieu, 1999: 614).

To this end, I believe the methods employed here have been successful.
CHAPTER SIX

Gender-identity in the Classroom

Introduction

My empirical work is an investigation of how the self is assembled and how gender is produced, and produced so consistently, from contingent, shifting social relations and it explores the ‘flat and empirical question, “What happens?”’ (Foucault, 2002: 337). It is an exploration of how, from all these vectors, and interstices, and varying relations of power, little children turn ‘him- or herself into a subject’ (Foucault, 2002: 327).

In doing so, the focus of the study is on the production of gender-identity and on the school as a site of production rather than the reproduction. As I have described earlier, much of the educational literature has its explanatory and interpretive focus on reproduction of social relations and the reproduction of masculinist hegemony in particular. The stress in these studies has been on the children as being more or less passive receivers of hegemony. My interest, however, is in how the children discover and invent gender, difference and identity and the materials they utilise and draw upon and the focus is upon the children’s participation and engagement in the making of gender-identity. The descriptions and interpretations here are not meant to identify an overarching or underlying cause but to show the need to include the reflexivity of the actors involved in the instantiation of moment, their social attempts to join the disparate and contingent social practices at that moment, and their role in the assemblage of the self.
The aim of the research has been to explore the process of continuous becoming rather than the content of the outcome. I am addressing the building process rather than the outcome of the process. The outcomes, such as differences between the boys and the girls, are of interest mainly as they serve to provide a clue to the process.

An important methodological problem has been how to investigate and ultimately to write about girls and boys without making the difference myself – seeing something that was not there and where there were differences, avoiding reifying those differences. As I prepared this chapter on my observations, the desire to be lucid and concise leads to a language that gives the appearance of homogeneity within gender and heterogeneity between gender. To say that ‘girls did this whereas boys did that’ gives the unavoidable impression that ‘girls on average’, ‘most girls’ or some frequency engaged in the particular behaviour. In some instances, this is the case. However, in a manner similar to Weber’s ideal types, what I have attempted to do is to develop, where appropriate, ideal types from which boys and girls can be seen to be departures from or approaches towards these behaviours. Closer analysis may reveal sub-groups, within and in opposition to, these general types, such as those sub-cultures identified by Reay (2001) in her study of primary school girls in the United Kingdom.

This chapter is divided into three major sections. In the first section I shall discuss the role of the teacher and the school in the production and reproduction of gender. In the second section, I report my ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of my observations in each of the settings in the field: on the mat, out the front, round the tables and the student-teacher interaction within those setting. It is in this section that I attempt to report the flashpoints and the how the children seize and make gender. In the final section, I report on the findings of the group interviews.

**The School, Teachers and Gender-identity**

In Chapters Three and Chapter Four, I argued that sex-role, reproductionist and hegemonic perspectives have all emphasised the ways in which adults and broader
Chapter Six: — Gender Identity in the Classroom

Society impose gender and gender-identity on the children. This being the case, teachers and the school system should be expected to play an important and identifiable role in the imposition of gender and the reproduction of gender-identity. In this section, I draw upon my observations in the field, teacher interviews and discussions in the staffroom to consider the way in which the teachers perceived their role and influence, their attitudes and approaches to gender-identity and how they might undermine or support the children with respect to gender-identity.

Overall, my observations and interviews with teachers suggest that they are ambivalent and cautious participants in gendered activities. As a group, both observed and interviewed, teachers were aware of the ways in which conventional gender closed off opportunities for children and saw their role as broadening the possibilities for all children. The teacher interviews, informal discussions in the staffroom, and observations within the classrooms all indicated that the teachers were aware of and concerned about, gender issues in the classroom and the school.

Teachers appeared to be reasonably well informed about gender issues in the school. Both staffrooms had equal opportunity posters displayed prominently in their classrooms. Teachers at WestVale had recently undertaken an Education Department workshop on violence in schools and a staff member was investigating the gendered use of the playground as part of her higher degree study. Many of the staff had undertaken gender equity courses as part of their training or through seminars. A number of staff approached me at WestVale following a presentation of my study expressing interest in gender issues.

Teachers were a little more circumspect at Eastern Hill. One teacher under observation at Eastern Hill\(^\text{15}\) always referred to her students as children rather than as girls and boys. This was not common practice, however. One teacher was a recent graduate and her usage reflected current teaching college pedagogy. At Eastern Hill, the teachers of both classes had enforced mixed seating patterns to discourage segregation and encourage mixing.

\(^{15}\) Pseudonyms are used for all teachers, students and the schools.
At WestVale, there had been some caution towards my research from some sections of staff as there was a perception that research usually ‘blamed the teachers’ and pushed simplistic and unworkable points of views. This attitude was expressed to me during discussions in the staff room. I attempted to address this issue during my discussions with staff and at the beginning of the interviews with teachers, I carefully explained that the teachers were not the subject of the study but were informants and experts on children in the classroom. During the interview, I then asked them to comment on an observation that I had made, trying to provide them opportunity and encouragement to disagree with my observation\textsuperscript{16}.

Throughout the interviews, the teachers at both schools displayed complex but essentially progressive attitudes towards gender equity. Teachers were reluctant, especially at the beginning of the interviews to identify any differences between boys and girls in their class. The teachers were sensitive to gender differences and to the issue of treating boys and girls differently. To identify a gender difference was to lay oneself open to misunderstanding and an accusation of sexism. A significant part of my interview time was devoted to gaining the trust of the teacher and they would often follow a pattern of explaining that (i) they believed in gender equality; (ii) they tried not to treat the boys and girls differently; but (iii) they did observe differences in the behaviours in the classroom.

Teachers rarely introduced any observations of their own of gender differences spontaneously. The following, albeit lengthy, quotation from a sixth-grade teacher captures this process of talking about gender difference. Having gained some rapport during the interview, I would make an observation about some different behaviour of the boys and girls. This would be based on my own observations, other teacher comments, or an interpretation of the teacher’s previous comments during the interview.

DC: And girls seem to ask more questions about how to set the task out, take longer to get to the task at hand, they might do …

\textsuperscript{16} A balance between possibly leading the teacher and with providing an issue for the teacher to discuss needed to be struck. By placing them in the role of informant rather than subject, this gave them the opportunity to disagree and to appropriate the inquiry (Bourdieu, 1999).
Chapter Six: — Gender Identity in the Classroom

MT: [interrupts] Borders.

D: Borders and things like that. And then they will slowly work through the problem. Is that something you see?

MT: Yes, You hate to think that you’re, you know, that you’re promoting or continuing on, you know, these little rituals [pause] I don’t want to slot them into boxes, you know. These were issues when I was studying. I did a unit on gender and education and I must admit that yes, the first time you think about things, ‘Wow is that true?’ All the research showed that teachers called boys names in a negative way more than girls which were positive and all this and you do have to, you know, you have to keep yourself making sure you are aware of all that. But for whatever reason the bottom line is, yeah, you are right; girls get on with things in a different way to what boys do. And I would like to think that I was very egalitarian in that way in the classroom that I tried not to promote either one above the other one or not to gear myself towards boys are a hassle and girls are good or anything but, the bottom line is yes, I’d tend to use, you know boys’ names more when I have to ask them to get on a task, or in what ways do you think you could improve that piece of work Fred? You know.

This quotation was typical of the responses of the teachers, comprising an affirmation of equality, a statement of qualification or study and an admission of difference.

Although the aim of the study was not to develop a systematic joint case study of the schools, some context is useful. Women principals ran both schools and almost all the staff at both schools were women. Equal time appeared to be given to boys and girls at the assemblies I attended. Girls and boys were represented equally in the presentation of school reports and awards. The children were split into groups of boys and girls at assembly. Students at both schools wore uniforms and the girls at both schools were permitted to wear shorts and trousers. At both schools, younger schoolgirls wore either a dress or pants, while older schoolgirls invariably wore pants. At Eastern Hill, prior to entering the rooms, the children formed two loose lines of boys and girls to enter the rooms. However, if anything this marked a coming together of the two groups side by side at the end of highly segregated play rather than a separation enforced by the school.
At both schools it was not obvious that the children were being disciplined into boys’
and girls’ groupings from the top down. It seemed most likely, from my
observations that the schools’ management team were very much like the teachers:
ambivalent participants rather than enthusiastic supporters of gender processes in the
school. Both principals and the vice-principals of the schools expressed support for
the purpose of the study.

The discourse of the teachers was that of child-centred pedagogy (Walkerdine,
1984). The teachers were focussed on developing the individual talents of each
child, irrespective of gender. They believed in a ‘broad education’ for all children.
This discourse was best expressed at WestVale, which had a significant minority of
Asian students. Many teachers at the school feared that some of the Asian students
were being pushed scholastically at the expense of their social and emotional
development.

Teacher: Ching Yee is from an Asian background, with a very, very, very demanding mother
who expects a lot, I feel sorry for Ching Yee, she is going to have no childhood, she won’t take
risks because I think mum, is like what I said before, so she writes very little. Her reading is
very good but she will write very little and try and do as little as possible and I think, which
probably isn’t to do with anything [inaudible], she works very hard for a reason.

DC: You mean like homework?

Teacher: Before and after school, weekends, the whole bit. Very big in that Chinese
community. Being, working hard. Often don’t have a lot to write about either because their
lives are very structured and homework, piano, swimming, chess. You know they don’t do the
normal things like making the cubby in the backyard and playing games in the back street.
(NH, year 123)

Stuart. A very quiet little boy, a loner. He is Chinese. His favourite thing is computer games
and reading. His family are supportive of education. He learns piano and goes to Kumon
maths. He is very keen. He doesn’t invite friends over to his place. He does play because he
plays at his mother’s friends place. There seems to be no social interaction except in home life.
He borrows books, a lot of library books. He is very strong in writing English, very good for a
child from a non- English speaking background. He reads anything, fiction as well as non-
fiction. He is not into footy or footy magazines. He tends to back away and is not confident in
physical activities. He needs the opportunity to have a go, he tends to fall back in those
activities. Sometimes I ask that Victor [another boy not proficient at sport] and Stuart are captains in one of those activities, the other children are surprised ‘Victor?’, ‘Stuart?’ They also may get an extra turn, they need the extra time in this. (FY, year 3)

Both teachers above state a commonly expressed view of appropriate child development and teaching in the staffroom in both schools. The approach to schooling, in contrast to the perceived cultural approach of the local Chinese Australians, was one of being confident, ‘taking risks’ and broadening their view rather than one of ‘learning facts’ and ‘not taking risks’. The teachers saw their role as one of opening children of either gender to the possibilities of education and to life, to facilitate their learning and to encourage risk-taking. Risk taking involved answering questions and taking initiative in class, writing funny stories and participating in sport.

Children at WestVale were often described on the criteria of ‘risk taking’. As part of the interviews, the teachers were asked to describe children who were the most and least proficient at reading and writing. Teachers would, at times, describe the child as ‘not a risk-taker’. They would illustrate this point by describing a cautious approach to writing by sticking to the ‘safe topics’ or mundane events and never putting up their hands unless the girl or boy was completely sure of the answer.

These attitudes of the teachers reflect a child-centred pedagogy that allows the child involvement and direction in the learning enterprise (Walkerdine, 1984). On the one hand, this child-centred pedagogy may serve as an important counter against particular or specific teacher, parent and institutionalised views of what a child, a boy or girl should be. It may serve as a counter against some regimes of subjectification. However, on the other hand, the approach has been criticised for permitting the children to persevere with conventional gender forms (Walkerdine, 1984). Left to their own devices, boys and girls may not break down the ‘borders’ of gender. The ‘risks’ they take are unlikely to be those of crossing gender barriers.

Kamler et al. (1994) identified class management issues as often leading teachers to unwittingly reinforce and support conventional gender behaviour of children. My observations support this conclusion. However, the focus on outcomes can mask
how it comes about – balancing the pedagogical, class management aims against, and
in response to, pre-existing and entrenched nature of the gendered activities of the
children. It does not appear to be the case that the teacher is unwittingly ‘moulding’
pliable children through simple ineptness or lack of awareness. Careful attention to
the process of interactions between teacher and students show that it is an interactive
process and the teacher is effectively trading off and balancing a variety of
competing goals in the classroom under a general overarching aim of increasing the
educational and social opportunities for all children.

One area in which it was apparent that conventional masculinity was at the service of
pedagogical aims was motivating the learning of boys. This was a key issue of the
teachers at both schools. The solution to the boys’ poor motivation was to make the
learning relevant to their conventional gender interests. One teacher made a boy a
‘computer monitor’ to motivate his learning. In the case of reading, teachers would
permit children on selected days to bring material of their own choice for ‘silent
reading’ or simply relax monitoring. A common approach was to allow sporting, car
and computer game magazines to read during ‘silent reading’. Some girls would
bring *Dolly* or *Girlfriend* magazines\(^\text{17}\) on those days.

Encouraging the boys to read appeared to be a greater problem than for the girls
across the classes and it was clear that the major purpose of providing reading choice
days was to encourage many of the boys to read on those occasions. Teachers were
resigned to this approach. As one teacher stated:

> We have silent reading after lunch and some of the boys bring AFL sticker books, 3 to 4 boys
and some girls might bring *KZone* magazine. I’ve tried to limit such things to every Friday but
I don’t always follow it up. I tend to do so when I find them just looking at the pictures or
talking. I don’t follow it up as I should because it is reading all the same (FY year 3, WestVale).

On the other hand, the issue the teachers raised most often about girls was the need to
broaden their reading and interest *away* from ‘baby sitter’ type books, girls’
magazines and other highly conventionally gendered reading materials.

\(^{17}\) *Dolly* and *Girlfriend* are two popular magazines aimed at the young adolescent girl market in
Australia.
Sally is one of my top readers. Like a lot of the girls in the class she will read the babysitter type books if she can. I think she reads that at home. I try to get her to read other things, non-fiction as well as fiction.

Some of them are reading [inaudible]. I’ve got a few girls who are right into things like the Babysitter Club books which I hope they move off them. I think that’s just a stage they go through (LU, year 123).

In these and other activities, the teachers were responding to the interests and motivations of the children. To this extent, the teachers were tolerating, even supporting the restricted gender choices of boys and girls in order to motivate the children, despite the teachers’ own views concerning the conventional or conservative nature of the material. The teachers traded gender conventionality for the encouragement of any form of reading because as the stated above ‘it is reading all the same’. Nevertheless, it would seem that, given the circumstances of an overall higher motivation to learn generally shown by the girls, the teachers do attempt to broaden the girls’ reading and interests away from conventional gender forms.

Another area in which the teachers appeared to accept highly gendered activities was in the area of sport. Sporting activities were extremely popular among the boys. As discussed below, boys described sport or physical activities as the ‘best thing’ about school. Boys would impatiently wait to be let out to play sport. Walking through the playgrounds, most boys were engaged in some form of physical activity. Younger boys tended to play ‘foursquare’, the eldest boys played football. Basketball was also popular. Each school listed announcements at assembly concerning the senior girls’ netball and boys’ football results. The boys’ results were listed last. Teachers’ references to any particular boy often talked about the boy’s sporting prowess or aptitude. It was seen as a significant aspect of a boy’s personality.

Simon is a sportsman, who is quite clever but couldn’t care less about being clever, he’d rather be the best cricketer in the world, he’s not a good footballer but he’s very, very good at cricket and he’s playing that and he has private coaching and he just loves it, he eats, breathes his sport (OT, Year 6).
Girls were seen by teachers to be far less passionate about sport. Girls would from time to time, be identified as being interested in sport, or being ‘sporty’. Boys, it would appear ‘eat and breathe sport’, girls on the other hand might be ‘sporty’. This was supported by the field observations that on the whole, the boys were far more interested as a group in sport, both as participants and spectators.

Sport was strongly supported at both schools. The office waiting areas at WestVale and Eastern Hill displayed trophies and pennants from previous successes. School assemblies announced sporting results and children who had achieved sporting success outside the school were congratulated. Given this, and the strength of feeling of the boys, the school and teachers would most likely risk alienating the boys from the school were the school not to support sport.

Teachers were also concerned with the children ‘fitting in’ socially. A lack of interest in sport by boys was seen as a concern. Some teachers expressed concern about boys who had no interest in sport and believed that as a consequence did not mix very well with the other boys and could have a ‘hard time’ in school in later years.

Bryan is quite a sensitive and quiet little boy. He is excellent at his schoolwork but he is quite physically awkward. His writing skills are very poor and in comparison to the other boys he is quite uncoordinated, not really good at sport or other physical activities. His mother told me that they were taking him to basketball to get some gross motor coordination. Because he doesn’t play sport with the others, he tends to be more on his own or he plays with the children in the younger grades. He is a bit on his own. Sport, and being good at it, is very important for how well boys get on at school (YD Eastern Hill).

This concern was also expressed at WestVale, and as I have identified above (p.167), teachers were sometimes worried about the social success of boys who did not participate in sport. Skelton (1996, 1997, 2000) and Renold (2001) found in the United Kingdom that sporting prowess was an avenue for social success for boys and as a result a source of distress for some boys. This would seem to be supported by the teachers of the two schools.
There was no obvious or stated concern by teachers about girls not behaving in a
gender conventional fashion. For example, teachers did not appear to be at all
concerned with ‘tomboys’, girls who act, dress or play in a manner similar to boys.
Only one girl ‘Jodie’ was identified in the classrooms observed as being a ‘tomboy’.
Jodie’s dress and demeanour in the classroom did not mark her out particularly in my
view. She was well groomed and did not stand out in terms of discipline or
rowdiness in the classroom. What marked her out as tomboy for the teacher was that
her best friend was a boy in the class who lived next door to her and with whom she
shared a worktable, as well as the fact that she played handball with him and the
other boys at recess and lunchtime. Another teacher mentioned that one of her girls
was a ‘tomboy’ during the interview. After the interview, she returned to take me to
show her, a long haired girl of an Asian background, sitting on the ground in the dust
outside playing with Pokémon cards with a group of boys. I interpreted this as the
teacher demonstrating the open attitude of the school. The teachers did know the
tomboys in the school but were not concerned about their behaviour.

Teachers were concerned with the sexual development of some of the girls at
WestVale. These girls were developing physically sexually and were beginning to
become interested in older boys. In one case, the sixth grade teacher feared
destructive sexual promiscuity and early pregnancy for one girl. However, the
concerns of the teachers I spoke with reflect the findings of Walkerdine (1998; 2001)
concerning middle class women’s concerns with adolescent girls’ sexual conduct and
education. Walkerdine argues those middleclass mothers tightly monitored their
daughter’s sexual development and discouraged sexual experience in favour of an
academic work ethic.

The toleration, support and facilitation by teachers of conventional gender behaviour
at the service of pedagogical and class management goals often focuses on how the
teacher may treat girls and boys differently. It is possible, however, that gender may
add a further complexity. It would appear that the teachers by treating the boys and
girls the same at times paradoxically may *heighten* gender difference. This was

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18 Pokémon was a very recent phenomenon at both schools. Boys in the junior schools at WestVale
and Eastern Hill had enthusiastically embraced Pokémon. With the exception of this girl, it appeared
to be an exclusively boys’ activity.
demonstrated in two instances, where two girls from separate classes who were late to the mat were rebuked. Both girls were typically the last of the girls to the mat and would sometimes arrive at the same time as the last group of boys. It was commonplace for boys to be late and to be rebuked. In the two instances, both girls were spoken to more harshly and directly than I had observed for any other girls. They were spoken to in the tone typically reserved for the boys. One of the girls was quite visibly upset and teary. The other girl looked unhappy. The girls did not respond with the boys’ typical casual and nonchalant appearance. Neither girl participated in the subsequent discussion on the mat.

This was a personal flashpoint for me. It seemed as though the teacher had ‘turned on the girls’ and I am sure that was how the girls in question saw it. I could not determine whether the girls were being treated the ‘same as the boys’ for a similar misdemeanour or they were being treated more harshly because they were not conforming to appropriate and conventional girls’ behaviour of arriving promptly to the mat. I did take the matter up with the teacher in a break following the incident. She dismissed the matter abruptly, simply stating that ‘Hette could get “difficult” at times’.

The contrast between the typical method of discipline for girls and these cases was striking. Irrespective of the intent of the teacher, it seemed that the consequence for the girls was to risk being treated like the boys if they behaved like them. The girls, unused to being spoken to in such a tone, appeared to be more likely to be upset. But additionally, the girls by behaving more like they boys were now being treated like boys. This reinforces such norms and practices that girls do not and should not behave in such a way. Conformity and conventionality may be extracted out of the situation, irrespective of the intention of the teacher. The situation arises through the involvement of the children and the teacher with the normative materials in the classroom. The situation is not simply given by the teacher or some form of regulatory regime but is constructed by the teacher and the children who draw upon normative standards.

Thus a simple matter of disciplining a girl for lateness, even treating her in an identical manner as the boys, raised some interesting issues. I suggest that some
behaviour, such as getting to the mat late and being rebuked, comprise a gender space for boys, and girls are noticed intruders. The girls are held accountable to their gender for such lateness and the ensuing interaction with the teacher heightens their intrusion. As I discuss below, there may well be instances where boys are the intruders in the classroom.

Teachers were often limited in their ability to counter the conventional gendered activities of the children in a variety of situations. Teachers at times encouraged gender stereotyped activities where they believe that it aided an individual to gain an interest in schooling, while at other times the teachers were placed in situations where they had to respond positively to the child or children for conventional gender activities. Supporting a boy’s interest in cars or a girl’s detailed recounting of a family outing, including what she wore, are necessary and routine actions of teachers and many adults.

The position of the teachers and the school is complex and contradictory and it is difficult to sustain the idea that school is simply a repressive force shaping the children. The teachers, by and large, were aware of their possible influence on gender-identity of the children. The teachers and the school are not simply cyphers of reproduction but attempt to solve current issues and respond to children with known tools and approaches and tolerated the conventional gender choices of the children in order to reach a pedagogical aim. The school is not simply a place for abstract learning from detached teachers but a place where the teacher supports and engages the child. The teachers provided, at best, lukewarm tolerance of many gendered activities but at times utilise gender to motivate learning. As I have tried to illustrate above, the participants of any particular situation—the children and the teachers—do not have a regulatory regime imposed upon them, but they draw upon the conventional gender norms in order to make sense of a situation, motivate each other or themselves and act in the world. By the active participation of the children and the teacher and the drawing upon the available norms or ‘gender regime’, such a regime is reproduced.

A more accurate picture of schooling may be one that Hunter (1994: 149) provides of the education system as a whole, that is of a set of multiple, shifting contingencies
that children, teachers and schools are muddling through. Given this complex and often contradictory situation, what we must now focus on is how gender-identity is constructed so consistently. What is required is a consideration of the specific ways in which children, teachers and the school interact to (re)produce existing social forms.

A closer analysis of the teacher, I believe, shows that the teacher is involved in a wide range of simultaneous activities as they teach. The teacher must balance a variety of sometimes competing objectives in a given situation. The following observation from my field notes illustrates this:

A girl comes late into class, the others have just been dismissed from the floor. She has a range of colourful butterfly clips carefully arranged in her hair. The effect is very striking, she looks cute, I think. She walks over to the teacher. I watch intently, trying to hide my interest. How will the teacher handle this? I wonder. The teacher says ‘you look cute’. The girl smiles in appreciation, the teacher glances at me with a worried expression.

There are a number of parts to this situation. Firstly, the girl initiated the situation and the teacher needed to respond. I saw the child and immediately thought she looked ‘cute’. I anticipated that this was going to be a difficult situation for the teacher. The girl had gone to some effort and that effort, needed, even cried out for acknowledgement. Not to acknowledge her was to ignore the girl. The teacher had to respond.

The teacher did respond, giving me a glance (I tried to look as unobtrusive as possible). Her glance signified discomfort with the situation. It was unclear whether this was because I was observing or not. Her response is also very interesting. On the one hand, she stated exactly how I myself saw the child. To this extent it was by conventional standards honest and accurate. On the other hand, it can be seen as reinforcing the girl’s femininity or wish to dress up in such a highly gender marked way. It was not an easy situation for the teacher19.

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19 I have discussed this observation with many people in the course of my analysis. Some have suggested alternative responses, such as “You have gone to a lot of effort today”. However, I have never felt that such statements were adequate in the circumstances.
However, two points must be made. Firstly, there was no ‘time out’ for the teacher. The teacher had to respond immediately. In hindsight, with training and experience, better alternatives may be more readily available; however as we will see in the section below, it is not uncommon for children to seek out and create these situations. Secondly, the teacher in this case must balance potential gender reproduction with ignoring and speaking honestly to the girl. To ignore or fail to engage with the child might have had worse educative outcomes for the girl. This may well be an almost routine dilemma for teachers, for as I shall describe below, the children in their efforts to define themselves and others as gendered selves, force adults to deal with them in that way or else, as in this case, fail to meet the child.

**Assembling the self at school**

It was clear from my observations that the children enthusiastically engaged with ‘gender’. The teacher interviews, and even the most casual observation of children at school, reveal that boys and girls engage in quite conventional boy and girl activities. Girls are generally seen by the teachers and from my observations, to be more interested in schoolwork, and are neat and tidy and cooperative. Boys, on the other hand, appear far more interested in sport and the playground and getting the school tasks completed and out of the way. The behaviours of the boys and girls seemed similar to those of the kindergarten children discussed by Paley (1984). Many teachers commented that, if anything, the differences between the girls and boys grew larger as the children got older.

The incident with the girl with the butterfly clips is one in which the child is a key actor in the production of her own feminine identity. Her presentation of her femininity leads to an affirmation. In this section, I will explore those observations, which like the ‘butterfly clip’ incident appear to represent or can be interpreted as ‘catching gender production in flight’. My argument is that through careful observation we can see how children make gender-identity a salient, even a defining feature, of their interactions. West and Zimmerman (1987) have argued, gender may be an omnipresent undercurrent in social interactions.
Children doing gender

‘Gender flashpoints’ provide an opportunity to see children producing gender. My aim has been to identify and discuss those naturally occurring interactions where gender-identity production surfaced and where it appeared to me that the children made gender salient from the routine and commonplace. These are the ‘flashpoints’ I have described in the previous chapter. These flashpoints are themselves not routine but are sudden and fleeting. They are moments in which the ongoing interaction pauses or changes direction completely. Such moments are also, at least for some of the protagonists, moments of signification (Shotter, 1995) where new meaning emerges and the emotional atmosphere changes.

In such moments, the protagonist’s attention is drawn to some unnoticed aspect and its significance is drawn out by virtue of the calling to attention. In this study, such flashpoints concern calling gender from an unnoticed backdrop and foregrounding and making it prominent or salient in the situation. In the following, a fairly routine teaching exercise becomes a place of gender incitement:

The children are sitting on the floor reading copperplate script. The children are taking it in turns to read aloud a story about schooling from the olden days. A girl is reading a sentence about corporal punishment. A boy suddenly exclaims:

‘My father got the strap and my uncle.’

The class comes to life. Both boys and girls are interested but the boys are noticeably so. I overhear boys talking about boys getting the strap. They seem proud. A boy says that girls didn’t get the strap; they had to write out lines instead. The teacher asks whether they would prefer to get the strap than writing out. The boys are unanimous.

“Yes”.

She asks some girls.

‘NO!!’, each says in turn.

The final girl in the line is asked. She thinks hard.
“Yes, the strap”.

The class appears shocked. Disbelief.

“Why?” asks the teacher.

[pause] “Because that way it would all be over quickly”.

The tension falls.

This flashpoint has several elements. The children are engaging in quite a routine teaching activity. The apparent purpose is to familiarise the children to reading different scripts and fonts. The book is a standard educational textbook produced by the state educational department. The children appear to be paying attention on the task; however they gave no indication that they found the content interesting. They possibly found it slightly dull. My impression at the time was that the content was bland.

The boy’s statement appeared to come out of the blue. The class became interested and boys in particular were excited. Getting the strap defined gender. It was a moment in which gender became salient, boys got the strap and girls did lines. The boy had made something exciting. He had pulled, created or stirred up a gender difference out from the somewhat bland exercise. The second aspect of the flashpoint is that, to the boys’ eyes, getting the strap is something heroic. It is perhaps not surprising that the boy draws attention to something he considers flattering to his gender, and draws upon such a masculine form.

The girls’ responses are also interesting. They dutifully reply, as they typically do, they have read the moment as one of gender definition and reply as ‘girls’. Only the final girl potentially spoils this mutual differentiation along gender lines, raining on the parade. The class was shocked; there was an uneasy silence and a sudden mounting pressure. Has she misread the situation? Is she contesting the boys? What is her explanation? Her stoical response satisfied the children. It was not interpreted as a challenge to the boys. She had not said something like ‘girls are as strong and as tough as boys’. It was in all probability seen as an idiosyncrasy of the girl in question.
so from a banal, routine exercise, a boy was able to make gender salient and the children marked themselves off by gender. an orthodox reading of this interaction may be to suggest that that the boys had simply drawn upon a hegemonic masculinist form, toughness, and the girls, in turn, had submitted. such a reading, i believe is misleading and fails to capture adequately the dynamic complexity of the moment. reproduction is not only what happened. in this example, the boys are clearly drawing upon and reproducing a particular masculinist form. however, there is also gender definition in the example in which both girls and boys play a role. the boys appear to be claiming corporal punishment as theirs, as part of the gender history and space of the boys. the girls in turn agree. there is an invisible boundary on the matter between the boys and girls. boys on one side, the girls on the other. one girl disagrees, but in the face of the weight of numbers on both sides, she comes up with a clever solution. in this example, ‘doing gender’ and defining and patrolling the borders is not simply a sole achievement by each gender but is also relational and comparative. it is negotiated between the two genders.

in the following flashpoint, a loose, personal statement from the teacher changes the atmosphere of the class and gender lines are clearly drawn.

it is after lunch. the weather is unseasonably warm. the children are lethargic. many of the girls on the floor have moved around behind and beside the teacher. a gap between the first and rear row of girls has emerged. two are plaiting or playing with another girl’s hair. the girls at their table are quiet; they look like they are day dreaming. the boys are quiet too. there is no argy bargy. everyone appears sleepy. the teacher is trying to get them to talk about farm life, following a story telling by the teacher. nobody is answering the questions, even the girls. the teacher changes tack.

teacher says: ‘when i was a little girl, i lived on a farm...’.

at the word ‘girl’ there is a major shift. from taking almost no notes, i go into an observational and writing frenzy. did i imagine or did i actually hear a low, barely audible groan coming from the rear row of boys? i reflect later that the change ‘deserved’ a noise of some sort. the girls behind the teacher stop plaiting, and move
themselves so that they can see the teacher. The girls at the rear spontaneously ‘leapfrog’ forward. By the time I glance at the girls at the tables, all their attention is fixed on the teacher. Those boys who were not leaning back on their arms are doing so now. Some are looking at each other, some exchange some words. I can’t hear them as I write; I don’t hear what the teacher actually says, I am too busy noting down the change. I think she was trying to continue as if nothing has happened and to bring the discussion back to farm life. The physical gap between the boys and girls is large. I see it as a metaphor of difference.

This flashpoint was a turning point in the fieldwork. It was the first flashpoint and it is also the clearest. The classroom went from torpidity to high voltage in a flash. The girls were obviously and spontaneously interested in the teacher’s life as a girl on a farm. The boys displayed a complete lack of interest to each other and possibly even resistance to the girls and the teacher. The girls were interested I believe for two reasons. Firstly, as many teachers noted, and the interest the girls showed with me attested, the girls were interested in relationships. Certainly much of the research literature, for example Gilligan (1982), has identified an interest of girls in relationships. However, the observation and interest seemed to turn on the term girl. It united the teacher and the girls. The focus was now not on farm life, as I believe the teacher intended, but on being a girl and the teacher as a girl.

From a simple statement the girls seized the teacher’s words and made gender salient. The girls made something out of almost nothing—a somewhat careless statement. They were pulling gender-identity out of the statement. I could not tell whether the boys responded to the teacher’s words or to the girls. I could not tell whether the boys were left behind or they turned away. They were having none of it, in any case. The class had split into two parts, separated along clear gender lines: the girls, all of whom appeared keenly interested; and the boys, who all clearly showed they were not at all interested.

Such clear moments happened rarely. Mostly the observations were ones where gender was an undercurrent and did not surface so dramatically. The performances of the girls out in front of the class can also be interpreted as the making of gender. I
was therefore keen to obtain such a spontaneous eruption on video. The following is
the closest I could obtain:

The children of the class were about to write a story on their grandparents and were
discussing their grandparents and both boys and girls appeared to be involved.

*Teacher*: “That’s right, grandparents can be very special. *I think they can be*”.

The girls move forward attentively, the boys move back, uninterested. Something has
happened or about to happen. Her voice is confessional in style.

“*OK let’s go and do it*”. Her voice is matter of fact, even abrupt. The girls move
back and prepare to get up off the floor.

*As I taped I thought, “This is the stuff. At last it is being captured on tape”*. The
teacher breaking it off disappoints me. *I made a note that something almost broke
out and that the teacher (a sessional teacher) is nervous and appears to want to keep
control*.

I had perceived something, ‘felt’ it and it seemed to me that everybody had. It
seemed that the teacher had also, for why else did she break it off so suddenly,
against the flow? The girls all moved forward, the boys moved back.

In this example, a fairly routine class activity on the floor with the sessional teacher,
*something almost happens*. The girls and boys began to behave in a similar manner
to those responding to the teacher talking about being a girl on a farm. In this
instance, the cue seemed to be a slightly intimate, confessional style where the
teacher seems to be addressing the girls, stating ‘I think they can be’. It seemed to
me, and perhaps to the rest of the class, that this was the opening for the teacher to
tell her story. She may have been thinking of telling her story and then thought
better of it or, as it appears to me, it was almost accidental, an unguarded moment,
that all the elements that created the situation were brought somewhat contingently
together by the children as an opening but at that point the teacher decided not to
cross the threshold.
In any case, the sessional teacher did not have an ongoing relationship with the children. I wondered whether she would have told a story if she had such a relationship. The response of the children shows that irrespective of the intentions of the teacher, the girls were ready to pounce on this moment and the boys were already distancing themselves. The moment, recognised by the children, was opportunity to enact gender, to do ‘girl work’. Just as the boys had pounced on the corporal punishment to define themselves, the girls were seizing an opportunity to establish a greater intimacy with the teacher and hear her story.

As I have discussed earlier, Shotter (1995) refers to such moments as ones of ‘signification’. At such a moment, the significance of events changes with some aspects opening up while others are foreclosed. In this case, and in the previous instance of the teacher as a girl on the farm, the significance of the events change from straightforward pedagogy to one of gender-identity work for girls and the obverse for the boys. These events were sudden from my point of view and they were brought about by the active involvement of the children.

In the following flashpoint, a boy caused a sensation by substituting one word for another in a presentation to the class. He used a taboo word for boys – ‘love’. In the presentation, two boys were enacting an interview they had prepared based on the children’s novel *Charlotte’s Web*.

*Adam:* Wilbur, do you like Mr Zuckerman?

*Francis:* No, I don’t because I think he’s going to kill me.

*Adam:* Do you like the farm?

*Francis:* Yes, I do.

*Adam:* Do you like your food?

*Francis:* Yes, it’s delicious.

*Adam:* Do you like the goose?

*Francis:* No, I don’t.

*Adam:* Do you ... love Fern?

*Francis:* ...She’s all right.
The script prepared by the two boys referred to like rather than love. Adam, had paused on ‘like’ in his final question, substituting the word “love”, cautiously. There was silence and a clearly rising tension in the class; all eyes looked expectantly on Francis. He looked down at his feet and mumbled “She’s all right”. Spontaneous laughter and smiles from all the class, including the teacher and myself.

The girls in their scripts freely used and played up to the word ‘love’. However, it seemed that everybody — including myself — knew that love was a taboo word for the boys. Adam’s pause on ‘love’ had the comic effect of heightening the taboo. The pause appeared to me to be less due to comic genius than to his own worry about using the taboo word ‘love’ in public. Francis also adroitly sidestepped the question stating that Fern was ‘all right’. Moreover, ‘She’s all right’ itself is a very Australian expression often used by men to express almost anything from mild approbation to infatuation.

There were clear content differences in the performances of the girls and boys. In the performances, we see the girls questioning, playing with and admitting to love and to feelings.

A key aspect of these flashpoints is their suddenness. In hindsight, we might see the reason for the flashpoints but at the time they appear as if they have been wrought out of thin air. Their immediacy, the constant bringing of gender-identity to the classroom places the teacher in unexpected situations. The teacher often has little time to reflect. A sentence about corporal punishment becomes a source of male pride, the class is only satisfied with a girl’s expressed preference for it when the girl appeals to a utilitarian reason – that the consequence is over with quickly – rather than a more confronting – girls can take pain and be proud of it too.

What these examples seem to show is the ubiquity and ‘naturalness’ of gender. The children come to school as gendered beings, they demand to be responded to and respond as gendered beings. The teacher must balance this. Courtesy demands, for example, to compliment someone who has gone to some effort in. The differentiation of gender leads necessarily to the inculcation of different interests.
Observations in the Classroom

In total, I spent approximately 80 hours observing classroom interactions and a further 60 hours in the staffroom or the playground across the two schools. All classroom observations occurred during scheduled English, literacy and communication skill class activities. These subject areas were chosen as literacy is generally considered a highly gender differentiated (c.f. Rowan, 2002).

There were three key observation frames or setting in the classroom: ‘on the mat’, where the children had been requested to sit on the floor at the front of the class; ‘out the front’, where one or more children presented their work or performed an activity; and ‘table work’ when the children were at their desks or tables undertaking a task set by the teacher. These observational frames proved to be useful setting from which to observe the children interacting with each other and the teacher.

On the Mat

The three classes at WestVale and one class at Eastern Hill conducted literacy, story telling and reading with the children while the children were sitting on the floor in front of the teacher. This was called ‘out the front’ or ‘on the mat’ by the teachers and students. The seating arrangements and pattern of arrival to the mat by the children were highly segregated by gender. There was little variation in this pattern between classes at Eastern Hill and WestVale.

The teacher would call the children to the front and there would be a race to the floor, from 3 to 7 girls would sit on the floor immediately in front of the teacher’s chair, hands together in front of them, smiling at the teacher. The teacher would reward them with a smile and occasionally may have said ‘thank you, girls’ or ‘you were quick today’. It was usually the same group of girls. Following these girls, with the occasional exception, the remainder of the girls would arrive. The girls who arrived first would allow other girls to move in between them and some of the girls may have moved back a little. The girls would form, where possible, a horseshoe
around the teacher with the teacher at the centre. The teacher from time to time might ask the girls to move back so that she could see them.

On one occasion at WestVale, the teacher called a reading group out the front. The six girls arrived and formed a straight line both side of, and facing the same way as, the teacher. The four boys arrived and formed a straight line facing the girls and the teacher. The teacher asked the girls to move and they somewhat reluctantly did so and slowly moved back as the lesson progressed.

Following the arrival and seating of the girls, the bulk of the boys would arrive. In some classes, there were favourite places and some pushing and shoving might occur between the boys. In one of the classes, the most fought over position was where the boys could use a table to support their backs on the floor. Finally, after some calling and scolding by the teacher the remaining 2 to 4 boys would arrive. They would usually sit at the back unless these positions had been taken. Both boys and girls would ‘save’ places for their friends, but unlike the girls, boys would not usually make way for a boy who had arrived late. Girls who arrived late would not sit at the back with the boys but would find a place with the other girls, sometimes squeezing into the first row.

The arrival of the girls and boys was somewhat symmetrical. The girls’ early arrival and cheerful and helpful demeanour was usually balanced by the boys’ late arrival and careless attitude.

The teacher might then spend the next five minutes settling the children down, explaining the task or reminding them of the previous chapter in the story telling. The teacher would make most disciplinary callings to the children at this point. Most, but not all, disciplinary callings would be directed at the boys. These callings would be for talking or pushing and shoving. The boys would be usually continuing a conversation that they had started while arriving at the mat or fighting about where they should sit. The latter was more apparent at WestVale.

The teacher would often ask questions at this stage. There was little obvious difference between the girls and boys in answering or being selected to answer. Girls
were more likely to put their hands up first and boys were more likely to call out an answer without being asked. Boys would be rebuked for this from time to time. When they called out, the boys were more likely to give a ‘cheeky’ even a subversive answer. They rarely gave a cheeky answer when they had their hand up.

*The teacher asks:* ‘What happened in the story last time?’ 3 girls put their hands up.

*Justin (no hand up):* – Wilbur might be eaten, (inaudible) blood and guts!

*Teacher:* - Yes, (firmly, in a “I don’t want any silliness” voice). *Antoinette?*

*Antoinette:* – “Wilbur was scared and worried”.

*Teacher:* – Yes, why was he scared?

*Nicola:* – because he....

*Justin:* – (interrupts) Lots of blood and guts!

It is difficult to determine whether boys were generally disruptive and in opposition to the teacher or simply responding to the situation. The ‘blood and guts’ in this situation was said with great affect. The boy’s interest was in the blood and guts but it was also oppositional and unsettling from the point of view of the teacher. It seemed that boys were, at times, self-consciously oppositional to the teacher and also to the girls and at times they simply had a different agenda. The teacher here ignores the boy.

The field observations lent tentative support to a subtle gender pattern of question and answering by the children while they were on the mat. On some occasions, there appeared to be something of a subtle ‘competition’ between the girls and boys for the style, content or ‘ownership’ of the question and answering interaction. When the girls put their hand up, the boys put them down and vice versa. Boys and girls would put their hands up as a block, and put their hands down if their gender was in a significant minority. This was more noticeable with the boys, but this may have been partly due to the girls generally putting their hands up consistently. Where a boy was successful in turning the discussion to an item of interest then more boys and fewer girls would put up their hands. On such occasions it was like a subtle
gender seesaw — now this way, now another — until one side ‘won’ or the teacher stopped it.

This interactive pattern was difficult to record using field notes. The following provides an example of this ‘seesawing’ gender pattern, reproduced from the videorecording at Eastern Hill. The children were talking about their grandparents. All or most of the children were interested in the topic and the teacher was taking responses in turns. The children talked about visits to the grandparents and what they do with them. A girl mentioned cooking with her grandmother, of the fun and closeness as they turned out the fairy cakes. Four girls had their hands up, earnestly pressing to tell of their experience. The girl’s telling has reminded them, incited them to talk of a particular experience, almost certainly with their grandmother. The teacher, however, selects the sole boy with his hand up. “My grandfather went to the war.” Four boys immediately put their hand up enthusiastically. The girls’ hands slowly, one by one, go down. The girls cannot keep the almost confessional style in their talk of their grandmothers as the boys’ state that their grandfathers went to the war. The subject has turned from grandmothers and domesticity to grandfathers and war. The topic moved from one in which the girls were interested and where there was little competition from the boys, to one where the boys were enthusiastic in their response. Faced with this the girls ‘retreated’.

The following is reconstructed from field notes at WestVale.

Teacher: Okay so what things did you do on the weekend? (5 girls, 4 boys, all/most children show interest)

David?

David: I went to the football with my dad and my brother (3 girls hands remain up, now 5 boys’ hands up).

Teacher: So, you can write about that (4 girls, six boys with hands up).

Samantha? (4 girls, 3 boys)

Samantha: I went riding in the park with my family (3 girls, 2 boys) and fed the ducks (2 girls, no boys. Girls show interest, boys no interest).
The above depictions do not adequately capture the subtle contestation present on these occasions. In the first example, the boys can talk about the war and their grandfathers and they seem successful, even though their knowledge is very slight. In the second, we see the seesawing quality of the children as they variously engage and disengage with the topic at hand. Nevertheless, the examples illustrate how the girls and boys often vied on the floor for subject matter, moving and responding to matters that interest them. The boys are interested in the matter of soldiers and without the moderation of the teacher could dominate discussion. On the other hand, the girl talking about her family at the park sparks the interest of the girls. It is now the turn of the girls to dominate.

Both gender groups expressed their interests along conventional lines and I detected somewhat different ways of talking. Boys would foreground what they had done, the girls seemed to foreground who they were with. Simple mat work seemed to accentuate and differentiate between the boys and girls. Discussion led to the identification of different interests and contests on the floor.

The reaction of boys and girls to a disciplinary calling was quite different. Girls were visibly upset at times for what appeared to be relatively mild callings. Boys on the other hand appeared unperturbed at even the sternest disciplinary callings. My notes record that boys took, or at least appeared to take, such callings with apparent nonchalance. On the other hand, when one girl was asked, moderately sharply, to stop talking, tears swelled up in her eyes. She looked down and did not participate in the remainder of the discussion on the floor as she normally would. After the children were dismissed from the floor, another girl was observed comforting her. On another occasion, a girl who was tardy in arrival also become teary when asked, a second time, to hurry up.

Teachers confirmed this difference in the impact of discipline in the teacher interviews and in the staffroom. “You have to be very careful when disciplining the girls” (Teacher year 4 WestVale). “Some girls will get really upset even at a minor ticking off” (Teacher, year 3 Eastern Hill). The possible reasons for their being upset may be a combination of factors: not being used to being spoken to sharply by the
teacher, being treated in a similar manner to a boy or that the girls are trying harder than the boys and identifying with the teacher.

During the lesson, the children would be surprisingly mobile. The general flow was for the girls to move forward and the boys to move back, leaving a gap between them. During afternoon stories at WestVale in two of the classes, I counted up to six girls who had successfully moved to create a horseshoe around the teacher and they were out of sight of the teacher. Boys would move back, often finding a wall, chair or table to lean against, or would sit with their hands on the floor behind them.

During the lesson, the children’s interest waxed and waned. Boys’ interest — or lack of interest — seemed quite easy to gauge. The boys would simply become restless when they were not interested and quite physically excitable and voluble when they were. Girls’ interest, on the other hand, was less easily determined. Girls sitting within the view of the teacher almost always looked interested. In contrast, the girls outside the view of the teacher often looked uninterested though, unlike the boys, they were usually still and quiet.

Towards the end of the session on the mat, the teacher would typically reiterate various pedagogical goals, ask questions and elicit discussion. During this period, there did not appear to be any major difference in the level of participation by girls and boys. Both genders would be selected or nominated by the teacher. My field notes at WestVale suggested that the girls participated a little more than the boys. More girls were likely to put their hands up and to respond earlier to the questions of the teacher. At Eastern Hill, there was no obvious or clear difference in level of participation between girls and boys.

While there may have been no significant difference identified in participation, it appeared that the girls engaged more with the actual story while boys seemed more interested in getting, and being seen to get, factual questions right about the story or task at hand. This difference was also reflected in the types of stories they wrote.

With the final and seemingly exhaustive instructions ‘I want you to write the 5 questions in your drafting notebook using your grey lead pencil’, the classes were
dismissed and the boys would hurry back to their places. This time, the girls took their time getting back to their seats. Four or five girls would invariably ask the teacher questions about the task. Mostly these questions were not about the content of the task (e.g. about whom they should ask the questions about) but about what sort of pencil or notebook they could use, whether a border was permitted and so on. The teachers dealt with these questions sometimes patiently and at other time impatiently.

Overall, the girls on the mat were quieter, more polite and helpful to the teacher and to each other than the boys. They were also more sensitive to the discipline of the teacher. They used the transition time to and from the mat to interact with the teacher. The boys, on the other hand, were far less quiet and still. They rarely initiated an interaction with the teacher and only answered questions or talked on the floor about matters that interested them. They were far less concerned with being disciplined and appeared to minimise the interaction with the teacher.

The above is a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of ‘on the mat’. My observations are what might be conventionally found and there is little in these findings that might surprise. Much of what can be seen is the outcome or products of gender-identity work. That is to say, they are realised or instantiated differences of interest. Perhaps the closest glimmer of gendering, that is, the production of gender-identity, is the weak but discernible ebb and flow of boys’ and girls’ interests. In this gendering, there is also a glimpse of contestation and power struggle between the two genders. The jokes and the attitudes of the boys may be considered as attempts to wrestle the space of the floor towards their ends and interests. The jokes sometimes resonate with a ‘Garfinkelian’ sensibility, a stubborn and mischievous refusal to comprehend20.

The girls on the mat appear to have sided almost completely with the teacher. They sit as close as possible, often facing the boys if they can get away with it. They are, for the most part, ‘ideal’ students. They have their ‘off moments’ but they are, by and large, keen to participate in the learning process. They arrive earlier to the floor; they leave later. They are helpful; they counter the boys’ jokes and noise with

20 Garfinkel (1967; 1990) became famous for his series of ‘breaches of trust’ experience where his experimenters refused to comprehend and deliberately took the wrong meaning.
correct answers. The girls have the high moral ground on the mat. It is possible that this may help to explain the increased attention that boys get. The boys are hard cases. They require cajolement and discipline.

**Out the front**

FY at WestVale provided two opportunities for the children to recite or perform to the rest of the class. In the first performance, the children had previously been asked to pair up: one was to take the role of a reporter and the other a character from the book *Charlotte’s Web*. There were to be five questions and answers. The teacher asked those who had finished to go out the front and ask and respond to the questions. The boys who had finished needed to be prompted.

FY “Who has finished? Let’s hear it!”

The girls relished and play acted in their roles. Odette as “Wilbur”, when asked by Vicky whether Charlotte was his friend, replied in a dreamy, romantic, voice: “She is my best friend in the whole world”. Jackie’s reply to a question about Wilbur was “ab-so-lute-ly cute!” in an adolescent manner. Nicole asked Caroline (as Wilbur) whether she loved Fern, replied “Of course I do!” as if there could not be any possibility of doubt.

However, the most illuminating in terms of how many girls performed out the front, is the following from Amy and Frances:

*Amy leaves the classroom. Comes in holding her hand in front of her as a pretend microphone. “Hello it is Amy from Channel 7 nightly news”.*

*Amy:*  What did you feel like when Wilbur left?

*Fiona:* Terrible, I cried. I made up my mind to visit him every day.

*Amy:* Did Wilbur tell you he ran away?

*Fiona:* No, not really. Oh dear that’s a bit naughty

*Amy:* Is it true that you saved the runt?

*Fiona:* Yes, I could not leave him to die.

*Amy:* Do you love Wilbur?

*Fiona:* Of course, he’s so cute. I love him to bits.
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Amy:  Do you think Wilbur will be made into bacon?
Fiona: I never really thought (Shock).  I have to go!!! (to save Wilbur)
Amy:  That was Seven Nightly News reporting.

The performance is significant as the girls confidently take their roles and then play up and parody their roles. Fiona, in particular, provided terrific melodramatic rendition. She swooned as she said “I love him to bits’ and “I never really thought”. On the other hand, Amy revelled in the role of a ‘hard boiled’ reporter, referring to Wilbur as a ‘runt’ and as potential ‘bacon’.

By contrast, the boys were embarrassed and self-conscious, and far less confident than the girls. They did not play act but woodenly read out their lines. Only on one occasion did a boy reply (as Templeton) “I eat all disgusting things” with any relish.

Other questions stems copied from the girls’ notebooks were:

- Were you happy when…?
- Do you mind Templeton eating your slops?
- Do you miss Fern?
- What did it feel like when…?

These stems invite an emotional response and have a relationship focus. Boys on the other hand asked far more factual questions:

- Do you eat out of Wilbur’s trough?
- Why did you take the rotten egg?
- What do you eat?
- Do you have an underground tunnel so you don’t have to go in the rain?

The boys chose male characters, with Templeton, the rat, a clear favourite, while girls chose both male (Wilbur, Templeton) and female characters (Fern, Charlotte).
On another occasion, the children were asked to make an acrostic poem, based on characters from *Charlotte’s Web*. The teacher asked the children whether those who have finished would like to read them out.

I closely watched one boy, Brandon, get up and walk quickly around the tables, with his head down. He was followed by James, who sat next to him. When he arrived at the front, he looked up and was shocked, taking a small step backward. There were 3 girls already at the front and a further two arrived to fit in between him and the first three girls. Another boy, Edward, also arrived. The three boys looked very awkward.

Madie read out her poem. The quality of her poem and her confident, expressive delivery startled me. I had expected a simple poem, delivered turgidly. Brandon and James looked at each other and began to walk back to their tables. Edward looked like, he too, is about to sit down. The teacher called them back. The remaining girls read out their poems. Most girls read their poem well and confidently. Edward was then prompted to read out his poem and he did so, obviously reluctantly, with his head down, mumbling. Brandon and James are then told to read out their poems. They read them out in wooden voices with a countenance and expression that could only be interpreted as “I have been told to do this”.

The question arises as to why the boys felt so awkward. One possibility is that simple ‘gender arithmetic’ showed the boys were outnumbered. But an important factor may have been the strength and confidence of Madie’s presentation which signalled to them that they were out of place and that this was ‘really’ a girls’ activity.

In one class, each reading group was preparing a short play. Only one play was observed. The play involved children bringing in increasingly scary pets that frightened the teacher. One girl was the teacher and each girl had at least some lines. However, all the boys in the play had non-speaking roles and acted out the pets. The teacher had appointed the girl as ‘teacher’ but all the other roles had been chosen by the children. I watched them rehearse in the corridor. The boys were keen on their roles (gorilla, spider and crocodile) and were very noisy and boisterous rehearsing their roles and interrupting the girls with their noise. However, when they came to
the point in the play where they were to act, they each became quiet and stilted. I suggested to one boy to do the roar of the gorilla like he had done earlier but he, nevertheless, gave a very quiet and tame roar.

After rehearsing the play, the children performed it in front of the teacher while the other reading groups were reading their plays. It was apparent that all the girls, except one who was a very poor reader, clearly enjoyed and were involved in the play. The girl who was teacher played the role particularly well. The boys provided a lukewarm rendition of scary animals.

The contrast between the girls’ and boys’ performances was large. Almost all girls observed were comfortable reading and acting in front of the class. As we have seen, some were confident enough to parody. Boys’ performances, by contrast, were wooden and self-conscious.

It might be suggested that these differences are simply conventional. However, we must also consider what this difference in performance may mean. I suggest that the space out the front in the classroom for the purposes of acting is girls’ space or territory. It is a territory that they feel comfortable in, playing with the ideas of love, cuteness and emotion. Girls reciting their poems, acting in the play and enacting an interview showed them as confident, competent actors and having fun. Boys were generally unwilling to present in these circumstances, did not appear to be having fun, were quite awkward and tended to mumble. Boys who were happy to snap spontaneously like a crocodile during class were reluctant to do it as a part of a play. The boys may be as out of place here as the girls may possibly be on the cricket field. That may be why the boys, realising their mistake, tried to sneak back to their seats.

Girls did not always appear more confident than the boys while presenting or performing out the front for all activities. There appeared to be little difference in the ways in which girls and boys provided formal reports or presented project work to the class at both Eastern Hill and WestVale. My first observation in a class at Eastern Hill involved a series of project presentations by children. The teacher asked selected students to present the work that they had prepared. There seemed to be little obvious differences in the presentation of the boys and the girls. The content
was different, but both genders gave their reports in a matter of fact way. There was no play-acting. Some girls were nervous, some appeared confident. The boys were similar to the girls.

At Eastern Hill, the children had to prepare a report on a holiday activity and present it to the class. There seemed to be too much variation between children and within gender to discern any real or obvious differences in the reporting styles of the boys and girls. The difference appeared to be the level of permissible or appropriate dramatisation. Where the children could play act, girls appeared more confident and boys were awkward. With the presentation of reports, there appeared to be no noticeable difference in the confidence or performance between boys and girls. The question is why and how these differences arise.

Drawing on Hartsock’s (1990) idea of gender colonisation, one explanation is that the girls may have effectively ‘colonised’ or ‘annexed’ the space for expressive performance, such as plays and poems. Presentation of projects and reports may be less familiar to both boys and girls and is not yet gender differentiated. It is for the moment ‘neutral’ territory uncolonised by either girls or boys and where neither gender can effectively claim it as their own.

**Table work**

The organisation of tables and seating arrangements differed between classes and schools. At Eastern Hill, students had little say over the seating arrangements. Every fortnight, children would pick out of a hat, the next fortnight’s seating pattern. These were mixed, in girl, boy, girl sequence. The teachers explained that this was part of an attempt by them to break down the segregation that typically occurred between boys and girls in the seating arrangements. The tables were arranged in a ‘tutorial style’, facing or with easy viewing access to the front, lining the room and parallel to the black board. Children did not keep any material on the table but in bags behind their chairs or in ‘lockers’ at the back of the room. During videotaping at one Eastern Hill class, these seating arrangements did not hold as rigorously as usual.
because some children were required to be off camera as I had not obtained parental permission to video tape them.

The table and seating arrangements at WestVale were more informal the Eastern Hill. Children sat at larger tables with anywhere between two and six children at the table, with some children not facing the front of the room. In the multi-age class, the seating arrangements were project and level based. In the other two classes, the seating arrangements were a collection of segregated and mixed seating. The teachers made continual adjustments to the seating as friends fell out or became boisterous. One teacher informed me that she had recently separated two boys, while during the observations, another moved one girl away from another. In comparison to Eastern Hill, the children at WestVale had personalised their tables.

Despite Eastern Hill’s attempt at reducing segregation, boys and girls worked almost exclusively as segregated groups of boys and groups of girls. Children were visibly upset if they had arrived late or for some reason had to work with the other gender on a project. Girls asked other girls for pens, paper and instructions while largely ignoring the boys sitting next to them and boys similarly bypassed the girls to request things from other boys. Boys played or joked with other boys. As I walked around or videotaped I observed boys trading Pokemon cards, playing table soccer, making paper aeroplanes and so on with each other.

Each table had a ‘table style’ for sharing material at WestVale. In one’s class, all of the tables, except one, had a communal sharing place in the middle of the table. At one all boys’ table, notebooks and reading material were untidily stacked on top of one another and topped with a jam jar full of pencils. This contrasted with what was effectively an all-girl table. The girls had, at times, their notebooks neatly stacked and topped by an attractive holder with pens and small brightly coloured soft toys. At other times, notebooks were absent or replaced by other books. The girls also had football scarves draped over the back of their desks. One mixed table had two containers for pencils. One was up the girls’ end, the other up the boys’ end of the table. One table had no pencil container or any other items on the table. I asked the children, a table of two boys and three girls why, and I was told, matter of factly, that ‘we like it that way’. The girls giggled. On other mixed gender tables, girls
effectively only shared with girls, boys with boys. Because of the relatively even and small numbers at this table, this was the only table where this would not work. I suspect that I had asked a question where the answer was obvious.

**Silent reading**

The use of ‘silent reading’ was common practice in all classes observed. Silent reading is a period reserved during the day for the children to read quietly books or other material they have brought from home, books from the school library or books from the book corner.

I observed silent reading in two classes at WestVale. In both classes, silent reading was undertaken for approximately 20 minutes most days at the start of school day and after the lunch recess. One teacher explained that the first period of silent reading gave the teacher some time to read and gather notices, organise lunch orders and banking, and undertake some administrative work at the start of the day. According to her, the period after lunch recess gave the children some time to ‘settle down’. The other teacher agreed.

Few children of either gender brought material from home. Both teachers had identified those who did as avid readers and it was these children who seemed to be the only children actually reading. Most of the others were flicking through picture books—poisonous creatures dominated these books during the time I observed them. Girls and boys were equally likely to be looking at these books which were recent introductions and fitted a theme being explored in the class. The remainder of the children would pick up a book from the book corner, flick through it in a bored fashion, and then replace it. Often it seemed that they spent more time choosing than actually reading. One girl explained to me that she had read everything already and everything ‘was really boring’.

It did seem the books were boring for the children. Teachers in the staffroom believed that it was often quite difficult to develop a good library of interesting books in the classroom. It is not possible to determine whether the books were
boring because of over reading, poor selection, or a reflection of the reading abilities of the children. The books ranged in terms of difficulty from learning to read books, large-type fictional books, some fiction, and finally some short non-fictional works that were mostly about teaching the children how to read such books than providing information about the topic. They were not the classics nor the books displayed under junior fiction categories in local bookshops. They seemed unremarkable, bland, ‘gender sanitised’, depicting girls and boys in unconventional gender roles. An analysis of the books might reveal an underlying support for conventional gender roles, however this was not obvious.

**Children’s use of time**

As I observed the children at the tables, a difference in the ways the boys and girls used their time at the table emerged. On the release of the children from the floor, the boys would spring up and most would immediately start the task at hand but without any apparent enthusiasm. Some boys might scarcely tackle the task at all. In the majority of tasks observed being undertaken at the table, the boys appeared to want to get the task over and done with as fast as possible. There appeared to be no obvious interest or excitement at the task.

Most of the girls, on the other hand, started their tasks slowly and deliberately. The girls would often pause on the layout, title or border of their work and apply brightly coloured designs. It was one of the few times the teacher would ask the girls to hurry up and get on with their work.

Watching the two genders was a little like watching the hare and the tortoise. The boys would, as a rule, run ahead until they had almost completed the task and then they would stop, with the finishing line still in front of them. They would begin to play. One of the boys may have finished and then all the boys of the table would join in, drawing, swapping cards, talking and so on. The girls on the other hand would build up momentum and slowly overtake the boys.

I decided to observe this process more closely in one classroom at WestVale. The children had been asked to make a ‘story map’ of a chapter from *Charlotte’s Web*. 
The story map was to make four frames with a picture and title in each frame. On dismissal from the floor, five girls asked the teacher a question concerning the task. The questions were not recorded. No boys asked the teacher a question. One girl at a table did not know what to do. She looked worried but she did not ask the teacher, but a teacher’s aide who was at the back of the class.

In the first ten minutes of the task, nine of the twelve boys had marked out the four frames and had started filling them in. Two boys had not started and one was going slower than the others. On the other hand, only four of the sixteen girls had marked out their frames. Three girls had drawn very elaborate, brightly coloured headings for their plan. After 15 minutes, two boys had almost completed the task. On the other hand four girls had not yet competed one frame. At the 20 minute point seven girls and three girls had almost completed the task. Eight girls had only completed one frame.

After 25 minutes, all the boys had effectively stopped the task. The boys had become restless and the amount of talking between the boys had increased. Four boys were surreptitiously playing table soccer. Only three boys had completed the task. On the other hand six of the girls had completed the task, and all the remaining girls were still working on their frames. I expected almost all of them to have the task completed within five and ten minutes. The girls had started more slowly but had caught up with and then passed the boys. At this point, the bell rang for recess.

It seems unlikely that the boys and girls directly or consciously expressed their identities through this difference. It is more likely that the difference reflected a different attitude to the work or presentation of self by the children. My notes from the field observations comment on the apparent different attitude the boys took to their work and discipline compared with the girls. The boys often presented themselves with an attitude of getting a tiresome and boring task over and done as quickly as possible. Boys could get interested in table work, but the task had to be of special interest to them. Girls, on the other hand, generally presented themselves as being interested in the task at hand or tried to find something interesting in the task. The time taken in the tasks reflects these different approaches. The boys try to get
the irksome task out of the way and ultimately become distracted as the faster finishers begin to talk while the girls take in general a more deliberate approach.

**Leaving the classroom**

The children’s table work and their use of time also reflected their behaviour on leaving the classroom. The boys were waiting for the bell to let them out into the school ground. The boys would often ‘champ at the bit’, waiting to get out of the classroom.

The children were required to eat at their tables in the classrooms. This, it was explained, was to ensure that the children ate their meals and there was no bullying for desirable food items. Sharing was not officially permitted. Most boys at WestVale and Eastern Hill would bolt their food; cursorily show the teacher an empty lunch box and leave. Boys in all classes at Eastern Hill and WestVale were reminded to wait for the second (lunch) bell before leaving the classroom. Within seconds of the bell, all boys had gone.

At WestVale a boy expressed dismay when he saw he had two items of food for his play lunch. One item was a banana and the other a muesli bar. I asked him what the matter was and he said that ‘they would take too long to eat’. He then gulped most of the banana and tried to smuggle the muesli bar out. Probably because I had drawn attention to him, the teacher noticed and asked him to stay and eat it. At Eastern Hill, a group of boys were rebuked for standing at the door waiting for the bell. The bell rang as they were being spoken to, and the boys appeared to be trembling, waiting for their release. Shortly after, two of the boys returned, saying that they wanted to work on their project. The teacher was amused. They had never done anything like that before and suggested they were doing it for my benefit. She told them to go and play.

At both schools, girls were always the last to leave the schoolroom. There was often a group of girls who would linger in the classroom until they were told to go out to play. On three occasions at WestVale, girls asked to remain in the classroom during playtime. At Eastern Hill, six girls took the opportunity to stay behind for some time
as I talked to the substitute teacher. They asked teacher whether they needed to pack up their work and whether they should get out their work for the next session. They ultimately had to be told to leave. At morning tea in the staff room I was told that this was ‘classic’ and that ‘you never get boys doing that’. The four teachers at the table warmly agreed. The following provides two examples from each school:

The lunchtime bell has gone and most of the student has departed. However, five girls are ‘loitering’ at the back of the class, watching the teacher and me as we talk.

Teacher: Girls! Off you go, girls! Go outside and play. [to me] You often have to shoo them outside [laughs] (Teacher YV, Eastern Hill)

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Teacher: I think many of the girls would stay inside, given half the chance.

Why do you think that is? (DC)

Oh, they just want to talk. Some of them would read. (Teacher GH year 4, WestVale)

This difference in desire to leave the classroom was exemplified at WestVale when the teacher decided to punish two boys and one girl for not having finished their work. The two boys had not started their work and the girl had spent all her time on an elaborate border for her report. They were told five minutes prior to the bell that they would have to finish the task before they were let out. Both boys looked worried and worked feverishly, showing the teacher their clearly hurried work only two or three minutes after the bell. The girl, Judy, looked pleased when told she would have to stay back. I mentioned to the teacher that the Judy looked a little like what Brer Rabbit must have felt. She ruefully agreed. Judy did, however, commence her report and worked quietly and diligently. She was dismissed shortly after the boys, not because she had completed her work but because she had made substantial progress on it.
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Observing the girls remaining behind, it did not appear as if it was only a select or constant group of girls who were late leaving the room. One girl seemed just as likely as any other girl to be late leaving the room on any given occasion. As mentioned previously, teachers were very circumspect in discussing gender differences. They were, however, far less circumspect in the interviews concerning girls trying to remain behind and occasionally succeeding. According to some teachers, most girls, given a choice between staying inside and going outside, would choose to remain in the classroom.

Teacher interaction

During the time the children were at work at the tables, the teacher would be at her desk or walking around observing or helping the children at their work. While at her desk, children might be requested to come to the front desk to have their work corrected. Based on the field observations, there was no clear difference in the number of boys or girls who went to the front to have their work marked. Nor did it appear that boys or girls had more time than each other with the teacher. There was a suggestion in the field notes that girls tended to go to the front as a group before the boys, but this difference was not marked.

There were distinct gender differences in the patterns of interaction between the teacher and the children as she walked around observing work, intervening in the children’s task or being available for questions. As she approached, the girls almost invariably smiled. They appeared to welcome the teacher’s arrival and looked comfortable and relaxed in her presence. Girls also typically interact with the teacher as a group. As the teacher approached a girl at a table, the girls at or near the table watched and occasionally asked questions or made comments. Their body posture was open out and they would move their work to be more easily seen by the teacher. Boys, in contrast, often appeared worried or concerned, often crouched over their work only relaxing or smiling at the conclusion of the interaction, often to another boy. They would at times watch an interaction between the teacher and another boy if they were on the same table but they were just as likely to look down at their own work and watch surreptitiously. Boys would rarely ask questions or comment.
Girls were also more likely to follow the teacher around. At times, there would be three or four girls following the teacher around, waiting for their work to be corrected or to ask a question. Boys would sometimes follow or wait for a teacher but this was less frequent. I also developed the impression that the boys would follow or wait for a teacher as a means of work avoidance rather than taking an opportunity to interact with the teacher. Girls, too, may have been avoiding work, but they appeared to be keener to actually interact. At Eastern Hill, the girls who are waiting took almost every opportunity to ask a question as they waited, whereas the boys merely stood passively, talking to one another.

Teachers also remarked that junior schoolgirls were also likely to follow teachers around during yard duty. This was observed in the playgrounds at both schools. Teachers claimed that boys never would follow a teacher or talk at any length spontaneously to a teacher on yard duty. However, not all girls followed the teacher nor were all teachers graced with a circle of girls.

Throughout all teacher interactions between teachers and students, a clear gender pattern of interaction was observed. Boys, as a rule, minimised or reduced teacher interaction. Their interactions with the teacher were more ‘formal’, shorter and less spontaneous. The videotape shows the boys in one case looking relieved following a discussion of their work with the teacher. The boys were the last to arrive and the first to leave the ambit of the teacher and her classroom.

Girls, on the other hand, were the first to arrive and the last to leave the classroom or the company of the teacher. Girls made time to speak to, or interact with, the teacher in these moments. They were generally more relaxed and open when discussing their work and generally appear to enjoy and seek the interaction with the teacher. In comparison to the boys’ more formal interaction, the girls are more intimate.

Of course, not all girls and boys behaved in this fashion, nor were those who did so constant in their behaviour. Some girls appear to seek out the teacher just as infrequently as boys. Some boys enjoyed interacting with the teacher, and all boys enjoyed this at least part of the time. Two boys (out of a total of 75 boys observed),
one at each school, were notable exceptions and sought the teacher out. They both appeared to have taken on a ‘good boy’ role.

The contested and relational nature of gender

Up to this point, I have largely provided a close and detailed description of the ways in which gender-identity is enacted and how children seize opportunities to make gender salient in the classroom. The children segregate along gender lines during most classroom activities. Boys pair, and associate, with boys, girls with girls. On the mat, the girls sit at the front, the boys at the back. The boys in every class cannot wait to get out of the classroom and make that obvious in their race to leave the classroom. The girls do not ‘stampede’ out of the classroom. Many girls would prefer, if possible, to stay inside and often need to be shooed out. The girls seek contact with the teacher, the boys avoid it. The girls mostly appear interested, willing and cooperative; the boys’ interests are less rarely caught and they are less cooperative and, at times, resist and provoke the teacher.

Such observations were commonplace in the study. One explanation for these behaviours is that this is simply the way in which the respective genders enact and produce their gender-identity. This may contribute to these outcomes but it begs the question as to how these different outcomes for each gender have emerged and are sustained. The children are not simply enacting gender-identity but are also cooperating, resisting, defending and attacking each other, and the teacher, on the basis of gender. Borderwork occurs not only in the playground.

Borderwork in the classroom

My observations support the view that the classroom like Thorne’s (1993) playground, is an area of gender contestation and ‘borderwork’. However, a key difference between the playground and the classroom is that the surveillance and proximity of the teacher provides far less opportunity, or need, for the children to openly engage in borderwork. The borders were, so to speak, policed by a
‘peacekeeper’, the teacher. Consequently, contestation between genders was muted and subterranean in comparison to that of the playground. Despite its muted quality, contestation and competition would easily bubble up or even erupt in the classroom. Contestation was not far from the surface.

One key indication of the contested nature of the classroom was the ‘see-sawing’ quality of the observed behaviours in teacher-led discussions and the group interviews with the children. As I have described above, the teacher-led discussions often had a quality of boys and girls competing on the basis of content or discussion points. Boys and girls would often try to turn the discussion to something of interest to them. One example of this see-sawing occurred when the boys and girls, in turn, attempted to wrest control of the topic was where beginning with one boy, the boys pick up the discussion of grandparents to talk about their grandfathers in the Second World War. The girls had initially talked about their grandmothers, and there is a point where there is boys–grandfathers against the girls–grandmothers but slowly the weight of the boys move the girls to silence and the girls’ hands go down. In this example, the winning factor appeared to be the boys’ enthusiasm for the very masculine topic of war.

It seemed that it was the boys who were most likely to contest, compete and conflict with the teacher and the girls. They would often exploit an opportunity to turn the discussion or attention away from schoolwork towards something that interested them, they seemed willingly distractible. Their interests seemed far removed from the activities within the classroom. At the start of a session on the mat, the boys would commonly be funny, or give a funny answer and the boys were disciplined or rebuked far more than the girls.

Even to the casual observer, the boys ‘dominated’ student-teacher interaction. This, as shall be shown below, was also the case during the student interviews. Teachers, were far more likely to discipline or request boys to pay attention, stop talking or shoving than they did with girls. Boys were more likely to be directly called to answer a question by the teacher than the girls, even where a number of girls had their hands up. Boys were more noticeably bored and took up larger amounts of space on the floor than the girls. Their behaviour was at time ‘testing’ or
provocative. Boys would be routinely and stubbornly late and some would comply with the teacher just within the limits of the teacher’s tolerance. Not all boys did this, and this was more apparent at WestVale than Eastern Heights. However, one of the teachers at Eastern Heights had stated that the boys’ behaviour was ‘appalling’ when she had taken the class over mid-year. The boys in that class were constantly being ‘silly’ but she had successfully stopped it.

My observations are consistent with other research (e.g. Croll and Moses, 1991; Kamler et al., 1994). Boys consistently outnumber the girls in terms of discipline and callings at each observation point. The observations revealed that boys received more disciplinary callings such as reprimands by ‘strategic or pre-emptive questioning’. While at the tables, the boys appeared to be more distracted, and their playing, talking and pushing each other far around exceeded that of girls. The teacher interviews also confirmed that boys typically required more discipline than the girls. My experience with the student group interviews was also consistent with this view. The boys were clearly the noisiest and most difficult to control, dominated the student interviews and gave ‘silly’ and confronting or provocative answers.

By contrast, most girls appeared far more interested in the activities of the classroom. The participation of girls in borderwork is less overt. Girls, when they were interested in a topic were far quieter, less obviously exuberant and they would close in on the teacher. While the boys were exuberant, the girls were intense. The girls always appeared to put their hands up first to help the teacher on some task. While the boys would provide, silly answers, girls would provide ‘helpful’ answers on the mat and during the group interviews.

Girls, it must be stressed did not appear as passive victims or were quiet and docile as a result of the boys apparent domination. The girls’ interests lay elsewhere. Moreover, close observation shows that girls will compete and contest something with the boys when they believe they have a chance of winning and where the contest is ‘schoolwork’, sanctioned by the teacher. As the group interviews outlined below show, the girls were quite ready to compete in games such as ‘who reads

21 Strategic questioning included the teacher asking questions of children who appeared not to be paying attention or who rarely put their hand up.
more, girls or boys?’ Girls at times would spontaneously challenge the boys in project work or in other activities.

In one class, the older children of the multi-age class have formed a pair of same-sex project teams to undertake a project involving the planets.

One of the girls says “It’s girls against the boys”. The teacher states that “it is not a competition, I am not comparing the boys and the girls” and the girls look initially disappointed but work hard at the task. I suspect that there is a competition all the same. The boys have left the room to work in the corridor. There is some noise in the corridor and the teacher goes out to investigate and I follow. The boys appear quiet and studious. They are told that it is a privilege to work in the corridor and to work more quietly. I stay and immediately the boys ask me what the girls are up to. “Do they know the planets?” one asked in a worried tone. There is a competition. I return inside and all the girls look up. “How are the boys going?” one girl asks, “Okay” I say and they put their heads down to work.

The teacher explains later that the children can get competitive and they were “quite vituperative” this morning.

These observations suggested that there were certain ‘core activities’ at which one gender was, or was expected by the children, to be better than the other. Girls were neat and tidy and careful of their appearance, boys were untidy and unconcerned. Such activities appeared to have clear borders and children from the opposite gender appeared to retreat when confronted. Boys were expert at gainsaying and overt contestation and would whip up the contest to the point where the girls would retreat. The domain of the girls, on the other hand, was a clearly expressive activity out the front of the class, and the boys would retreat. At times girls seemed to engage in this deliberately to triumph over the boys.

I have tried to demonstrate that while contestation and borderwork is far more muted in the classroom, it does exist and is not far from the surface. While some areas
appear to be safely within the domain or territory of one gender, the seesawing, tug of war quality of many of the classroom activities suggest that there is unfinished business in the segregation.

**Group interviews with children**

The original purpose of the group interviews was to explore what the children thought about schooling, and reading in particular. To this end, my questions had been based on the previous work by Millard (1996) who had studied gender attitudes to reading amongst older primary school children. Were there differences between boys and girls in their attitudes towards school? What did they like or dislike about school? What were their attitudes towards reading and did they believed that girls or boys read more? In this way, the children were provided an opportunity to speak about these matters.

As the interviews commenced, it soon became apparent to me that the greatest utility of the interviews was the interview as a site of gender production rather than the interview responses themselves. The interviews provided a structured interaction between the students and me. The differing gender responses to the questions, i.e. how they went about answering the questions, could be observed as well as the actual content of the responses themselves.

My initial plan was to tape record the children. However, teachers in both schools pointed out that there was no suitable room to interview the children. This lack of room had become apparent during the teacher interviews. The solution was to interview the children either while at their desks or outside the room in the corridor where some tables had been placed. In both cases, the noise of other children and passing traffic made tape recording the interviews impractical, particularly as most children spoke over the top of each other. It was difficult, if not impossible to hear children and impossible, to discern who was actually responding to the question.
The only alternative was to attempt to record the children’s answers on an interview template. Such an approach suffers from providing limited information about the fine detail of the interactions and precludes later detailed examination and interpretation. The onus therefore falls back on the researcher as the instrument for recording as events occur and for recall. My second problem was that the actual recording onto the template was difficult. It was difficult to record both the answers to the questions as best as I could while I managed the children and the detail of the interactions. My approach was to record the answers on the pro forma and, where possible, provide a note about what appeared to be an interesting observation or interaction. As soon as possible after the interview and using the notes, I would write up the particular interaction. This approach did suffer from selective observation and recall and incomplete note taking. I tried to address these problems by writing up my observations while they were still fresh in my memory (c.f. Humphreys, 1970).

From the point of view of collecting orderly information concerning the students’ views, the interviews were a frustrating experience. I had little disciplinary authority or continuing relationship with the children. Overall, the interviews can be characterised as noisy and chaotic and required considerable effort to encourage the children to answer the questions, while maintaining control, particularly where the interviews took place in the corridor. When the children did answer, the questions, the responses tended to be brief, and often the children were undecided and would change their minds as other students answered. The children were quite unfamiliar with the genre. When the children answered my questions there was very little variation in their answers across groups and schools. From the point of view of gaining knowledge or recording information about the specific attitudes of the children towards schooling and reading, the study was of limited success. In retrospect, my initial approach towards the student interviews strikes me as naïve.

On the other hand, the interviews provided an excellent opportunity to interact and ask questions. The interviews opened a small space or opportunity ‘outside’ the classroom for the children to behave differently from the way they did when I moved around the classroom observing them and asking questions during the field observations. The interviews provided a contrasting setting in which to interact with
and observe the children and gender-identity production. Nevertheless, the interviews revealed some information concerning the outcomes of the processes of gender-identity production, that is to say, their likes and dislikes about school. These findings are quite conventional. However, I wish to stress the value of the interviews lays not so much in those findings as it does in the different ways the girls and boys interacted with me in the interviews.

**The Interview approach and setting**

The interviews did not elicit good, reliable information about the individuals’ attitudes towards school and reading and writing. Students typically did not appear to have formed attitudes towards these areas and the interviews were quite artificial. It was difficult to tell exactly what the students felt towards these issues. During the interviews I sometimes gained the impression that they could just have easily answered the questions in the opposite way. Whether they liked, or did not like, reading or writing was often left unresolved.

At one extreme, there were students who did not like school, including reading and writing and, at the other, those who liked school or significant aspects of school. However, much of my knowledge of the students’ likes or dislikes came more often than not from the field observations rather than the semi-formal interviews. It was one thing to ask a student engaged in a task or shortly after they had completed a task or moved onto a new one whether they liked it or not during the field observations; it was quite another to ask the students in the interviews about their likes and dislikes in general\(^\text{22}\).

A key difficulty was the time set aside for the interviews. The interviews were mostly a race against time and not undertaken in a conducive atmosphere. I had initially been advised that the interviews should take no longer than 20 minutes, otherwise the children would lose concentration and begin to play up. However, teachers arranged for the interviews to take place during specialist reading time or

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\(^{22}\) One reason may be that the children are unfamiliar with this form of questioning.
when they were otherwise working with one group of children. The teachers would send a student out to ask whether I had completed the interviews as she had completed her task, or while at the tables, the children often had tasks that they needed to complete. It was generally difficult to ask the children probing questions at the table.

The following provides an example, reconstructed from my notes at Eastern Hill illustrates some of the difficulties in the interviewing format:

I: Do you like reading at school, Sarah?
S: I don’t know.
I: What about you, Annalise? [pause].
V: [interrupts] I like reading.
I: What do like to read, Victoria?
V: I don’t know, [pause] I liked Willy Wonka, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.
S/A: Yeah I did too/ me too. [together].
I: And what do you like to read, S?
S: All sorts, chapter books, fact books.
[Interrupted by the teacher, who asked all the children to get ready to present their work to class.]

This example was reasonably typical of these interactions. The first asked child ‘doesn’t know’ and in this case the second appears to not know either. The interview is helped out by Victoria. She at first responds saying she doesn’t know, as if she had not thought that her agreement would be rewarded with a question and she the remembered a particular book, Willy Wonka, that the students had read in class. This was also common that the children answered the question quite literally – they had liked Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, or Charlotte’s Web, books the teacher had set for the class. Next, and in response to Victoria, the other children agree. When Sarah is asked about the books she likes, she broadens the categories from the particular to what seemed to be the key taxonomy of books for both teachers and
students: ‘chapter books’ (fiction) and ‘fact’ books (non-fiction). Finally, the interview is broken by the teacher.

The students typically would answer ‘I don’t know’ or remain silent when I asked them a question. Whereas adults may give an immediate response of ‘don’t know’, this is usually a time filler while the adult reflects on the question. For the children interviewed, a response of ‘don’t know’ or silence was the full answer. Often the child would sit and wait until another child responded and then agree with that child’s response. My probing rarely elicited a more elaborate response.

In many interviews, there was often an awkward pause immediately following the first question or following the response ‘I don’t know’. This pause was difficult to capture or elucidate and I was very aware that I often felt awkward in this circumstance. The boys’ joking may well have been their attempt to defuse this awkwardness as was the attempt of some children, particularly girls, to interject their own response.

To understand this situation, it is necessary to consider what the children made of the questions and the interview process. From the point of view of an adult, an interview is reasonably familiar. It follows a procedure of questions that aid in setting the context and point to what the interviewer wishes the respondent to elaborate upon. The respondent uses these cues and others to reflect upon and answer the question.

However, children have little experience in semi-formal interviews. Children are more likely to be questioned routinely concerning their school work or as part of a disciplinary process. For example a child might be asked a question by the teacher as part of a lesson, to make the child pay attention or to investigate what has occurred in the classroom. Parents, teachers and other adults may ask more open-ended questions but being interviewed in such a manner was likely to have been a novel experience. Certainly the children appeared to approach the interviews as an unfamiliar activity.

They appeared to interpret the interviews as a more familiar activity, such as being in class and would often ‘sit out’ a question that they could not or did not wish to
answer and wait for another child to be picked. The experience of interviewing the children was often like asking a child of a friend ‘how is school?’ The child would answer politely, giving little away until either a particular aspect of school was identified or the child was released.

On the basis of the field observations and interactions with the children, it is possible to discount, although not dismiss entirely the idea that the children were unwilling to talk to the interviewer. While some children, mostly boys, were reluctant to talk to me early in the course of my visits, most had become willing to talk by the time the interviews had commenced. The issue seems to be more one of being unwilling to talk in the more formal forum the interviews rather than an unwillingness to talk to me.

**Gendered responses to the interviews**

One of the clearest aspects of the interviews was the difference in the way boys and girls approached the interviews, their interactions with each other and the interviewer. These differences read something like a classic stereotype of boys and girls. The key different ways in which boys and girls responded was that boys’ responses were often jocular and confronting. Boys were also noticeably noisier and difficult to control. Girls, on the other hand, were more polite, quieter and more serious in their responses. Finally, in mixed gender groups boys always won ‘gainsaying’ competitions and dominated the interviews.

**The response of the boys**

Boys initiated jocular, often confronting responses, whereas no girl initiated a jocular response. Some girls joined in and all were visibly amused by some of the boys’ responses. To the first question ‘What do you like best about school’ the most common response from the boys was ‘hometime’, ‘playtime’ and ‘lunchtime’ and less rarely ‘there is nothing I like about school’. This was one of the most gender differentiated responses of the interviews.
In a typical exchange, one of the boys would say ‘hometime’ or ‘playtime’ and be followed by a chorus of affirmation of all the boys. While it was a very common response amongst boys, no girl spontaneously responded or joined in with the boys with this response. The responses also carried with them a form of confrontation, of testing the limits to the interview. The first response of ‘hometime’ was often said defiantly or testingly. The boys believed it was not the answer I was seeking and they would look at me expectantly to see my response.

The vignette on the following page provides an illustrative example taken from the interview at Eastern Hill. The text is based on notes taken during and immediately after the interview.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the vignette was its similarity with other interviews at Eastern Hill and WestVale. The response ‘playtime’ was a joke, but it was also a joke that tested the bounds of the interview and interviewer. Students, both boys and girls, would react to the response, the response ‘playtime’ or ‘lunchtime’ was seen to be clever and the students would laugh or move about excitedly. At times, the response would lead to difficulties in managing the interview. The children, and in particular boys, would start to push each other around, not pay attention or increase the cleverness or the daring nature of the responses. At face value from the point of view of determining what these children liked about school, these responses were unenlightening. The reasons given for liking playtime and lunchtime given by the boys centred on playing some sort of sport or playtime activity. Foursquare, basketball and playing with Pokémon cards, a recent craze within both schools. A few boys also responded that in the playground they were not told what to do all the time, that they did not have to work, or that school could be boring. On one occasion, a boy very firmly responded that hometime was the best thing about school. On this occasion, there again was much jocularity and excitement, but in this case, the boy was serious.
Chapter Six: — Gender Identity in the Classroom

**DC:** So what do you like best at school?

**Josh:** ...I don’t know.

**Ben:** [interrupts] Playtime!

**Josh and Peter together:**

Yeah play time...lunchtime!

**DC:** What do you like about playtime

*(Ben)*

**Ben:** you can muck around and stuff.

**Peter:** You can play basketball.

**Josh:** We love basketball and foursquare.

**DC:** Is there anything else you like?

**Ben:** — no!

**DC:** What do you like best Nicolletta?

**Nicolletta:** Don’t know.

**DC:** What don’t you like at school?

*[Peter]*

*(looking at Josh)*

Looks at boys and then to me.

Nicolletta looks at me expectantly with amused shock, boys laughing looking at each other and me, waiting for my response.

The second aspect of the vignette was the girls’ reluctance to respond to what they liked about school. The girls would sometimes ‘sit out’ the question and wait until another child spoke. The girls did not disagree with the boys. They would smile broadly at this response, sometimes mixed with apprehension and watch my and the

*(Ben)*

Sounds at boys and then to me.

Nicolletta looks at me expectantly with amused shock, boys laughing looking at each other and me, waiting for my response.

*(looking at Josh)*

Looks at boys and then to me.

Nicolletta looks at me expectantly with amused shock, boys laughing looking at each other and me, waiting for my response.

*(looking at Josh)*

Looks at boys and then to me.

Nicolletta looks at me expectantly with amused shock, boys laughing looking at each other and me, waiting for my response.
boys’ response. The girls, when directly asked, would agree that they liked playtime but were reluctant to answer whether it was the best thing about school.

**The cooperation of the girls**

The girls, in contrast, cooperated with the interviews, helping each other out and giving ‘dutiful’ answers. Girls would provide responses to their friends or elaborate on their friends’ response. They would try to answer the questions, carefully and politely.

Such answers were not necessarily ‘true’. Over the course of time, I began to realise that most children did not like, or would at least nominate religious education or LOTE (Language other than English) as the most ‘boring’ subject. On one occasion, I asked a girl what she liked best. After a moment she said ‘French’. I responded with ‘do you really?’ in a pleasantly surprised tone. She blushed, and shamefacedly said ‘No, I think it is boring’. I asked her why she said French originally and she said she didn’t know.

In that instance, I do not think the girl was being deliberately misleading, nor do I think she changed her mind simply because of my surprise. It was a similar response to that of Victoria (above, p. 194). I concluded she had said ‘French’ in order to cooperate with the interview.

**The dominance of boys in the interviews**

Given the boisterousness of the boys and the cooperative approach of the girls, it is perhaps not surprising that the boys dominated mixed gender interviews. Once the boys had begun to joke, the girls became quieter and appeared to sit back and watch the boys. The example given in the vignette on page 215 was typical. In that example, we saw Nicolletta withdraw, outnumbered by the boys. The context had been defined by the boys in terms of schoolboy wit and daring. Her choice was to join in with the boys, a response that may not be as clever as the boys, unlikely to be
believed and possibly contesting the gendered activity of the boy. Alternatively, she could have tried to answer the question ‘seriously’ and potentially open herself to scorn. Her response, like most girls in this situation was to suspect she might have been torn between giving a ‘proper’ answer and thereby being subject to the scorn of the boys, or going along with their joking. She answers ‘don’t know’ and withdraws from the interview and watches the boys’ performance.

The explanation that appears to best fit these observations suggests that the boys’ statement, which appeared to be a clever and daring answer, defined or marked that space as a boy’s space which the girls were unwilling to compete. The response turned the interview – a weak concept for the children, in any case – into a boy’s performance.

The case of Nicolletta is something of a mirror image to the field observation of the boys attempting to withdraw from reading their acrostic poems. In that instance, it was the boys who were outnumbered and the performance was ‘feminine’ in terms of its highly expressive quality. Nicolletta here had to withdraw. In both cases, Nicolletta and the boys seemed to have decided that each context had been annexed by one gender. *Overt* clever, daring or confronting behaviour was within the domain of the boys.

One factor that may shed light on this was that, in both occasions, either gender were able to perform the activity better than the other. In the case of providing ‘clever’ responses, the boys were well practiced. A further factor may be that, throughout the observations, girls generally did not overtly contradict the speaker. Finally, I believe that the follow up questions – why do you like that best and what don’t you like – showed that the boys responding in this way really did like lunchtime, playtime and hometime very much. To this end, the boys may well have been answering the question – that what they liked best was the social interaction in the school.

**Who reads more? Boys or girls?**

A second area of the interviews in which the boys appeared to dominate was the question concerning who they thought read more: boys or girls. The initial purpose
of the question was to obtain an idea as to whether children had strong or clear views as to whether reading was a gender-specific activity. Millard’s (1996) work with older primary school boys and girls in the UK found that both boys and girls considered reading, and reading novels in particular as girls’ activity.

The children I spoke to interpreted this question as a challenge between boys and girls as to who read more. The challenge was taken up with considerable gusto in the corridors. That the children took the question as a challenge is perhaps not surprising. However, were reading highly gender-differentiated at this stage, it may have been quite possible for either gender to state that the other gender read more or liked reading more than the other. The fact that it was taken as a challenge suggests that reading per se was not highly gender marked and was valued by both genders.

In mixed genders, both genders rose to the challenge and excitedly and often noisily claiming that their gender read more. Same sex groups also stated that their gender read more. As the following findings show, year 3 students were not so fixed in their views on reading, reading was part of the gender battleground, part of what Thorne (1993) terms gender border work, where which gender reads more and what was still open to question.

The following box provides a set of examples that were representative of the children’s responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eastern Hill</th>
<th>two girls, two boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DC:</strong> Who reads more girls or boys?</td>
<td><strong>Simultaneous cry ‘Boys!’ ‘Girls!’ from the respective gender groups.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It was difficult to determine whether the boys or the girls were first to respond in this manner.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter: Yeah, girls read the babysitter’s club!</td>
<td>The boys laugh loudly [provocatively?]. The group look back into the classroom to see if the teacher has heard them. Girls are amused but don’t respond in kind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WestVale (one boy, three girls)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC: So who do you think reads more, boys or girls?</td>
<td>Tim says this as a challenge. The four girls look at each other and Tim disbelievingly and in silence. They do not take up the challenge. Tim takes the silence as disbelief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim: Boys read more!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[pause] Tim: Yeah well, boys read more to find out things, they need to know much more, so they read.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odette - yeah boys read more, about Nintendo cheats and things like that, they want to know the cheats.</td>
<td>Odette begins in a matter of fact fashion, that boys read more, she then turns this into a barb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline: girls read more stories, we <strong>like</strong> reading</td>
<td>Caroline picks up the barb, in her view (and to the approval of the other girls, stresses that girls like reading, not simply fact finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim: I like reading too [defensively] [pause] wars and stuff!</td>
<td>Tim’s ‘I like reading too’ is said quietly as if unsure as to whether he should continue, but increases volume at the end.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Follow-up questions asking why each gender thought they read more, were typically met with ‘we just do’ or a reiteration that boys or girls did read more. The answer as to whether boys or girls read more was unknown, the response was more to do with the issue of gender loyalty.

Whether boys or girls read more was still very much an open question for the children. The children when asked who read most in their family almost invariably answered along gender lines, boys stating their father’s read more and girls stating their mother’s or elder sisters read most. Reading *per se* may not at Year 3 be a gendered activity. However, throughout the interviews and illustrated in the above examples, girls and boys were beginning to differentiate themselves, at least in principle, if not in practice, about what boys and girls read.

The above examples show that both girls and boys ridicule or belittle the opposite gender’s apparent choice. Choice, or attributed choice, acts as gender markers to differentiate ‘us’ and ‘them’. According to both boys and girls, boys read more (or should read more) ‘fact’ or non-fiction work than girls, whereas boys clearly attribute ‘girly’ chapter books as defining characteristic of girls reading.

It is unknown how well practiced the children were in ridiculing or stereotyping. However, the interviews did suggest a certain novelty in the responses by the children. The delivery and response to the barbs and characterisations suggested that these were relatively new observations. For example, when one of the boys suggests that girls liked babysitter club books, this was expressed as a new discovery, a new thing to say about the girls and *ipso facto* the boys.

The apparent novelty of the differentiation of girls and boys on reading content suggests it was a new avenue for the children to undertake gender-identity work; as if a new previously undifferentiated area of human activity has been opened up to them for gender annexation and border work with the competing gender teams contesting and negotiating the new territory. At issue were: who reads more, perhaps an indication of who is better at reading; attitude towards reading – who likes it; and finally the content of reading – who reads what.
Perhaps the most interesting example, however, is where one of the girls suggested that a key difference between boys and girls is that girls like reading. Both at the time and on reflection, her statement appeared as an attempt to sequester the liking of reading for her team, the girls. The boy was clearly troubled by this. Whether his trouble arose simply by being outnumbered and outgunned or whether her remarks sowed doubt into the boy as to whether he should like reading cannot be resolved. Nevertheless, it was clear at the time, that attitude towards reading, whether it be instrumentalist or intrinsic was ‘up for grabs’.

- Boys were noticeably noisier and more difficult to control. Girls rarely raised their voices, apart from during the last question about who reads more and, while girls sometimes talked or were not paying attention to the questions, this was far less apparent than the boys who would often be distracted and talking or pushing each other.

- While the boys appeared to try to think of something funny or provocative, the girls would, as the example above (p. 211) illustrates, attempt to help each other and the interviewer.

- Boys appeared to be more obvious in that their answer needed to conform with a particular view of boys as a gender. Their responses were sometimes quite consciously working towards a particular gender position. They wanted to be confronting, clever and funny. These gender positions were often taken up in juxtaposition to or as a challenge to the girls.

At face value these observations support a stereotyped view of boys and girls: a stereotype, depending upon one’s perspective, of boys dominating the interviews with their disciplinary challenges, jocularity and teasing, or a more simple ‘boys will be boys’ whereas girls are more obedient, mature and so on. However, this needs to be further examined. What needs to be considered is the children’s relation to each respective gender and to the interview and the situation.
One has to consider carefully how the context changed when the boys’ jocular response was permitted. As an interviewer, when a boy answered a question with a joke, I had the choice of taking the response seriously or refusing to accept the response as legitimate. In retrospect, I believe that taking the response as a legitimate answer was critical, it placed the interview in a context in which boys could dominate. On the other hand, by refusing to accept the response may well have lead to the opposite.

Domination in this context is made visible because the boys are not complying with the rules of the game, the wishes of the interviewer. Girls are less visible because they, as a general rule, conformed. It is therefore very easy to pass over the domination of girls across activities because they worked within the rules. In the example of the field observations given above where the girls recite their poems and the boys slink off, it may be argued that in such a case, it is the girls who dominated the activity. Were the interviews successful in silencing the boys playful and dominating behaviour, it is possible that the girls would have dominated with the boys reduced to don’t knows and silences. On such a score, it may be suggested that the girls would dominate. What we have here is domination and contestation. Which gender is dominating the conversation or activity is dependent on the context. One gender does not dominate in all contexts.

**Common activities that boys and girls reported they liked and disliked about school**

The responses concerning what boys liked best about school were clearly skewed towards playground activities. However, it is likely that these responses overshadowed any possible responses concerning enjoyment of activities in the classroom. It cannot be concluded that the majority of boys did not enjoy activities in the classroom. On those occasions where the boys had responded as a group about playground activities, what the boys liked best closely followed the girls’ responses.

Overall, the most common activities that boys and girls liked, excluding playground activities, were art and drawing and writing.
Vince (WestVale): I like writing stories, cool ones. I like drawing violent ones too. [why?] It’s fun making things up.

Hilda (WestVale): I like art. [why?] You get to do different things, it’s fun.

Jacqueline (Eastern Hill): I like art and drawing. [why?] You can do what you like.

William (Eastern Hill): I like drawing and art. [why?] You can do really great pictures and things. [Like what?] Pokemon, battles and stuff (laughs).

Writing was perhaps the most polarised of all activities. Many children, mostly boys, did not like writing. However, a large minority of boys and many girls did like writing. The following are response from a group of seven children at WestVale. This group had been streamed as one of the top reading groups in the class.

Vince: I like writing stories, cool ones. I like drawing violent ones too. [Why?] It’s fun making things up.

David: I like writing. [Why?] you learn new words, you can tell things that you did, I like stories with happy endings.

Harriet: Yeah, I like writing about things I’ve done or want to do.

Matthew: Yeah I like writing but not writing out sums! [Why?] I like writing about cops... good guys and bad guys.

Amy: I like writing about going into the jungle. [You like story writing?] Yeah. [Why] It’s good to imagine things.

John: I don’t know, sometimes we write too much! [How come?] All those reports and things.

There was little discernible difference between boys and girls about the types of activities they did not like. The subjects the children selected ranged across most of the activities, but it was difficult to determine the extent or reliability of their reports. A small subset of boys however, had very strong views about writing. Some boys at
WestVale that I observed effectively refused to write at all. When I asked one boy why he was not writing, he simply said he hated it. When pressed he said that it was boring, it made his hand hurt and that they did it, ‘all the time’.

Apart from these boys, the most common thing boys and girls did not like about school was ‘boring subjects’. Children could rarely articulate beyond what seemed to be the ‘obvious’ fact that the subject was boring and therefore not enjoyable. That children found some aspects of their work boring was at first a little surprising. With the exception of the silent reading sessions, the observed sessions did not appear to indicate that the children were bored with their work. When questioned, the children tended to focus, as the above example illustrates on the repetitive or routine nature of the task, that they had to do the task ‘all the time’.

**Eastern Hill**

*Is there anything that you do in the classroom that you don’t like?*

*L. Writing out sums (with disgust)*

*E. yeah and story writing*

*I – story writing? (The teacher has previously spoken about E’s enjoyment in story writing and his efforts had been observed by the interviewer)*

*E. well I do really (looking embarrassed)…it’s just that you do it …I don’t know…all the time.*

**Reading at school and at home**

Responses to questions about reading at school and at home did not reveal any significant differences by gender. Whether children liked reading at school or at home appeared to be more closely related to reading skill than gender. At WestVale, reading level was determined by the reading stream that the teacher had placed the children in. At Eastern Hill, reading level was identified in the teacher interview.
On the whole, those students who had been identified as good readers said they liked to read at school and at home. It was, however, very difficult in the interviews to clearly identify what they enjoyed reading. The children would generally respond that they liked one of the books they had read most recently at school (*Charlotte’s Web* (WestVale) or *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* at Eastern Hill). A few also stated that they had read other books by Roald Dahl or Paul Jennings and Morris Gleitzman. However, it was apparent that, with a few exceptions, these children were not widely read or could be called ‘bookworms’. They may like and be good at reading, however their independent reading skills and habits may not have been well formed.

Children who were the poorer readers generally did not like reading and did not read at home. The interviews suggested that the difficulties of reading detracted from the task.

The majority of students fell within these two extremes. Their attitude towards reading was lukewarm. Interview schedules summarised many of these children’s responses as “yes, no, maybe” as the children changed their mind in the interview. Some found the books at school boring or that they had ‘read all the books at school’ but the field observations at WestVale suggested that they made little effort to bring books to school that they did like.

A key aspect of the questions concerning reading was to identify whether boys and girls by Year 3 had diverged in what they enjoyed reading. However, the interviews generally revealed that almost all students did not read very much outside the texts provided by their teachers. This suggests that any differences would be difficult to identify.

There was, however, one interesting trend in the interviews which suggests an emerging differentiation of reading between boys and girls. Throughout the teacher interviews, teachers would often make the distinction between fact or non-fiction books and chapter or fiction books and remark that boys generally preferred to read non-fiction and girls fiction. The teacher’s also spoke of ‘babysitter club books’ as a term for a particular genre of books that were ‘girlish’ and AFL/car books as those
that were ‘boyish’. Teachers generally attempted to broaden the interests of readers of each respectively.

The student interviews and field observations were an opportunity to observe whether this differentiation held amongst Year 3 students. The field observations suggested that these categories did not fit what the children actually read at school. However, this may have been due to the fact that such books were discouraged in the Year 3 classes.

The interviews themselves were inconclusive concerning what the children actually read. However, it is clear that the children were either discovering or [re-]inventing or using these categories themselves. This was clearest in the responses to the question ‘who reads more, girls or boys?’

The foregoing has focussed on what may be considered differences between the boys and the girls. These differences can be summarised as:

- The most common spontaneous response of the boys that the best thing about school was playtime;
- The context of this boys’ response was mischievous or joking, whereas the girls with few exceptions did not engage in this joking; and
- A few girls claimed they liked drama or self expression, whereas no boy responded.

However, while these differences in responses can be pointed out, so can the similarities:

- It was clear that many girls liked playtime and lunchtime as well and could readily identify boring subjects;
- Both boys and girls found the routine of schoolwork trying at times; and
- Both boys and girls liked best activities where they were freer of supervision or engaged in self-expressive activities.
Despite of the difficulties involved in the interviews, the interviews do provide some insight into the construction of gender and the construction of difference. Such construction involves the active participation of the children, the ‘will to gender’. The exploratory nature of the interviews does mean, however, that how such differences are constructed and worked upon, how the differences between boys and girls diverge needs further study.

**Conclusion:**

*Imposition and participation; reproduction and production*

The picture of the schoolroom where the teacher imposes his or her views on the children and where the children are disciplined and regulated by the schooling system has, in some of the literature on schooling and gender, been too sharply drawn. My observations and interviews support a far more complex view of gender-identity production and reproduction than reproductionist accounts in the literature. On the one hand, teachers were deliberately working against conventional gender practices in the two schools. The rhetoric of the school system, the posters on the walls, the staff room conversation and the interviews with the teachers suggested that the schools were making an attempt to break down gender barriers. A consistent theme the teachers expressed in their interviews was their attempts to broaden the experience of the children. Children were actively discouraged from reading strongly gender stereotyped reading matter. The interviews showed a particular concern with opening the avenues available to girls. Girls were discouraged from reading ‘girly books’ and encouraged to read non-fiction despite the general preference of girls to read fiction.

On the other hand, there was evidence to suggest that the ways in which the teachers related to the children and tolerated the children’s conventional gender behaviour lent support to the reproduction of current conventional gender-identities for children. Teachers deliberately fostered boys’ interests in sport and computers in order to serve a pedagogical aim of improving literacy. A girl’s ultra-feminine presentation was reluctantly supported. These events occurred largely in response to the gendered demands of the children. The teachers were obliged, with some
hesitation and self-consciously, to work with the child in a way that supports their gender-identity as a girl or boy in order to reach either a pedagogical aim or more general rapport and appropriate norms of social interaction with the child.

It would seem that despite the intentions of the teachers, they at times unwittingly and at times reluctantly, support the reproduction of conventional gender-identity. Teachers appear to be responding to the well-established and gender-specific demands of their children. Children, as the flashpoints show, seized opportunities to delineate and incite gender. Teachers had less power than conventionally assumed over the children, and the children work on their gender-identities irrespective on the teacher’s attitudes and behaviours. The teachers were only one part of the construction of gender-identity and their role has been overemphasised in the new sociology of education and its feminist and post-structural successors.

The children appeared to be far more active and motivated in drawing out and inciting gender in their interactions with teachers and each other. The classroom interactions observed showed children taking the lead and initiating rather than responding to the teacher’s gender agenda. The children draw upon the teachers as resources for action and gender-identity. Perhaps the strongest and clearest observation was that gender is not a backdrop to the children’s activities but a significant part of it. Reflecting back on the classroom observations, I do not see so much children but boys and girls. One of the participant teachers, a recent graduate, referred to her class collectively as ‘children’ rather than as ‘boys and girls’. Over the time of the observations this began to rankle in my ear. I wondered why it did so, particularly as I agreed with the sentiments behind this usage. In retrospect, I wonder whether this was because that term ‘children’ failed to reflect what the classroom was, or rather, the way the children constructed it. It was not only, or simply, a classroom of children but also a classroom boys and girls. Gender was not simply ‘omnipresent’ as a potentially accountable item (West and Zimmerman, 1987) but also salient, as an ever accountable item. As Paley (1984) observed, the children do believe that they have invented gender and seek every opportunity to use it.
Chapter Six: — Gender Identity in the Classroom

The flashpoints observed in this study are the clearest examples of making or inciting gender in the classroom. In the flashpoints, the children almost seem to make gender an issue out of the most banal materials. There they turn mundane events into gender defining ones. As I attempted to show in the example of the girl wearing the butterfly clips, the girl’s dress and her expectations require a response. In the example of the teacher trying to motivate a listless class, her phrase ‘when I was a little girl…’ electrifies the classroom and the girls’ intense interest in the teacher that identifies them with the teacher and separate from the boys. In another example, the boys’ realisation that they are outnumbered on gender grounds and attempted retreat in the recitation of their poetry, all point to the significance of gender in their lives and in the classroom.

The picture painted in the study is one in which minor differences are amplified and greater differences are constructed and the differences so constructed reflexively work to produce future differences Doing gender may well be doing difference (West and Fenstermaker, 1995). The children draw upon their stocks of knowledge and experience to create the differences. Difference is re-invented time and again by the children. This is not to suggest that such differences are random: that children at other schools will draw upon other differences generating different genders or no gender at all. Children may firstly draw upon earlier constructed differences. However, most importantly, the key initial condition for such difference generation is that children may have learned that gender matters, that successful categorisation and membership to one gender or another matters tremendously.

I observed that the boys and girls actively segregated themselves. Mixed gender relationships were unusual. On those occasions where the children had to pair and work in dyads, both boys and girls appeared worried that they had to work with the opposite sex. I observed almost no evidence of spontaneous mixed gender interaction in the classroom. The boys and girls virtually ignored each other socially, but on the other hand took careful note of the gender balance in activities. The ubiquity and strength of this segregation, the absence of obvious teacher encouragement towards stereotyped gender behaviour and the way in which the children seemed to pounce on and make gender salient in flashpoints are all consistent with children’s active participation in the making of gender-identity. The
children appear to be making almost arithmetical calculations concerning gender all the time. The children could be segregating and differentiating only if they were very aware of what they and the other gender were doing. The questions for the children seem to be ‘what is my gender doing? ’; ‘What is the other gender doing?’; and ‘How should I act?’ They are questions of active participation not passive reception.

It is more accurate to suggest that the situation within the classroom is a ‘co-creation’ between the reproduction of the past and the production of the present. The question of whether or not my findings of the relative ‘benign’ nature of teachers in the two schools may be replicated in other Victorian schools and elsewhere is an empirical matter. Other schools and teachers may be more or less interventionist, more or less sexist and so on. However, the key point to be made here is that gender-identity is made in the classroom and it occurs as a consequence of the interaction between the teacher and the student. It is not simply reproduction nor, clearly, is it solely invention. The teachers are not simply witting or unwitting agents of reproduction. Gender forms part of the very sinews of the classroom. Neither the teachers nor the students can escape it.

This difficulty of ‘escaping’ is perhaps best exemplified in the dismay of the two girls being rebuked when they arrive to the mat late. Their treatment by the teacher may have been identical to that of the boys; the intention of the teacher may have been to treat them as she would have treated boys. However, as they were girls, the rebuke seemed more severe and accentuated their accountability to, and deviation from, their gender rather than lessening or avoiding it. This demonstrated the difficulties and consequences for the teacher and the girls in terms of treating them in a similar way to boys.

The classroom is a complex situation co-created by the students and the teachers. I suggest that this ‘co-creation’ reflects the duality of constraint and enablement with both teachers and students drawing upon and making the gender ‘matrix of intelligibility’. Social practice is best characterised as production and reproduction, participation and imposition.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Gender, Power and Identity

Introduction

The main line of inquiry of this thesis has been an exploration of the production of the self in everyday life. The theoretical questions have pivoted on the points of participation, compulsion, constraint and enablement. In what ways might the production of the self be interpreted as the result of the negative powers of constraint and limitation? Can the production of self be more usefully analysed as a result of active participation in the world, as much an enabling move as a constraining one? Was the self something imposed, or was it something grasped and reflexively wrought by the human being?

These questions have been explored through the study of gender-identity production of young children in the primary school. Gender-identity is one aspect of the self, and the classroom provided an opportunity to observe its production and to consider the ways in which gender-identity was the imposed by teachers and the school system and the ways in which the children actively seized opportunities to make gender-identity salient.

This thesis offers four main contributions to the study of gender-identity:

1) It provides insights into how in the classroom, children take up (conventional) gender differentiated conduct and dispositions in order to forge both their identity and the establishment of a social order based on gender. This gender order is not
simply imposed on them by teachers but is actively constructed by the children. The thesis provides insights into how the children in the classroom seize and appropriate the practices of gender for their own ends. These ends, I argue, are the construction of their gender-identity, and the establishment and maintenance of a ‘matrix of intelligibility’.

(2) It offers a close-up illustration of how gender construction is negotiated and contested between girls and boys. This is characterised as largely a struggle for enablement — the power to be and to do — rather than as a struggle of one gender over another.

(3) It develops an analysis of classrooms as productive sites, as ‘complex strategical situations’ in which the participating agents — the teachers and students—deploy and utilise available resources in their ongoing construction of the world. This suggests that that the social world is not as unitary and totalising as ‘constraint perspectives’ within practice theory often imply.

(4) It proposes methodological perspectives and strategies for researching empirically the day-to-day production of gender and for capturing that complex and often elusive process ‘in flight’. It shows the value of an ‘ascending analysis’, one that does not foreclose findings on the basis of a pre-existing theoretical position, and the rich potential of ‘flashpoints’ as a way of illuminating ongoing and often ‘unremarkable’ and therefore unnoticed practices of gender production.

**Gender-identity and intelligibility in the classroom**

Enablement and constraint are, as I argued in Chapter Two, twin concepts, a duality. The operation of power opens certain possibilities while foreclosing others. While this is acknowledged within the practice theory literature — Foucault’s positive power is one prominent example — much of the emphasis has been on the constraining qualities of social practices. This has lead to a deterministic and totalising view of the self in the literature where the self becomes characterised as an effect, a ‘place-filler’, something almost entirely imposed on the individual (c.f.
McNay, 1994). Through observations of gender-identity in the classroom, this thesis has attempted to illuminate this theoretical issue and offer some insight into how individuals participate in the creation themselves.

My classroom observations have illustrated the micro-practices of how the self is constructed, shaped, and incited in social interaction. They illustrate how children draw upon available resources and intersubjectively create both a social world and the self. Girls and boys work with gender as a resource, as an ontological building block in the construction of their selves, in what Giddens (1991) refers to as the reflexive project of the self.

Two examples illustrate this process. In one example, a boy exclaims that boys, including his father, got the strap in the olden days. This can be taken as a claim of stoicism, but it is also one of identification. The boy, and the boys who follow his lead, are producing a particular gender-identity — they are making and honing a sensibility distinct from, yet in relation to, the “sensitive” and “caring” girls. In another example, the cute girl with the butterfly clips wrestles out of the teacher an affirmation of her hyper-femininity. In both cases, the children are actively drawing upon available resources and knowledge and thereby participate in the cultivation of self. They appear to be working on their self as part of their reflexive project.

Social practices, such as those of gender and self, form part of the geometry of the possible and impossible, the comprehensible and incomprehensible. Such a geometry does not determine action but makes action possible. Social practices form the ‘sparse field of possibility’ (Foucault, 2002: 340). Each gender group in the classroom looks to their gender to see what they can and should do, what the ‘right’ way to interact is, what the ‘right’ answer to the questions are.

The relational quality of gender, and segregation by gender, form part of the reference grid, the matrix of intelligibility, for understanding and acting in the world. The practices of gender furnish standardised expectancies that make social conduct possible. Comprehensibility and engagement are carved out from the basic dichotomous relation of gender. As Garfinkel (1967) has suggested, the children can comprehend the world as departures from, or approaches to, expected gender
practice. Gender-identity provides a place or ‘region’ within that world and gender provides an order of intelligibility.

The observations and flashpoints show the children constructing their gender-identities, making gender salient in interaction and ordering their classrooms, activities and plays. One means of ordering their world on gender was spatial. Boys and girls sat separately unless forced to sit together, and they teamed in same sex groups. They left the class and returned to the class in same sex groupings. They arrived on the mat in ‘waves’, ordered by gender with girls at the front, boys at the rear. Interactions in the school yard were also highly segregated — boys on the oval, on the handball and basketball courts, and playing with model cars in the tanbark; girls sitting in groups talking or playing. This pattern of segregation of the boys and girls in the classroom was observed and reaffirmed throughout the day.

The children, as the observations show, differentiated themselves not only spatially and socially — conversations, let alone friendships between genders were rare — but also in terms of the classroom activities the children engaged in. The sight of the children sitting on the mat, with the well-groomed, quiet, interested and obedient girls at the front and the unkempt, sullen and uninterested, unruly boys gravitating to the rear remains an arresting image of the gender order maintained by the children.

This approach also contributes to the explanation of why, given that gender is constructed and a performance, it is nevertheless produced in such apparently consistent ways. As I have discussed in Chapter Three, the two major practice theory approaches of Connell (1987) and Butler (1991) argue for a form of domination, the regulatory regimes of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality respectively. My argument is that, irrespective of the existence of these regimes, they are not the major driving forces behind the maintenance and continuation of the gender order. As I have attempted to detail, they fail to consider enablement adequately. The main argument is, however, that such gender orders are maintained, created and sustained agents in order to conduct their mundane routine affairs. Through the creation and maintenance of normative expectancies, social conduct is made possible (Garfinkel, 1967). Gender and identity together provide a framework for the contingent world and the self.
The attributes and performances of gender are not conduits of discourse, but are reflexively constructed. I have argued that the reflexive project of the self is mundane and routine; part of the process of making some contingent sense of oneself that is accountable to others and which also provides a basis from which to act interact with others. This construction is active, dynamic and contested. Gender-identity and the practices of gender have to be continuously constituted and manufactured. This is perhaps one reason for the borderwork of the girls and the boys that Thorne (1993) observed in the playground and I found in the classroom. Borderwork may be a process of maintaining, discovering and reinventing this basic socially constructed ontological order. Paley (1984) observes that her kindergarten children, think they have invented gender and attempt to prove it. This captures the dynamism and spirit of the endeavours of the children I observed.

**Contestation, negotiation and enablement**

My observations show that the production of gender-identity and the gender order are contested and negotiated between boys and girls. This contestation and negotiation supports my view of active participation in the social construction of gender. It also suggests that this construction is not simply a matter of consensus but one of contest and conflict. It is a power struggle.

It is perhaps not surprising that girls and boys contest what each gender can and cannot do. How the contest is decided may have ‘real’ outcomes for the self and for each gender. There are real outcomes of enablement and constraint, privileges and penalties to the gender order. Enablement embodies a wide range of activities, each associated with their respective genders. It is the power to do specific things and the opportunity to incite and develop certain attributes.

My observations show a contest between girls and boys over topics of interest and over what boys and girls can or cannot do. The struggle over topics of interest is illustrated in the seesaw quality of discussions on the floor, each gender vying for the topic that satisfies their conventionally gendered interests. These struggles also
suggest that they are defining a gender ‘space’ for each. They are negotiating with each other over what each gender is better at, and over what constitutes appropriate masculinity and femininity. Some of these qualities are clear and well established. However, in Year 3, other qualities are less well established. For example, they are still struggling over the gendered dimensions of the curriculum, such as whether girls or boys are better readers.

Borderwork not only maintains the borders but also implies spaces to appropriate or annex, and activities and attributes to defend. Borderwork suggests an instability in the content of the sanctioned, legitimate behaviours for each gender. What constitutes appropriate behaviour for each gender can more readily change than the relations between genders. This is illustrated in the emergence of the girl as the ‘ideal student’ and the development of classroom as female ‘territory’.

**Gender power in the classroom**

The observations of this thesis are consistent with the view that the boys received most attention and dominated the classroom while the girls learned both docility and invisibility (c.f. Kamlar et al., 1994). The boys were clearly more rowdy and disruptive, cheeky and potentially confronting, and they required more discipline and strategic or pre-emptive questioning than the girls. They appeared overall to be less interested in, and easily distracted from, their work and a large part of the teacher’s work was bringing, and keeping, the boys in line. During the group interviews, the boys gainsaid the girls and dominated the discussions and their boisterous behaviour overran what the girls were doing. The girls, overall, were not unruly or noisy. They were far more likely to work and maintain interest (or the appearance of this) than the boys. The girls were more interested and more cooperative in the tasks set by the teacher.

From this point of view, the masculinist hegemonic conditions of the adult world are being reproduced in the classroom as the boys seem to be dominating. However such a descending conclusion (Foucault, 1976) hides not only the complexity of the
situation and countervailing forces, but a closer analysis may reveal a change in the relative positions of boys and girls in the classroom.

Being interested and cooperative in the classroom has become identified with the gender-identity of the girls. The girls identified with the teacher. The girls want to stay in the classroom; they seek opportunities to talk with the teachers. The boys cannot wait to get out of the classroom and rarely spontaneously talk to the teacher. From being less than ideal in the 1980s (Walkerdine, 1986), the girls have become the ideal student (Tyler, 1997). In this context, overt resistance against the teacher, overt competition or aggression against the boys may compromise the girls’ position in the classroom. Being too aggressive and competitive may also open the possibility of attack on or questioning of the normative gendered nature of the girl. The desire to identify with the teacher by the girls may also explain the apparent devastation that occurs when a teacher has need to rebuke a girl.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to identify the shift in the set of complex cultural and educational changes that have made such a change possible. Certainly, such exterior forces have made it possible. My argument here is that we must also consider the ‘agents responsible’ — the girls, the boys and the teachers in the production of this outcome. The analysis of girls as powerless victims and boys as dominating and domineering has become unsettled. Girls may now hold and defend the valorised position in the classroom. The boys’ behaviour may be at least partly a contestation of, and reaction to, that position. The flashpoint of the girls performing expressively out the front and boys retreating in the face of the performance provides a strong image of this change.

On the other hand, and in contrast to their performances in front of the class, the boys were brash and confident in ‘out of classroom’ or unsanctioned interactions. This was perhaps most apparent in the group interviews where the girls were effectively and quickly silenced by the boys in gainsaying competitions. Once the boys had successfully defined the interviews as fun and subversive, the girls could not compete without risking open competition and therefore risk being held accountable for their status as both an ideal student and a girl.
Support for this analysis is suggested in the work of Paley (1984) and Walkerdine (1990) who identify aspects of the classroom that mark it as potentially a female space. Paley, a kindergarten teacher, observes that ‘When the children separate by sex, I, the teacher, am more often on the girls’ side. We move at the same pace and reach for the same activities, while the boys barricade themselves in the blocks, periodically making forays into female territory’ (Paley, 1984: x). Paley is suggesting that the girls and the female teacher have some sensibility in common, a way of engaging in the world that the boys resist and barricade themselves against. Her observations also suggest that perception of the classroom as a female space is formed before children arrive at primary school.

Walkerdine (1990) also locates early primary school as a place of feminine power and suggests that girls’ apparent superior academic and social performance in the early years of schooling is at least partly a consequence of this. Walkerdine suggests that the current ‘child-centred’ pedagogical approaches support a motherly, feminine approach to the tasks of schooling. Moreover, most primary and, in particular, junior primary teachers are women, providing a greater opportunity for girls to identify with and for boys to distance themselves from. The classroom is an indoor and ‘domestic’ and hence unmasculine space, unlike the outdoors playground. The classroom is, like the playground, a place of border work. The classroom, I suggest, is currently deep inside the girls’ borders.

My purpose here was to explore from my observations the ways in which gender positions are unstable and how they may enable one gender vis-à-vis the other. I am aware of the political debates concerning these matters. However, I do not wish to engage in them, nor do I believe that my findings shed any particular light on the most appropriate response other than to note the complexity and that the current situation, is like all such situations, a temporary settlement in an ongoing struggle.

Enablement rather than domination

The contestation and borderwork that I have observed in the classroom and described is a contestation over enablement, the power to do things for one’s self and one’s
group. It did not appear to have the quality of domination. The girls may have revelled in their expressive performances and the boys may have dominated the group interviews, but both genders appeared to have no particular desire to influence or control the other gender. It is local struggle for positive power: the determination of social reality and one’s gender relation to it. It is a struggle to be and to become. This is another form of what Foucault has called the ‘will to power’. From this perspective, the (gendered) self is the outcome of this struggle. Enablement may be as much, even more, a driving force than that of domination and constraint. Negative power is not the whole, and perhaps not even the primary explanation of their conflict.

Whatever the overall strategical effect of this struggle is in adult life, masculine hegemony and conventional gender reproduction cannot simply be ‘read off’ the activities of the classroom. In a similar manner, because the girls are the ideal primary student, it does not necessarily mean that they will become any more or less valued, or have more or less power in the adult world. Whatever links there are between such “worlds”, they need to be traced rather than assumed.

**Power and deployment in the Classroom**

The foregoing discussion suggests that power as enablement is contested in the classroom. This contestation is, following Foucault (1976), a local or regional struggle for power. A key issue is how such local struggles for power are related to the techniques of subjectification (Rose, 1996) and what Foucault refers to as ‘the government of individualisation’ that ‘attack[s] everything that separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way’ (Foucault, 2002: 330). How do the observations I have made shed light on the relation between such global mechanisms and local power? Up this point, I have focussed primarily on positive power in the classroom.

A way forward is to consider the classroom, and other social interactions, as a productive site in which there are many conflicting purposes, enablesments and
constraints. Global mechanisms, such as the ‘government of individualisation’ must compete with, and are appropriated and subverted by, agents for their own ends. Global mechanisms are also resources for deployment by the ‘agents responsible’ (Foucault, 1976: 101) for their ends and purposes. In Chapters Two and Three, I argued that Rose (1996), Butler (1991) and Foucault overestimate the power of global mechanisms. The government of individualisation is not total. In the following, I sketch some of the resources available for deployment in the classroom.

**The classroom as a resource for deployment**

The classroom provides resources for deployment, not causal elements or determinants of identity. Teachers, girls and boys draw upon the resources ‘at hand’, and these may be local and context specific or have a more general status. Participants work with these resources in service of the project of the self. The classroom needs to be considered as both a site and as a rich source of resources for the agents responsible, including the children, from which to appropriate and annex. The mix of resources, techniques, strategies and interventions which agents seize and appropriate can be identified:

These resources can be contradictory, complementary and context specific. Some practices lead to (or afford) other practices whilst some hinder. Some are global and powerful while others are local and regional forms of power that struggle against, resist, appropriate such global strategies for their ends and are in turn themselves colonised and annexed by such forces. It is within this ‘soup’ of resources, techniques and technologies that colonisation, resistance and the struggle for power occurs. How they interact, their stability and so on needs to be examined closely rather than presumed. In the following, I attempt to sketch some of the resources available for deployment.

**Global Mechanisms of Power**

The school, as Foucault (2002) describes, is an instrument of governmentality that attempts to ‘govern individualisation’. This includes techniques of pedagogy (Hunter, 1994) and techniques of subjectification (Rose, 1996). Such regulative
techniques of the self are, however, not total in their effect. Some pedagogical approaches may be more amenable to deployment by one gender vis-à-vis the other. Child-centred pedagogy for example, may be more conducive to girls seizing the curricula of the classroom than boys\textsuperscript{23}. The problematisation of boys — the other side of the view of the girl as the ideal student (Tyler, 1997) is another. Other, and counter, discourses and global mechanisms such as those forces of subjectification identified by Rose (1996) may be found in the classroom, but I have not focussed on in this thesis.

Foucault argued that power was an overall effect of a complex strategical situation (Foucault, 1978; 93). By this he meant that power was the ‘over-all effect’ of ‘unbalanced, heterogenous, unstable, and tense force relations’ (Foucault, 1978: 93). For Foucault, power was not a privilege wielded or possessed by the dominant but the ‘overall effect of its strategic positions’ (Foucault, 1979, 26). Power, does not have a single point of application but has innumerable points of confrontation and manifold forms of domination (Foucault, 1976: 96). One way to illustrate this concept is to consider power as the sum effect of a manifold set of opposing, oblique, orthogonal, complementary and parallel vectors of force whose direction and force are themselves contingent on context, time and the position of other vectors.

The local actors are not dupes of these forces, but use, and are in turn ‘used by’, such forces. Nor are global mechanisms the only forces of relations and resource for deployment that can be found in the classroom. Children, teachers and the schooling system have pre-established solutions and customs that may resist certain types of change and accelerate others. Established ways of doing and being also serve as sources for deployment and resistance in the service of enablement by the children. The sensibilities and gender characteristics of teachers may provide a further resource. The desire and ability to identify with the teacher may provide one set of resources. The pace, style and the examples used of the teacher is another set of resources that can be seized and deployed more readily by one gender as opposed to

\textsuperscript{23} This is contrary to the early arguments of Walkerdine, (1984) and others in the initial phase of research on gender differences in the classroom, where girls marginalisation was documented but also presumed from an analysis patriarchy and systematic male domination. The similarity of child-centred approaches to ideals of mothering coupled with most primary teachers being women, may lead to a ‘domestication’ (Walkerdine, 1990) of the classroom. The girls can more readily identify with the teacher and the setting. The boys do not.
the other. The current call for teacher ‘role models’ for boys (e.g. Biddulph, 1997) draws on this aspect of the classroom. The recognition of the relative junior position and the lower grades of women tend to teach is another (e.g. Evans, 1988). Mass media, parents and other resources external to the school are seized on by the teachers and children and worked in the school and deployed in gender-identity construction.

These manifold relations of power are unstable and may be ‘chaotic’ – impervious to some things but produce dramatic shifts in others. For example, it would appear that the shift from the problematisation of girls in education to that of boys occurred in a period of a little more than a decade (Tyler, 1997). How these shifts occur, and its influences on contestation in the classroom require far greater examination than current research allows and what this thesis can provide.

The classroom is revealed as a ‘complex strategical situation’. The local and the global are appropriated and annexed as the agents involved fix reality and their place in it and complete the mundane activities of the day. The study of the micro-practices reveal the importance of positive power — the power to do and to be — and the techniques and strategies that are deployed by the agents to that end.

My analysis also suggests that the classroom should not be considered as a proxy for, or an explanation of, actual or apparent relations between men and women. The links between the experiences of the child and those of the adult are less direct than asserted in reproductive accounts. There is no simple relation between the struggles of the children and the adult. It is not a simple matter of deducing the single underpinning operation of power. Such relations that do exist cannot be deduced but must be painstakingly examined. The agendas are not ‘hidden’; gender does not serve some greater functional purpose. The outcome of the struggle is not teleological. There is ‘no more’ to gender and gender-identity than as part of the matrix of intelligibility that the children and others seize on as they construct the social ontology of the world and their relation to it. That is the complex strategical struggle.
**Hegemonic masculinity and the importance of ascending analysis**

I have argued against reproductionist and ‘hegemonic masculinist’ approaches to gender-identity because they derive from, following Foucault (1976), a ‘descendent analysis’. Descendent analyses posit a particular form of power or outcome and analyse the way in which it underpins or permeates social action, I argued that this deductive approach characterised much research in the classroom (see also Foster *et al.* 1996). My observations reinforce the importance of avoiding such an approach and focussing on the micro-practices of the situation. This is what Foucault (1976: 99) refers to as an ascending analysis, which requires analysing the routine practices of everyday life and how such practices are deployed to strategic effect.

My observations reveal a classroom that is far more dynamic, far more participatory and contested and multi-vocal, than the strict reproductionist and hegemonic masculinist approaches tend to suggest. My interpretation of the classroom led to a different conclusion to that typically provided by a (descending) masculine hegemony analysis, namely girls dominate the legitimate activities of the classroom. The boys used other strategies to contest and dominated other areas but had largely conceded this space to the girls.

An ascending analysis demonstrates the participation of the actors – in this case the children and the teachers in the production of gender-identity. This local production shows spontaneity, a demonstration of the particular ontological demands and constructions of the children. They mounted a certain resistance to, and appropriated, the global mechanism of pedagogy for their own local ends. These local and regional forces (Foucault, 1976) remain extant and vibrant, even in the classroom – a key site of disciplinary practices. In this case, the children pursue their own ontological agendas.

My study provides an optimistic note concerning such global mechanisms. Foucault’s conception of the global mechanisms, the techniques of truth production, are dystopic. As other authors such as Giddens (1984) and McNay (1994) have
observed, Foucault provides a gloomy picture of the progress of governmentality and the production of the subject. Like Weber’s concept of rationalisation, the world is increasingly disenchanted, subject to control by impersonal calculating forces, the future sequestered by knowledge systems. Giddens (1991) refers to this as a ‘world without Nature’. This gloomy picture is the result of an overestimation of the powers of such techniques. The classroom shows, in contrast, the ‘spontaneous’ production of gender-identity and the lively struggle and resistance against global mechanisms.

Foucault’s work has a tendency towards determinism, the individual as an effect, an (unintended) epiphenomenon of the myriad of power relations. With respect to the current ‘state of affairs’—the state of the complex strategical situation within the classroom and the school — I have attempted to illustrate aspects of this general argument. My key point is that the current borders and the current behaviours of the children are partly an outcome of this contestation and are not simply the result of ‘exogenous’ factors such as hegemonic masculinity. The relational and oppositional nature of gender is immanent in the social construction of gender. We need to consider how each gender draws upon and appropriates resources in the contest, the tactics and the strategies. I have provided some detailed descriptions of how that happens.

**Flashpoints as a method**

The use of flashpoints provides a useful method for ascending analyses in ethnographic or naturalistic settings. The use of flashpoints offers a rich strategy for researching the everyday and for making the mundane ‘commonplace scenes visible’ (Garfinkel, 1967: 36) which are critical for the development of an ascendant analysis. The method proved a useful approach in capturing the dynamism of the classroom and how the children seized gender as a resource and used as an interpretive lens for their purposes. The method provided the opportunity to view the participation of the students in the construction of their gender-identities and ways in which they drew upon the gender and made gender salient.

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24 See also Giddens (1991) discussion concerning the limitations of ‘expert systems’.
Conclusion

This thesis commenced with an image provided by Foucault (1973) of the face drawn in the sand waiting for the tide of history to erase it. What I have shown through the observations and analysis of the making of gender-identity is a far more active and reflexive self than the image of the face in the sand suggests. Through the study of gender-identity, I have attempted to show how the self participates in its own making; how the children seize upon resources such as gender as part of their reflexive project of the self.

The self from this perspective is not an effect of regulative regimes or the reproductive demands of a social system. The self is the current manifestation of the ‘will to power’, as much an enabling force as it is one which is subject to constraint and limitation. It is part of a struggle to be, to have a place in the world and to engage in the world. It is grounded in the everyday, mundane experiences of ordinary people.

The key framing question of this thesis has been whether gender-identity was imposed or given, or whether the children are active participants in the production of the gender-identities. My observations and analyses have shown that the classroom should not be characterised as one in which teachers impose conventional identity on a passive population of students. It is the students who appear to seize the opportunity to perform and cultivate or incite conventional identity. Teachers are, nevertheless, sometimes reluctant supporters of conventional gender when they utilise conventional gender interests at the service of pedagogical ends.

The flashpoints show how suddenly gender becomes a salient, even defining feature of classroom interactions. In these flashpoints, the children suddenly seize the situation and turn it towards ‘gender-identity work’ — the cultivation of their gendered self — and turning themselves into a subject. In such moments, it often appears as if it is the teacher that is imposed upon by the children rather than the opposite.
My analysis also suggests that such gender-identity work is related to not only to making or inciting a particular self but also to establishing, maintaining and creating a gender order. In the terms of Garfinkel (1967), they are developing a set of background expectancies, based on the relational nature of gender. These background expectancies of what each gender can and cannot do, the likes and dislikes, form part of the ‘matrix of intelligibility’ from which the children can comprehend and act in the world. Gender and gender-identity in this sense are enabling.

My observations also reveal that the ‘content’ of gender, what each gender should or should not do, is negotiated and contested in the classroom. The situation of the classroom is an outcome of contests won and lost, ‘territory’ ceded and annexed as the children and the teachers deploy and appropriate resources for their ends. With respect to the children, I suggest that the children are engaging in something of a power struggle over the power of enablement, the power to do, not simply or even primarily, the negative power of domination over.

Such an ongoing contest also suggests that any given situation in the classroom is a ‘temporary settlement’ that is unstable. Gender as a principle of social order may be far too sedimented and too central to change. However, the content of gender – the behaviours and sensibilities attached to one gender versus the other – seems far less intractable and subject to contestation. As I have discussed, there has been a quite recent change in the notion of the ideal student. Gender may remain, but the gender behaviours and their valorisation may be subject to change and be subject to the complex struggles between global mechanisms, teachers and students.

This provides an alternative perspective of the classroom of enablement and change, of a ‘complex strategical situation’ where the research must look at how the resources available including the regulative regimes and techniques and instruments of governmentality are deployed by the ‘actors responsible’ (Foucault, 1976). The children resist and appropriate resources in the classroom as part of their reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991). This is not simply a reproduction of a given social structure imposed from without. It precisely through such power struggles that
the gender structure is reproduced. The use of flashpoints provides one method to assist in illuminating these processes.

My approach provides avenues for further research. The thesis has focussed almost exclusively on the question of gender-identity. The ascending analysis approach and the focus on enablement may well aid in understanding other important and enduring features of social structure, such as ethnicity and class and their inter-relationships at the level of micro-practices.

A further avenue for future research on the self and practice theory in general is to continue the integration of elements from the Foucauldian and ethnomethodological approaches. I have suggested that Foucault’s perspective on power (e.g. 1976; 2002) can be joined with fine grained ethnomethodological analysis and arguments concerning the social fixing of the possible and the intelligible. This integrated approach could produce a less determinist Foucauldian analysis and ethnomethodological approaches gain an important power dimension to their work.

The perspective put forward here also joins the more general Foucauldian approach towards an understanding of how the local procedures and techniques of power are invested in and ‘annexed by more global phenomena’ (Foucault, 1976: 99). To a considerable degree, this issue has been kept in abeyance in this thesis as part of the general approach to demonstrate the participation of the actors in the creation of the self. A key focus must now be on how global phenomena such as child-centred pedagogy and other pedagogical and ideological interventions and viewpoints are utilised by agents and, in turn, colonise the classroom.
## Appendix I

Demographic Characteristics of School Areas

1996 ABS Census Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Melbourne Statistical Division</th>
<th>Eastern Hill</th>
<th>WestVale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low English Skill</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renting</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undertaking tertiary study</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers/professionals</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One parent families</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income for families over $1,200 per week</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under 10 years of age</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average housing cost(^{25})</td>
<td></td>
<td>$650,000</td>
<td>$362,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2001-November 2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal monthly housing loan repayment(^{26})</td>
<td>$600-$799</td>
<td>$1,500+</td>
<td>$800-$999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Table shows a comparison of ABS 1996 Census and the November 2002 Australian *Home Price Guide* for figures selected socio-economic related variables for the two areas. Exact catchment areas for the schools were not selected and the preserve anonymity of the participating schools. This selection does, however, over-estimate the socio-economic status of WestVale.


\(^{26}\) ibid, based on 1996 ABS Census Data.
Appendix II

12 August 1999

Dear Parent

My name is Darryl Coulthard and I am a Ph D student at Swinburne University. I am currently undertaking a research project exploring how boys and girls learn to read differently with the assistance and co-operation of the school and Year Three teachers Ms Samuels and Ms Brown. I am seeking agreement for your child to participate in this research project.

The project has received consent from the Principal, Ms Hook, ethics approval from the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee and approval from the Department of Education.

The project will involve:

° interviewing and tape recording small groups of Year Three children about their experience of reading;
° observing and videotaping some Year Three reading classes;
° the children completing a writing composition on a topic developed in consultation with the Year Three teachers.

All interactions with the children will take place in a group setting. You are free to withdraw your child from the study at any time. You may simply inform one of the Year Three teachers or myself.

It is anticipated that both the teachers and the school will gain insight into how children learn to read differently and new approaches to improve schooling outcomes for children may be developed.

I wish to assure you that your child and the school will not be identifiable in any report. Information and interpretations directly relevant to the study will be shared with the Year Three teachers and the consent of the principal will be sought prior to the release of any information to the broader school community. No segments of the videotape will be published or transmitted in any report or presentation but will be used in the analysis of student interaction and then be immediately destroyed.

27 Pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis.
If you have any questions about this project and your child’s possible involvement please contact me directly or leave a message with Ms Samuels or Ms Brown and I will contact you. I am very happy to provide you with further information or discuss the project with you before or during the project. My telephone number is 9214 5029 and my email address is dcoulthard@swin.edu.au. You may also contact my supervisor, Associate Professor Tanya Castleman on telephone number 9244 6532.

In the event that you have a query that my supervisor or I have been unable to satisfy you may write to:

The Chair  
Human Research Ethics Committee  
Swinburne University of Technology  
PO Box 218  
HAWTHORN, VIC.  3122

Please give this request your careful consideration and complete the attached form, place it in the envelope and return it to the school by **Thursday 26 August**.

Yours faithfully

Darryl Coulthard
Appendixes

Swinburne University of Technology
Research Project

An exploration of the relationship between gender identity and literacy for primary school children.

Investigators
Assoc. Prof. Tanya Castleman
Darryl Coulthard

Parental Consent

Please sign and return this sheet to the school by Thursday 26 August. This sheet shall be destroyed at the completion of the study.

☐ I do not consent to the school to my child[ren] participating in the project.

☐ I need more information prior to giving my consent. I can be contacted at............................................................... (ph. no., best time to contact).

☐ I give my consent and have signed this informed consent form:

I have read and understood the information above. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree that my child(ren) may participate in the group interviews and field observations and that these activities will be recorded.

I agree to the school providing the investigators the writing exercise written by my child on the topic developed in consultation with the Year Three teacher.

I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or provided to other researchers on the condition that the name of the school or any member of the school community is not used.

I understand that I may withdraw my child from these activities at any time.

Name of Parent/Guardian.................................................................

Name of Child[Ren]...........................................................................

Relationship to the Child[Ren]..........................................................

Signature .................................................................................. Date .......................
Appendix III

Small Group Interviews with Children
Interview Questions

1. What do you like best at school?
   - what do like about that?
   - anything else?
   - prompt for subjects/activities

2. What do you like least?
   - what do like about that?
   - anything else?
   - prompt for subjects/activities

3. Do you like reading at school
   - why/why not?
   - what about at home?

4. What is your favourite story that you have read or had read to you?
   - tell me about it
   - what do you like most about it
   - can you think of any other stories that you like?
   - what stories don’t you like very much?

5. Do you like reading a lot or not very much?
   - what do you like/don’t like about reading?

6. When you do read, what sorts of things do you like to read?
   - what do you like most about [those things]?

7. Who do you think reads most in your family?
   - what does [that person] like to read most?

8. Can you remember what it was like when you first started to learn?
   - what can you remember about it?
   - was it easy or hard?
   - who do you think helped you most in your family?

9. Who do you think likes to read more, boys or girls?
   (why?)
Appendix IV

Teacher’s Interview Schedule

Preamble

This interview is about your experiences of teaching children to learn to read.
Overall the interview is divided into three parts. Firstly, I shall ask you about your
current experience teaching reading and writing this year, secondly I shall ask you to
talk about some experience with specific children this year and finally, I shall ask
you for any observations of the reading process you may have concerning children
and reading.

At this point I wish to reiterate that you may stop the interview at any time or refuse
to answer any question. Any thing you say will be strictly confidential and you will
not be identified in any report.

Part One: Teaching reading and writing this year

(1a) What class do you currently teach?
(1b) What year did you teach last year?

(2) What are the rewarding experiences in teaching reading and writing year X
children?
   - any specific instances?
   - any others?

(3) What difficulties and frustrations did you face in teaching reading and writing
   in year X?
   - are they fairly typical for year X children?

(4) What are the basic goals or outcomes that you work towards teaching reading
   and writing in year X?

(5) How did you go about reaching these goals?

(6) What are the problems or difficulties the children often face?

(7) Are there any story books or tasks that the children find particularly appealing?
   - are there any that they find less appealing?

(8) How do you engage the children in the tasks of reading and writing?

(9) Is there anything that you would try to do differently next year?
Part Two: Experiences with specific children

What I’d like you to do is to think of your current class. Could you please list the first names of five children you believe are among the best readers in the class. Now I’d like you to list the names of the five children who were among those who found learning to read the most difficult. Finally, at this point I’d like to the names of five children who were about average.

I will now ask you to describe each of these children in turn, what they were like to teach, their character, the difficulties they faced or you faced with them, what they seem interested in what they weren’t interested in and what made them good readers. Taking V could you describe this child to me...
Taking W, X, Y, Z.

Now thinking about the five top readers as a group, could you describe what things the types of things they seem to do differently or better than other children?

Are there any characteristics that you can see that these children have in common?

Now I’d like to do the same with those who were the poorest readers what sort of problems or difficulties do they have? how did you try to address these difficulties

Now considering the average readers as a group...

Part Three: Experiences with reading

(1) Is reading and writing popular amongst the children?

(2) Do you find that there are any differences between boys and girls reading and writing? (tastes, styles, interests, outcomes, behaviours)
   What about to schooling generally?

(3) If yes what are they?
   did it surprise you that there were those differences?
   why do you think there are those differences?
   are there any ways you try to overcome (differences/difficulties/issues)
   If no
   does it surprise you that there are so few differences?

(4) Prompts re any observations regarding any apparent gender differences arising from part 2.
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